

Statement from Rabbi Knopf of Temple Beth-El, in Response to Mayor Stoney's Open Letter to RISC:

I'm a proud member of RISC. For those who don't know, RISC is a multi-faith coalition of about two dozen congregations, including Temple Beth-El, representing thousands of Richmonders. This morning, over 100 of us -- clergy, community members, allies, and gun violence victims -- gathered at City Hall because we have a gun violence epidemic in Richmond, and despite what he says in this "response," Mayor Levar Stoney, a self-described "man of conviction" isn't doing anything about it.

In the two years we have been urging Mayor Stoney to take action on this issue, more than 150 men, women, and children in our city have died needlessly from gun violence. Jewish tradition teaches that to destroy one life is to destroy an entire world. Since Mayor Stoney was reelected, that means he has presided over the destruction of more than 150 worlds.

Yet what has the Mayor done about this crisis besides periodically holding a press conference? The answer, unfortunately, is very little. We, on the other hand, have been urging the Mayor for two years to adopt a program called Group Violence Intervention that has proven to work in dozens of cities nationwide. As a matter of fact, in many cases, GVI has been shown to cut gun homicides in half.

The Mayor says below that his few proposals have been informed by listening to a quote-unquote "vast array of community members." We don't know who he's been listening to, but it isn't his community, and it isn't the experts. Since September 2020, Mayor Stoney has refused to meet with us to discuss even exploring GVI. We have made eleven requests to meet with the Mayor since his re-election. Eleven times we have been denied a meeting. No wonder the Mayor keeps proposing "evidence-based" solutions that might sound good, but simply don't work; he's listening to the wrong people.

So we showed up at City Hall today because we refuse to be ignored by the Mayor any longer. The blood of our brothers and sisters who have died by the dozens cries out to us from the ground, and their cries for justice demand to be heard. The lives of our fellow Richmonders hang in the balance, waiting for our Mayor to take meaningful action. And we refuse to be ignored any more.

Mr. Mayor, I say the following with as much "respect and grace" as I can muster after reading your open letter: a press conference is not a plan. Your words must be backed up by action.

You could have started today by meeting with us. Instead, you ran and hid and then, once we were gone, you took to social media to call us names and disparage your citizens for their righteous indignation. Tell me: How is trying to have a substantive conversation with you on this issue "bullying and intimidation"? What kind of "man of conviction" refuses to meet with his constituents for the better part of two years while failing to advance a thoughtful, meaningful plan of his own? How is making our voices heard, speaking on

behalf of the voiceless, including those (who you shamefully refer to as "pawns") who no longer have a voice because their lives were cut short while you did nothing, "bullying and intimidation"? We simply refuse to be ignored any more.

One more thing: "division" is not the issue here. Justice and righteousness is. We must not prioritize a superficial harmony over the demands of justice. We read these very words from Dr. King in the lobby of City Hall today while we were being prevented from meeting with you: we must not prefer "a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice".

Mr. Mayor, we showed up at your doorstep today ready to work with you to solve this crisis and end the scourge of gun violence in our city. We are here, Mr. Mayor. The question is: where are you?