

Texas After Violence Project
Interview with João Paulo (JP) Connolly

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AMY KAMP: My name is Amy Kamp, and I'm with the Texas After Violence Project. It is June 11th, 2021. You may introduce yourself.

JOAO PAULO CONNOLLY: My name is João Paulo. People call me JP, and I am the director of organizing at the Austin Justice Coalition.

KAMP: Could you tell us a little bit about Austin Justice Coalition? You've been there for a while, right? It's grown a lot since you've been there.

CONNOLLY: Yes, the Austin Justice Coalition has been around for six years now. We're in our sixth year and started as a response to police brutality and high-profile police killings in Austin and throughout the country. It has evolved from its initial place of a group that was highly focused on police and police policy work, and has now started to look at housing, gentrification, displacement, community. A whole range of other issues, including things like transit justice, and so forth.

I think a large part of that evolution comes from us realizing that it was almost impossible to talk about over policing in neighborhoods without also talking about disparate land use policies that segregate populations in certain areas. Also when we think about things like mobility justice and cars, and that overwhelmingly encounters with police officers take place inside motor vehicles.

So, fighting for things like better public transit and so on is also not only a way of reducing encounters with police for people of color, but also a way of increasing accessibility for the city for people who live further away and for people who can't have driver's licenses because they're re-entering the system after a long stay in jail. There's a whole web of interconnected issues. It was very organic. Starting to talk about one thing just eventually led us into a whole bunch of other questions that are connected.

KAMP: How did you become involved with AJC?

CONNOLLY: I wanted to do something. It was the aftermath of Mike Brown [who] had gotten shot and there were protests, and it was the Ferguson uprising. We were on the streets here in Austin protesting but not really part of any group of people or anything like that. Full disclosure, I am Brazilian. I was born and raised in Latin America and had experiences with community organizing and different forms of progressive left-wing politics in Latin America.

The experiences were complex. I learned a lot, but I was actually in Austin trying to get away from some of that and just thinking, I'm going to just have a job and make money and live my life. [chuckles] I'm done with that scene and activism and advocacy and all that. But then we started to see the beginning of the Black Lives Matter Movement in the US in 2014 and the real rise of Black Lives Matter. It was just impossible to not get involved, not do something.

Started looking for like-minded folks. Found Chas and Fatimah and a group of people that were having first conversations around starting AJC. We had our first meetings at the Victory Grill, which was just the very, very beginning of what has been a very long process and the group has evolved since, but that's a little history and background. [laughs]

KAMP: Growing up in Brazil, I read on one of your bios that you did interpretation for asylum seekers. Can you talk a little bit about that time in Brazil, the

organizing and work that you were doing there.

CONNOLLY: Actually, I still work with interpretation right now in Austin. That's something I still do. I volunteer with American Gateways. I'm still helping families that are in process of seeking asylum, mostly Portuguese-speaking families from Africa. Those relationships are still very, very important to me and absolutely inform the work I do. It wasn't something I had planned out. It was just someone mentioned that there was a need for Portuguese speakers and I just said yes, and then got involved.

Growing up in Brazil, I had a whole range of experiences that are probably well-beyond the scope of this interview. Brazil is a country that has massive wealth and income disparity, extreme inequality, police brutality that is on a whole other level of awful. There are struggles that come and go. I think that right now, it's very interesting because movements in Brazil have really changed in response to the Black Lives Matter movement, there has been this reciprocal energy. Things are very different now than they were when I was in Brazil, for instance. There's a new wave, new generation of activists getting involved. I'm not sure if I completely answered your question, but we can--

[laughter]

KAMP: There's not any right or wrong answers. You mentioned working with African asylum seekers. Do you feel like that intersects with your work with AJC?

CONNOLLY: Yes, it very much does. There are stories that I can't tell because they are people's personal lives and these are all delicate cases. Folks seeking asylum are very, very much at the mercy of the police and the police state. Oftentimes, asylum-seeking children in a public school system that don't speak English fluently can face harder times with their teachers and fellow students.

Any brush up with a police officer at school or anything that leads to an arrest can derail the entire family's asylum case. There have been a number of instances where you really do see the overlap by the ways in which the police most heavily target the people who have the least resources and support. That definitely is very connected. I started doing the two things at the same time. My work at AJC evolved parallel to that, and now I'm doing more AJC stuff.

KAMP: With AJC, do y'all take into consideration those types of issues like immigration and asylum?

CONNOLLY: Yes. They're not our primary issues of focus. I think there's other organizations in town that do more advocacy around that, but we have for instance, our higher learning program on Saturdays for children. The families of asylum seekers that I work with, their kids participate in our higher learning programs. We also offer them support. We were able to help them during the winter storm, Uri, during moments of crisis. We know it's part of our network of people. We've been helping them during COVID as well. There's a lot of overlap whenever possible.

KAMP: You were formerly the housing and community development director. Would it be correct to say you had a bit of a forefront of the effort to prevent the recriminalization of homelessness here in Austin? [laughs]

CONNOLLY: I don't know. I've been involved. There's been a lot of amazing people who have poured their hearts and souls into helping keep our unhoused neighbors safe and out of the criminal legal system. There's been a lot of incredible people. Unfortunately, we weren't able to stop Proposition B, which really recriminalizes acts and behaviors that are inevitable for people who do not have a home, a house, for our unhoused neighbors. Things like sitting down on the sidewalk, or sleeping on the sidewalk, or even just hanging out in some spaces has now been criminalized. That also includes camping and a whole number of other things.

