

Senator Thad Cochran, Chairman
Senator Barbara Mikulski, Vice Chairwoman
Senate Committee on Appropriations

May 25, 2016

Dear Senators:

We represent civil liberties, humanitarian and religious organizations concerned about federal funding of militarized and sometimes racially prejudicial policing.

Proposed funding for Fiscal Year 2017 includes significant spending cuts - from \$600 million to \$330 million - in the Department of Homeland Security grant program known as the Urban Areas Security Initiative (UASI). This is a step in the right direction, and the cuts should go much further. UASI money has accelerated police militarization and lack of accountability in our communities.

Most law enforcement agencies supported by UASI grants conduct activities that address ordinary crime. But, by requiring training supported by these federal funds to contain a “nexus to terrorism,” UASI serves to fuel the dangerous culture of aggression so rampant in U.S. police departments. UASI also creates a structural bond between militarized law enforcement and vital emergency response resources and workers.

In practice, UASI grants are often awarded to cities based solely on enhancing their core anti-terrorism programs, and not for wider emergency preparedness. New York Governor Andrew Cuomo’s announcement in July 2014, for example, discussed “an additional \$18 million [to] be allocated to the City of New York from the State’s portion of FY2014 UASI grant, in recognition of the City’s unique position *in terms of potential threats from terrorist-related activities*” (1). (emphasis added)

This militarization is best exemplified by Urban Shield, the UASI-funded training exercises and arms trade show held annually since 2007 in Alameda County, California. Urban Shield is a carnival of militarization that features Islamophobic 'disaster' scenarios, major arms dealers hawking their wares to cops, as well as shocking racialized merchandise. The program’s rewards for SWAT teams promote a “shoot first, ask questions later” ethic.

Such an ethic is reflected in racialized SWAT deployments that are disproportionately targeted on Black families. The American Civil Liberties Union found that more than half of all people impacted by SWAT deployments were Black or Latino, and two of every three SWAT raids were drug search warrants (2). There are also many examples of botched SWAT team raids. It was these effects of militarized SWAT team training that drove vibrant and ongoing cross-community protests and concern that compelled the City of Oakland to cease hosting Urban Shield in 2014, though it continues to be held in a nearby suburb.

These trainings - which occur in 29 high-density urban areas across the country - feed directly into the more than 100 SWAT raids that occur daily in the United States - in mostly Black and Latino communities.

Thirteen-year old Maria Calvillo burst into tears as she told the story of the day in 2014 when Oakland SWAT team officers barged into her family’s home, pointed a rifle at her, and searched her family, including her three-month-old sister who was wrapped in a baby blanket. “The police had a tank in front of our house, an actual tank. I thought I was in a movie ... It made me angry that they were searching

my baby sister,” said Calvillo. The Oakland SWAT team has participated in every Urban Shield competition since they began in 2007.

As this testimony makes clear, monies that contribute to this phenomenon, instead of serving to counter “terror,” have served as a blank check for fueling fear and violence. Money should be funneled into emergency preparedness for first responders, not through the Department of Homeland Security and militarized policies.

Police departments continue to obtain more armored vehicles, new surveillance equipment, and SWAT training. The federal government should instead support programs for education, housing, job training, mental health, and other resources that address the needs of our communities. **We urge you to support the Administration’s proposed cuts to UASI, and move these funds into emergency preparedness that are unaffiliated with counter-terrorism priorities.**

Sincerely,

**American Friends Service Committee
War Resisters League
Bill of Rights Defense Committee
Fellowship of Reconciliation
Iraq Veterans Against the War
Showing Up for Racial Justice
Media Alliance
Moana Nui Action and Alliance
Environmentalists Against the War
Malcolm X Grassroots Movement
International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network
Eastside Arts Alliance
Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice
Catalyst Project
Arab Resource Organizing Center
National Lawyers Guild
Oakland Privacy Working Group
Xicana Moratorium Project
Berkeley Copwatch
Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America
Codepink Women for Peace
World Beyond War
Anti Police Terror Project**

(1) <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-cuomo-senator-gillibrand-and-new-york-congressional-delegation-announce-45-million>

(2) American Civil Liberties Union, *War Comes Home: The Excessive Militarization of American Policing*, June 2014.