It's always worth reminding folks that Proposition B contained nothing in the language about resources, about funding, about redirecting people to housing. There was nothing. It was just pure criminalization. I think it was quite shameful that that was what Austin chose, but I'm also encouraged that there are many, many people that didn't choose that. I think the people, if you look at the map of who voted for Prop B in Austin, you see that the people who really came out in support of Prop B live in neighborhoods that aren't really affected. They don't live close to people experiencing homelessness. That's not really something they deal with. It's something they drive by.

The neighborhoods that do house, that do encompass most of our unhoused population voted against Prop B for the most part. I'm hopeful there's lots of people in Austin that still don't think we should just try to solve all of our problems by locking people in jail and hiding that. Now there's been a post-Prop B struggle, which was always the struggle to begin with. Prop B was just a very expensive and unfortunate distraction. The real struggle is how do we actually build housing and enough of it in a way that we can stably house people? We can go into the details. There are so many ways in which we get the outcomes that we have in our current system because it's designed to produce these outcomes.

I don't even think it's broken. It's just very much-- There's so many holes that seem almost intentional and people fall through the cracks a lot. Building a system that is different, that is new, building something that could be transformative is what we've been working on in coalition with many other groups and advocates fighting to get the city to commit resources.

We just yesterday had an important win where city council agreed to commit a \$100 million dollars from the American Rescue Plan Act to housing and services for our unhoused neighbors. With that investment, and our fight is we asked the city to commit, we asked the county to commit a matching amount, and we're also asking the local foundations and private sector to step up and match that with the goal of raising \$300 million for an initial phase of the new investment. We won a piece of the city council fight yesterday, and now the struggle continues. [chuckles]

KAMP: When you talk about investment, what does that mean specifically?

CONNOLLY: There's a lot of questions about that. What does that mean? For instance, there's many problems with-- We take every different piece of our system as broken. For instance, is broken in a weirdly intentional way. Our shelter system doesn't work. First of all, our shelters are at capacity. There isn't even space in our shelters. Then congregate shelters don't allow people a lot of privacy.

There's a whole range of issues, health and sanitation problems. Then people are forced out of the shelters. They're allowed into the shelters at night to sleep and then they're forced back

into the streets, where their mere existence is now criminalized. Shelters are a problem and congregate shelters are not good for mental health. Then we need investments in emergency places for people to go, but we also don't want to throw all the money into band aids like shelters when we could really be investing in things like actual long-term housing.

Every piece of it – There's an argument and a conversation and a debate taking place. These are difficult conversations that involve stakeholders and different opinions and perspectives. I don't want to pretend like I have found the perfect formula. It's something that we're in the middle of. Then there's rapid rehousing where we give folks vouchers or we try to pay, set up some negotiation with an apartment complex and make them accept low barrier criteria in order to house people that have criminal records, that have bad credit or no credit.

All the problems that make it impossible for someone who has been on the street to access housing. Most of our rapid rehousing programs have a ticking clock. If you can house someone, which is already an incredibly difficult thing to do because very few landlords in Austin even want to accept-- Very few landlords in Austin accept vouchers or even want to have conversations around lowering the entry criteria for people experiencing homelessness.

Let's say you can house someone, then you have a ticking clock because that money runs out after a certain amount of times. That person has six months to a year sometimes if they're lucky to somehow get back on their feet. If they don't, then they lose the access to housing. If they do get a job and manage to earn a little bit of income, they also run the risk of losing access to that housing. It's a very temporary solution still.

Rapid rehousing, we know that in the long haul it doesn't work. It helps as a short-term temporary emergency transition, but things that have much better success rates are things like permanent supportive housing, which really is the housing first approach. Where we allow people access to a place to live, full stop. Then we give them support wraparound services, support with mental health, support finding work and job training opportunities and all of that. That's the best solution.

One of the major barriers to that solution is an old culture in our services and systems that address homelessness, that sets up a staircase model that says you have to go through a number of steps and clear certain hurdles in order to then become housing ready and qualify for housing. It's, I think, informed by a very punitive and in some ways a very Christian worldview that says that if you struggle with addiction or if you have various kinds of problems resulting from having mental health crises or breakdowns, you have to prove yourself worthy of housing by going to a 12-steps program, becoming fully clean, making your check-in appointments on time. If you don't meet all these steps, then your support is withdrawn.

Whenever we put people in that situation, we set them up to fail. Whereas giving people access to housing and support has a much higher success rate. We know that, that's not really controversial at this point. The problem is that housing takes time to build. Housing-- Sorry, if I go too deep into the weeds, just cut me off because I feel like once you get me started talking about this stuff, it's hard to get me to shut up.

Sorry, I just made your edit a little harder there. [laughs] Housing is hard to build. It takes a long time. You face so many barriers to constructing any new housing in Austin. Starting with zoning codes and restrictions and regulations, neighborhood groups that come forward in strong opposition to any permanent supportive housing or low-income housing in their

neighborhoods.

Those are huge fights that you have to clear in order to build anything affordable. Then there's investment and time and so on and so forth. It can be very tricky and complicated to actually get housing built, particularly this kind of housing. It's housing that's not market rate housing. It's a huge struggle. While we fight that battle and we think that that is really what we should prioritize in terms of our spending, is that long-term structural change, you have people that are facing an immediate crisis right now in Austin because they face the threat of possibly violent encounter with a police officer if they do not have a place to go.

Which has forced the city into having this very unfortunate debate about creating designated campsites and where to put these designated campsites. Nobody wants a designated a campsite in their district. We treat our unhoused neighbors like they're a problem and every district wants to kick it around back and forth. Then spending millions and millions of dollars running and maintaining and operating camp sites that are still not really a solution in any way and are just this very expensive band aid.

That's the world we live in right now because Prop B passed. Finding that balance between building long-term structures that can really change what things look like and keeping people alive and keeping them out of jail, and just avoiding the humanitarian disaster that is looming or that we're already really living in right now, it's tough. Those aren't decisions that I make by myself, but I'm engaged with those questions here in Austin. AJC really is engaged.

KAMP: What do you think with Prop B and stuff like that? I think you've touched on some of that already, but what do you think is most overlooked in the general narrative on homelessness in Austin?

CONNOLLY: The narrative has changed. I think the general narrative has changed a lot because when I first moved to Austin 10 years ago, I don't think people paid a lot of attention to homelessness at all. Except for the people who were really providing services and goods and resources, it just wasn't top of mind for most people. Yes, our population has experienced an uptick, but there has been an unhoused population in Austin that's been pretty steady and growing a little bit.

Now, people are really talking about it. Whereas I don't think up until very recently people were talking all that much about it. Now it's very top of mind. It's being reported on a lot. People are very anxious. In the mix, you start to hear lots of false narratives. One of the false narratives is that homeless people, people experiencing homelessness are just pouring into Austin from other places in the state or from out of state. That people are sending their homeless populations to Austin. That's just not true.

I don't have the exact number, but it's somewhere in the range of about 70% of the people experiencing homelessness in Austin became homeless for the first time while living in Austin. They lived in Austin, they lived in majority-- the majority of them lived in our gentrifying neighborhoods. Homelessness and gentrification are really closely linked. Most of the people in Austin that are homeless today are homeless because of gentrification. I think that is something that is not often talked about.

This idea that they come from outside is just an urban legend. They really are people who for the most part-- I think everybody, whether or not they come from outside or not, belongs in this community, but they are definitely people who have had lives in Austin before they

became unhoused. I think that's really key.

Another major thing that I don't know if it's overlooked by everyone, but it certainly is often overlooked in the way we talk about things is that about a third of our unhoused population works. They're employed, they have jobs, they just can't afford housing. I had an interesting conversation with a person who is unemployed because the state garnishes their-- They're employed, but they're unhoused because the state garnishes their wages and the attorney general-- There's actually a surprisingly large number of people who are unhoused and living on the street because their wages are being garnished, so they work, but they cannot afford housing.

I think that whole piece of it is probably one of the most infuriating and telling aspects of this crisis, which is just we put people in situations where they have no alternatives. We corner people through the effects of multiple systems acting on people's lives that just give people no way out. I think that's worth highlighting.

KAMP: When you say homeless because of gentrification, what does that mean? Gentrification is a word, but I think--

CONNOLLY: Yes, it's a scary word.

KAMP: People use it in different ways.

CONNOLLY: No, that's totally fair. I use gentrification in a very straightforward way, which speaks to the original way in which it had been used by Ruth Glass when she was looking at changes in working-class neighborhoods in England in the '60s. Then that term has been picked up by various other people but she used it to describe the process where a working-class neighborhood becomes an upper-class neighborhood and that demographic change.

For me, when I talk about gentrification, I really talk about people. I know that other people use gentrification-- I think the major trend in academia is to talk about flows of capital and gentrification as an influx of investment and so forth. But for me – I always try to bring it back to people and maybe it's because of the work we do. Gentrification for me is when a neighborhood begins to change so rapidly that it reaches a tipping point and the demographics in that neighborhood are different. The cost of living is much higher.

Accompanying that influx of new higher-income earners, and in the United States, that is absolutely tied to race. Property values and race are [chuckles] unfortunately, very much linked. That influx of wealthier white people in a historically Black and Brown neighborhood increases the value of land and the cost of living. Accompanying that piece which leads to displacement, there's also cultural erasure and a sense of a loss of culture in the space.

I think that whole package is what gentrification is and it's what gentrification feels like on a visceral level to people who live in these communities. With regards to people becoming homeless, I think it's very much just directly the cost of living. Their rents have gone up and their incomes have not. Many of them rely on things like social security or other supports to get by. There's just no way you can make your rent and your bills on that kind of money in Austin in these neighborhoods anymore.

Austin's last affordable neighborhoods are becoming incredibly unaffordable. There's actually

a much larger crisis of people experiencing homelessness that is looming right now because we have giant, old apartment complexes throughout the city in Austin's historically Black and Brown lower-income neighborhoods that were all placed in those neighborhoods as a result of not only the 1928 master plan--

(Background Noise)

CONNOLLY: Some action going on.

KAMP: [laughs]

CONNOLLY: There is a school.

[laughter]

CONNOLLY: All right, let's try this. There's a crisis looming that is actually much bigger than the crisis we're in right now because-- Sorry, have I moved, changed the position?

JANE FIELD (Camerawoman): No, you're good. I can accommodate.

CONNOLLY: As a result of a long history of segregation that was not only the 1928 master plan and Jim Crow in Austin, but continuous pattern of zoning policies that constantly warehoused, stacked all of Austin's Black and Brown and low-income people in certain parts of the city. As a result of that, we have a large population concentrated in parts of East, Central East, Northeast, South East Austin, that live in apartment complexes that are quite old and rundown.

These apartment complexes are treated like hot potatoes by their property management companies and landlords who buy them and sell them off after two or three years. At some point, they will face the risk of being torn down and redeveloped. Even if they're not, the cost of rent in those apartments keeps going up, but the maintenance and improvements are not there. The apartments are falling apart and the rent is going up.

Unless there is a massive new program for tenants rights and tenant stabilization in Austin, the wave of evictions that's coming coupled with people who just aren't able to find places to live is going to lead to complete displacement of low income Black and Brown people who don't have some other support system from this city. I think that Austin is a majority renter city. 56 plus percent of Austin is renters, but the city's politics are heavily dominated by homeowners, and the city's policies are guided very much by the idea that protecting homeowners is the priority still. I have nothing against people being homeowners.

We also, at AJC, fight to protect legacy Black and Brown homeowners in East Austin. When you have, for instance, the city is now adopting a policy of a massive new increase in the homestead tax exemption with the idea that this is going to be an anti-displacement policy, but also a large boon to very wealthy property owners in West Austin who are millionaires and are going to now benefit from a huge new increase in their property tax exemptions, but will be passed on to renters and apartment complexes who will have to now carry more of the burden.

We can argue about how much of the burden they're going to have to carry and go back and forth on how much of an impact it's going to have. Regardless, we are spending hundreds of

millions of dollars on a tax exemption to homeowners when tenants are our most vulnerable population at the brink of displacement. It just shows how if we don't look five, ten years down the road and take real strong strategic action now, the size of the crisis that we're going to be facing is much greater.

Austin has a declining Black population, has had for years. I don't know if something like what we're facing now might be one of the nails in the coffin for Austin's Black community. Now, we hope not and we hope that we can buck that tide and transform things. That's what gets us out of bed in the morning. [laughs] We've got some tough times ahead of us, I think. Sorry, I don't know if that was too [laughs] gloomy.

[laughter]

KAMP: Don't we love gloomy.

[laughter]

CONNOLLY: I want to be optimistic.

KAMP: With Texas After Violence, a lot of times where we're talking about violence, we're talking about the violence of mass incarceration and police brutality, and things like that. I feel like you're talking about already the violence of planning and zoning. I don't know if you wanted to expand on that, the way that planning and zoning can be actually violent towards communities?

CONNOLLY: Zoning in the United States, from its very inception, was a tool designed to exclude people of color from white spaces and from white neighborhoods. Actually, it was a tool designed to create white spaces. That was done through things like aesthetics, through things like rules and regulations that said, in California, You couldn't have laundromats in residential neighborhoods and stuff like that, and that's how you excluded Asian-Americans. Different kinds of policies like that have the very intentional long-term implications. It's always connected to policing and over policing and police violence, the intersection, it's not even an intersection.

If you look at a map of Austin's neighborhoods where the police patrols happen most frequently, and then you look at a map of the 1928 master plan where Austin really set itself up as a Jim Crow city, the overlap is just tremendous. The redlined neighborhoods are the overpoliced neighborhoods. It's tough because then you find yourself in a place where you have these debates between NIMBYs, who are the not in by backyard crowd trying to protect their turf and their territory and the status quo and their neighborhoods in various ways. Then you have YIMBYs and pro-development and new urbanist ideas and the clash, the battle between those two sides.

A huge part of the way AJC has tried to think about housing policy is to really say that neither of those two positions really work for people of color. Neither of them articulate the nuance or express the position that people of color are in, particularly low-income working class people of color in this city. Black and Brown people are most likely to be renters. Their ability to stay in Austin is often hampered by the lack of affordable housing that exists within the city.

At the same time, there needs to be a consideration for historical reparations and undoing of

past harms that it's completely unrealistic, to put it nicely, to expect that the market can somehow do that. There needs to be really intentional public policy to undo the harm that public policy created. Where does that position fit in these debates about urban land use? We often find that we have to create some new position for ourselves that actually articulates the perspective of Black and Brown people and working-class people, and it doesn't fit that binary. [laughs]

Going back to the question about the intersection between policy and violence, we're not always consciously aware--When Black and Brown people were forced to move from their homes in the '20s and '30s and '50s and '60s and '80s right through, first 1928 master plan and urban slum removal, urban renewal, all of these programs that just constantly forced Black and Brown people to uproot themselves and relocate. There was a very intentional-- It was very easy to be conscious and aware of what was being done to you. The government is coming here and telling me that I have to leave, like what's happening right now with our own house population and Prop B.

When you think about things like the slow impact of long-term economic pressures, the increased cost of living, the fact that my neighbors are slowly disappearing, and I experience a loss of culture and a sense of cultural erasure. It's harder to think of that as violence directly. I think we don't always identify it as violence for that reason. We think maybe it's tough, brutal, but this is just the game of capitalism, and this ultra-commodified society that we're all stuck in.

If we can identify that as violence and start to see that constructing a world without violence has to be a world that moves us outside of this market-driven, commodified paradigm, I think that that is really what will allow us to confront these problems in a way that we can actually-- This is going to sound so dreamy and ambitious, but in a way that we can really transform our urban space for future generations. [laughs] I'll leave it at that for now.

KAMP: You've been with AJC for a while. Are there certain people that you've worked with or campaigns that have affected you, particularly deeply during your time here?

CONNOLLY: I get very deeply connected to everything that I'm working on. [laughter] There's been so many. I think last year was a really special and unique year. First of all, because the pandemic disrupted all of our lives and plans and forced us to reevaluate our values and what we were doing with our lives. In the middle of the pandemic, we saw, of course, another wave of police killings throughout the entire country. In Austin, the police shooting of Mike Ramos, and then later, Alex Gonzales more recently. Nationally, of course, the murder of George Floyd by a police officer on camera that we were all forced to watch. The wave of protests and the uprising that took place in the wake of that was the largest that I have ever seen since the beginning of the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States. There was so much energy and so much movement happening in so many different places. It created opening a potential for changes, to really start talking about changes that I think maybe even just a few years before would have seemed scary or difficult.

That moment of facing that was both incredibly stressful and tiring and heartbreaking and at the same time, it was exciting. It was thrilling to actually have a conversation about not just trying to reform policing, but actually defunding police. Which means defunding violent approaches to social problems and making space for approaches that allow us to build new cultures that are not violent and that are transformative and that address trauma and so on and

so forth.

That moment was exciting and thrilling to be a part of and I think a huge part of the struggle that we're in now is holding on to that, holding onto some of the wins that we made in 2020. Now as things start to open up again, [laughs] here, the children going back to school, as things start to open up again, this tendency to go back to normal and this normalcy that brings us back into a world where we were going out on weekends and having fun and going to brunch and everyone's going to work and everyone's just preoccupied with life again, that we very easily let slip and lose some of the powerful wins that we've had. How do we hold on to that? How do we maintain that momentum? One of the big challenges.

KAMP: That's so awesome. There was a vote to reduce this budget and then there's still debate about how to use that money and then there's a lot of backlash. Can you talk about that?

CONNOLLY: We were able to for the first time, really have a conversation about reducing the police budget when always the conversation was about increasing it. Going through the police budget and looking at various things that we used police for and saying, "Can we dare to imagine an alternative?" Of course, that work of imagining an alternative is very difficult. I think there are many people in Austin who find it easier to just settle back into the status quo. I think that that process, we always knew it was going to be a battle. It's going to be a struggle. It wasn't going to be easy.

I think that some good outcomes have come, but it's just as a long ongoing process which has now been in many ways completely boycotted-- Sorry, that's not the right word. Has been in many ways completely undermined by new state legislation, which has basically forbidden the city from decreasing its police budget and has actually mandated that the city return its police budget to 2019 levels.

Want to talk about violence? There's a violence of the state imposing its will upon a local community and really just making a political statement and trying to score some easy political points in the culture wars. Doing so at the cost of a community that has been struggling asking for change and had finally decided to take a bold, maybe not as great a step as I wanted, but a bold and important step towards change and that was trying to figure out how to make that change work and the beauty of that process. That was just trampled on by the state.

However, I don't think that everything in the reimagined process has gone. I think there's a lot that we can hold on to. I think that we still need to do the work of imagining alternatives to police. The more we can create those alternatives, I think the less police will become necessary. There's so many areas in our city today that we use police for tasks that there's just no reason why we should. We just need to actually do the work of thinking of what and who can do that, can respond to crisis and can fill those gaps.

KAMP: What are some alternatives that you think we most urgently need?

CONNOLLY: We need to continue to reimagine how the low hanging fruit is people experiencing mental health crises and unfortunately, the city's mental health response lines are still manned by the police. Police still go to those calls. Really doing the work of having real mental health professionals respond to mental health crisis as opposed to

police officers is one of the things that we should do immediately. Another is taking something like our forensics lab, where we have a huge backlog of rape kits that have never been tested or looked at and where you have people who are not scientists doing pseudo-scientific things.

Having a real forensics lab, that's run by civilians, that's run by scientists and that does the real science and it's not just a branch within the police department is another very low hanging fruit that we should continue to follow through with the plan. I think there's others. We need to look at the role that our canine and police dog units play. We need to look at the role that mounted patrol plays in crowd control downtown. I think there's plenty that we can do and that we should continue to fight for despite the circumstances that we're now in.

KAMP: You need a break for you? You were gesturing in a way that you think that you're at the center of the camera.

CONNOLLY: It's the battery dying? [crosstalk] I have no sense of time. I don't know if I've just been talking for an hour or 45 minutes or 20 minutes.

FIELD: 40 minutes. We can take a break if you want. No, the camera is all good. I don't know why I was--

[crosstalk]

CONNOLLY: I'm down to keep going.

KAMP: Okay, great. Last year you wrote an essay and you talked about how it's the city that should scramble to reform as fast as it can in order to save itself. We are already dead and simply waiting for our numbers to be called. Should embrace this truth and use these precious few breaths we have to create something wholly different, something dignified and beautiful, something worthy of the eminent unfolding of life. What does justice look like to you and what does a world without violence look like to you?

CONNOLLY: That essay, it's interesting because I always have felt the need to write, but usually only end up writing in moments when I'm almost emotionally, mentally, spiritually, forced to write because I have no choice. I feel like the words in that essay really come out of that place. It's tough because a lot of the work we do is in that middle place between are we just reforming the system or are we actually trying to transform it? I think that's an open-ended question that lingers over so many of the conversations that we're having about housing, about criminal justice, criminal legal system.

Then when I get an opportunity to step back and really think about what something really different could be, I think that it's a-- I had some answers to this question, but then I started to-- Let me think for a sec and then I might have to just take it back from the beginning on this one because I'm trying to spare you guys from going off on some giant long diatribe. Also let me splash some water on my face. I'll be right back.

[video cuts]

I think when I wrote that essay, it comes out of a place of urgency and tiredness and heartbreak, and just a desire for something completely different and new as opposed to just more of the same. This real sense that we've been fighting this fight for years and you start to see the cycle of some change followed by pushback and you just really start to wonder like, Is

this it? Is this what we're stuck in?. Doing something really different and transformative would require us to rethink our priorities on a level that-- I'm not going to say very few of us are ready to do, but it's hard to gauge how many folks are ready. I don't know how many we need. [chuckles]

We need to rethink priorities. For instance, let's think about housing. If my house is my investment and my house is my tool for building wealth, and my house is my step-up into the middle class, through which I can achieve the American dream, then my house is always going to be this thing which threatens me with displacement at the same time because as long as I'm thinking of my house as my commodity, it always will be this thing that, at some point, I could lose, and lose everything with it.

Is there a different way of thinking about housing where I'm not thinking about my house as a commodity, as a wealth-building tool but I'm actually thinking of it as home, as a place to live and to be in company with others? If that's my paradigm for thinking about housing, then what kind of a housing system do I then advocate for? It's very difficult. I don't blame people because we're all taught to see things in a certain way.

Different set of priorities of the house as the home, the neighborhood as community, as real community where we share space, even challenging white aesthetics for the city. This idea that every house has to have a perfectly manicured lawn and a minimum setback requirement and that we need to design things in certain ways, a preference for a certain set of white European aesthetic values that determine what we think looks nice and what doesn't.

If the city was a space of community, a space of healing, a space where there was real room for new creative movement to flourish, what would that city look like? There's always a tension that I live in between the dream of something better and something new and this idea that fixing what currently exists or somehow making it less lethal to poor people and to working-class people can save lives in the short term. How much energy do I put towards that versus towards really transforming and rethinking things?

There's no way to talk about this without also talking about racism and about the fact that racism has shaped everything about the American city. It has shaped zoning laws, patterns of housing and density. It has shaped our policing and legal systems. It has shaped so many aspects of the market and our lives that whatever that world looks like, that's that new better world that I dream of, has to be a world that is no longer shaped by that paradigm which is white supremacy and racism.

That is a very difficult thing to imagine. I think I get glimpses of it sometimes. The glimpses are beautiful. The glimpses are glimpses that come in spaces where you're allowed to be and you don't have to consume anything in order to be there, you don't have to buy something in order to just hang out and have a good time, spaces where people are inherently valued for who they are as opposed to the work they accomplish or their degrees or what they bring to the table in terms of value measured in some fundamentally capitalist way. [chuckles] Every once in a while you get a little taste of what that looks like and you always wonder, "What would it be if we could have so much more of this and so much less of the rest?"

KAMP Do you feel like you're creating that space here at the-
CONNOLLY: Austin Justice.

KAMP: -here in the AJC buildings? I don't know if you want to talk a little bit about that.

CONNOLLY: I want to create that space. I think we do, in moments of community, in moments of working together and imagining what things can look like when creating a campaign together. I think there's a feeling of something new that becomes possible when you come together around that. I don't think that AJC is the larger movement. AJC isn't the thing that will create that new world. I think that AJC is something that can help make the process of moving towards that new city possible. I think of it as a kind of support and resource station and a node that helps keep the movement alive.

The movement itself is something that's so much bigger than an organization or a group of people. It's this fluid, dynamic, growing thing that none can really control or predict. [chuckles] Going back in time, in Latin America, in conversations with some of my old socialist friends I would always say, "I love revolutions. I don't want the revolution imagined as some final messianic horizon for history but a multiplicity of revolutions constantly unfolding in time." [chuckles] I want many, many, many revolutions. I hope to be a part of a few of them. [chuckles]

KAMP: With this building, I meant, you're talking about a place where people can exist without the hierarchy of white supremacy and without feeling like they have to purchase something to exist. You talked about your higher learning program and then also just the fact that we're in this building that has so much space. Do you think that AJC can create examples of what that different world would look like?

CONNOLLY: Yes. I think that it's possible. I also think that that question you asked is the question that I need to ask myself every day and that we're constantly asking ourselves. I think that it's a work-in-progress. There are days when we're closer to being that and there are days when we're not, just being real honest.

It's tough. I think that there are moments when I do feel like the work brings us closer to that. This space is new. This space that we're in is new. I'm really excited to do as much as I possibly can, to work with a team of people that are doing as they can to make this into something like that, a community space that can serve multiple purposes where people are allowed to be without the pressures or fears.

It's tough because we internalize so much of this culture that makes me feel guilty if I'm not working enough, if I'm not producing enough, if I'm not earning my place in the movement by accomplishing x, y, and z. We're always looking for these metrics for success by which we judge ourselves and others. Unlearning that and not allowing that to be the paradigm of like, "Oh, how much do I do? How deserving am I of rest? How deserving am I of joy? How much do I have to sacrifice?" but moving out of that space and trying to really create a movement where it's like changing things is pleasurable and it's something that we're building together and it's something that we really enjoy being a part of together.

Rest is sacred and it's beautiful to be in a community with people even when you're not accomplishing something or winning something or working on a policy. I think that's an ongoing lesson that needs to be learned and relearned every day. I still have not fully learned but I'm working on. [laughs]

KAMP: That leads into another question that I had where, there

are lots of things that you enjoy that are not necessarily completely tied to this work. You're a DJ, you're a graphic designer. I know that you love reading and stuff like that. What role does art play for you?

CONNOLLY: I think this touches on my previous answer where making the work of transforming society feel and look less like work, although it'll always have some work aspects to it but making it feel more like real community and pleasure and a collective process of forming new intensities around new ideas. I would love to live in a place where my art and this art that keeps me alive, keeps me sane, helps me get out of bed in the morning, and helps me deal with stress and anxiety. The work I do are just completely merged.

There are times when we're able to do stuff like that. For instance, AJC organizes an event called Black Art Matters, where we bring a whole bunch of Black artists together and we help plan and organize and create the event. I help with projections. We bring DJs and play music. There's room and stuff like that for something that merges those two worlds together. Of course, every time we have a campaign or something like that, then we can use some graphics. It's also very important for me.

Music particularly, and I'm not a musician, I don't play, I just collect records and like to play them, music for me is-- I don't imagine I could live without it. It's just absolutely necessary at all times. I love playing with friends and sharing those moments. I feel like in some way that I can't even really articulate right now, it's all very much connected and it's all very much part of the same thing.

Forgive me for-- If there was less bullshit to deal with, then there would be more time for music and art and creativity. If we had less police killings, there would be more time to do creative stuff. If Black and Brown people didn't have to fear for their lives on the street quite as frequently, I think we could occupy the streets in new ways and express new forms of creativity in public and in public spaces and enjoy public space in different ways.

There's always the looming fear of an encounter with a police officer, of an encounter with someone who reminds you that you don't belong in that space, that makes it much more difficult, that makes our experiences more traumatizing or anxiety-inducing. For me, imagining a world without police is imagining a world where people can freely engage in art and collaborative art projects together and enjoy music and raise families, do all of the things that people want to do without having to fear for their lives or their futures or well-being.

KAMP: You say a world without police. What does the word "police" mean to you? Because I don't think that you mean specifically just APD [**Austin Police Department**].

CONNOLLY: A world without police is a world where we have different ways of responding to crisis when it emerges. It's a world without scarcity, where there isn't a group that is just facing brutal poverty and the constant threat of displacement, barely able to subsist while there's another group of people that is just living in absolute luxury. It really goes beyond even the idea of living in luxury. It's like hoarding beyond what you can even enjoy in a single lifetime. The idea that there's a group of people hoarding so much and a group of people hurting so much.

A world without police is a world where you don't have that dynamic because as long as you

have that dynamic, where some people are hoarding all the resources, where some people live in mansions and other people live in huts, as long as you have that world, then you need walls and you need the barbed wire and you need some form of police, whether it's called APD or not, you need some form of violent repression to contain the subaltern population.

A world without police is a world that just doesn't look and feel that way. It's a world where I'm not scared. I'm not trying to protect what I have because everybody has what they need and we're in a good place. Maybe that feels like a utopia but there are many places in the world today that have very little or no police where people are just fine. The question is how do we have those bubbles that have very little or no police? Then outside of those bubbles, police targeting certain communities and maintaining a certain social order that is fundamentally unjust. I don't know where I'm going with this.

[laughter]

KAMP: To go back to what you said, where you said some things feel like bullshit. Right now, we're dealing with Austin looking for a new police chief. Sometimes it feels like those things are just distractions. What purpose could that serve in trying to find a better police chief when that person was still being the head of the police? I was curious about your approach to things like that. It seems like you have to have an opinion about it but it also seems like it could be a waste of time.

CONNOLLY: Well, I'm currently serving on the Citizens Police Review Commission, and a lot of what we do is review and recommend policies for a police department that ultimately I do not believe should exist. [chuckles] I see it as a temporary thing. It's not something that I would dedicate all of my life's energy towards. I do believe that as long as there is a police, there needs to be feedback mechanisms through which the community is able to hold the state accountable for the actions of police officers and hold the police department and political leadership accountable.

I know that that term "to hold accountable" is riddled with problems but it's just the best word I could find at this moment. [chuckles] There needs to be ways out. It's tough because I've had the opportunity to meet and speak with mothers and families of young people or people who have been killed by the police and the families that have lost loved ones to the police. They're often not at a place where they're ready to talk about abolition. Some are. I've had families of victims of police brutality say that they don't want to talk about defunding the police.

To what extent do you meet people where they're at and articulate a message that people can get on board with? To what extent do you really express the deeper conviction that things as they are, are not likely to change in meaningful ways unless we really radically rethink the systems? I think that the personality, the temperament, the cultural background of your police chief does affect many, many, many aspects of the police department. It affects the nature of policing in the city.

A police chief that takes an attitude towards grassroots community groups that is basically, "To hell with you. We know what we're doing, and we got this figured out," a police chief that basically, gas lights or promotes a culture of just ignoring or pretending the problems that are being pointed out are not problems, has the potential to promote much more violence and harm in the community than a police chief that is capable of responding to community pressures, capable of recognizing that there are cultural problems within the department and

so forth.

I think that a police chief has the potential to do a great amount of harm. Providing input on what kind of a police chief we should have is a form of harm reduction. It's not a solution that in the long haul really transforms things but it is a form of harm reduction. If I can save a couple of lives in so doing at the moment, then that's what I have to do. Often, I'm in a middle place with regards to these things that not answer the questions for me.

I don't know how useful it is at the end of the-- when all of a sudden, done. I'm not ready to not try, but I'm also not convinced that that's all there is to it. In fact, I am pretty convinced that there is no way to reform policing in America and that we're much better off thinking of alternatives. That was such a long rambling answer to a pretty simple question.

KAMP: No, the whole purpose is to have long answers. We don't want yes or no answers. Although, of course, you're welcome to answer yes or no. We'd prefer longer answers. Something that you talk a lot about doing this kind of work where we're constantly hearing stories of violence. Trying to listen carefully, to those stories there can be vicarious trauma to that. Is this something that you've experienced? Are there ways that you've found to alleviate them?

CONNOLLY: I need to learn how to be better at handling the trauma that other folks bring with them in this space and my own traumas. That's a really good question and it's really tough. It's a really tough one. People bring a tremendous amount of trauma with them. For all the obvious reasons, their entire lives are just layers of trauma, but that's also not true. There's people who have lived and dealt with immense trauma, also have the capacity to live lives that are incredibly beautiful and creative, and also bring so much more to the world than just their trauma.

It's a huge trap to define people by their trauma, but because of the nature of the work of advocacy, because oftentimes we organize the immediate response to police killings, or we organize folks who are at the brink of facing eviction or we organize with people who are in very desperate situations, oftentimes we are very much exposed to the trauma and not to the beauty. People bring heavy amounts of that.

I think that that is a lesson and a culture shift that needs to take place within organizing spaces and within people like me, who position themselves as advocates in the community and as community organizers, is always reject this temptation to play a messianic role or a savior role towards people, that there is no room for saviorism, that it has to be something that is built mutually. That sometimes involves expressing the limits of how much I can do or how much I can take or how much I can listen to at a certain time, versus pull away and have rest.

Unless organizers really learn those lessons, which I'm very much struggling to learn, I think that we can step into spaces, become extremely exposed to large quantities of trauma and post-traumatic behaviors that are responses to trauma and become very burnt out by them very, very, very quickly. That's not sustainable. You can't build a movement on that. People do need spaces. They need people who will listen to them in a world where very few people are willing to listen. They do need to be able to express their hurt and their heartbreak.

A mother who just lost a son needs a place to cry, to vent, to be herself and to change her mind half a dozen times in the day as she's dealing with grief and loss. That does need to

exist. The people who position themselves in a place so as to provide that need to take care of themselves and find ways to heal constantly. Boy, am I not an expert on that subject? [laughs] You throw yourself into it and you don't quite think through what it entails until you live it. Of course, you have your own trauma, so not an easy one.

It's also not all trauma. That's the other side to it is people are fantastic, especially when they're in environments where they don't feel like they have to be on the defense, where they don't feel like they have to guard themselves or protect themselves, or they don't feel like they have to sell themselves either, or make themselves look better than just what they are in order for them to get the job, to be likable. When people are allowed to be in that vulnerable place and let their guard down, people are fantastic. They're beautiful. They come up with great ideas. They express tremendous amounts of joy. There's great times as well. It's not all trauma. [chuckles]

KAMP: I think we talked about this a little bit. You have a new role. You're the organizing director. You talked a little bit about how the pandemic has affected y'all's approach. Can you talk a little bit about what you're looking forward to in your new role and what you've learned from the pandemic when it comes to your approaching these issues?

CONNOLLY: I'm barely stepping into my new role and I'm excited about it. The reason I'm excited about it is that I feel like the work of actually building community with people, and building networks of trust and mutual accountability, groups of people that could feel they flourished together around a process, is really exciting to me. Whereas, the space of just working on policy can be very draining and taxing, especially when you live in a state like Texas. [laughs]

I'm excited. I think I have so much to learn. A lot of the lessons are some of the things that I was just mentioning, finding balances between work and rest, finding ways to build relationships with people and also have healthy boundaries in those relationships. I need to learn to be a hell of a lot more organized and maybe commit to fewer projects because we do take on probably too much and there's always too much going on. Everything feels urgent. Everything feels like if someone doesn't step up, no one will and it's not going to get addressed. Everything has this intense urgency to it.

Finding ways to acknowledge those feelings, but do so in a sustainable way that doesn't burn you out are some of the main challenges. I also think that there's a culture here in Austin that we need to overcome, move beyond, which is a culture of engaging with people around issues, around campaigns, around election cycles, around specific things where we're trying to turn out the vote, and we're trying to get people to join a phone banking campaign. All of these things are important tools for advocates, but can we think about community building and community organizing as something much deeper than that, where I'm actually forging relationships and building networks of mutual aid that go beyond today's battle or today's issue or hot topic?

I think, "What does that new culture look like? How can we get organizing happening on a street level where people on the same street, on the same block, in the same neighborhood, are coming together, talking to each other, collaborating, tenants in the same apartment building?" There's other organizations in the space that I'm always very excited to work with. We have a great relationship with BASTA, which is a tenant organizing group in town. They lead a lot of excellent work with tenants. We always enjoy collaborating, and very much

enjoy working with them recently too. Hopefully, that was an answer.

[laughter]

KAMP: I think I've come to the end of all the questions that I have. I don't know if –

CONNOLLY: Boom!

FIELD: I have several but I'll stick to one.

CONNOLLY: By the way, I can talk less, I can give you short answers.

FIELD: No, we love the long, we love the tangents. That's what this is all about. This is a question about-- that could be considered a tangent. You've talked a lot about these moments of joy and community, especially when you were talking about how you were thinking about what this space could be. You said you you've experienced those moments of community and joy. I was wondering if you could just describe for us a moment when you felt that and experienced that and what it was like for you.

CONNOLLY: There have been many. For instance, when we get together with the kids that participate in our higher learning program and we get together with their parents, there's a birthday party or something and everyone brings food and we're all hanging out and spending an afternoon together, there's a real feeling there that there's community here. There's moments when people are dealing with large amounts of trauma and pain but for instance, the family of a victim of police violence sees a large group of people coming together to support them and feels like they're not alone, and then they tear up, hug you and thank you for organizing something like that for them.

There's a couple I'm just going through. There's a moment when the team is working together on something and everyone's really excited about a new event that's coming or a new project, there's that synergy and it feels good. This space here during the winter storm, we turned this into a temporary shelter during winter storm Uri and opened it up as a warming station. We got to run that operation here. We also distributed food to a whole bunch of people that needed it.

The gratitude, the sense of people articulating to you that they recognize that you don't have to be doing what you're doing, you didn't have to be doing what you were doing, but you're doing it anyway and they're grateful for it, there's a connection there that goes well beyond the need for resources and help.

One more story I want to-- We've been giving out assistance and storm recovery grants. We gave out a storm recovery grant to one person who was an electrician and said, "If you ever need help I'm willing to do free electrician work for you guys, if you ever need help with the wiring at your office." Little things like that where you really see the people want to be reciprocal. I think that that's what people want, but I don't think people want to receive charity. They want to be in relationships where they can feel valued, they're collaborating, and they're helping to lead. I see a lot of that.

There's more. The winter storm has so many examples of moments like that, where you just see people be-- you offer them something and they say, "This is great. Thank you. I know a neighbor who needs it more. Prioritize that person." Those moments, if we would have that

energy, and vibe with that for longer, if we could have that energy when we're discussing land use and urban policy, and maybe we were like, "Let's have a permanent supportive housing in my neighborhood because why not make space for people to have home and community here," then that would be wonderful. [laughter] Might be a bit of a stretch.

[laughter]

KAMP: Are there other things that you were hoping to talk about and touch on?

CONNOLLY: I think we touched on so much. I feel like I've just been jabbering. [laughs] I don't know. Unless there were any of the questions that I didn't fully answer but I think I did, I don't know.

KAMP: I feel like you've, yeah –

CONNOLLY: I think we got it. That's it.

KAMP: Thank you so much. I really appreciate that.

CONNOLLY: Thank you, guys.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]