



James Bible
LAW GROUP

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Sent via USPS and E-mail

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Dear Attorney General Ferguson, Agent Tabb Jr. and Chief Dyer:

Muslim Advocates, a national civil rights firm, and the James Bible Law Group—with assistance from the Washington chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR-WA)—have been retained by Ibrahima and Aicha Keita in connection with the disappearance and death of their son, Ben Keita. On behalf of the Keita family, we write to you to express concerns regarding the law enforcement investigations surrounding Ben's disappearance and death. It has been nearly seven months since Ben was first reported missing and five months since his body was discovered, yet there remain far too many unanswered questions pertaining to this matter. It is vital that your agencies conduct a fair and comprehensive investigation into Ben's disappearance and death, including whether religious or racial bias played a role in this tragedy.

The Keita family have long been members of the Lake Stevens community. Ibrahima and Aicha Keita immigrated to the United States from West Africa in 1993 and 1997 respectively, and eventually settled in Washington State; they have resided in Lake Stevens for the last seventeen years. Both Ibrahima and Aicha work in the community, and their children have all attended or currently attend school in the area. Ben, their second-born child, was an 18-year-old African-American Muslim teenager. He lived with his family, and was, by all accounts, an ambitious and jovial teenager with plans to attend medical school in the future. While still in high school, Ben enrolled in Everett Community College's Running Start Program, which provides students a chance to take college-level classes even before graduating high school.

As you are likely aware, Ben was reported missing by his family on November 26, 2016. Specifically, after his mother and older sister realized that although Ben's wallet, cell phone, and car were still at the home but he was not, they immediately reported his disappearance to the Lake Stevens Police Department (LSPD). The LSPD launched an investigation, which entailed land and aerial searches as well as interviews with Ben's family, friends, and acquaintances. Finally, on January 9, 2017 a group of teenagers found Ben's body hanging from a tree in a wooded area not far from the Keita residence, and an area that had purportedly been repeatedly searched by law enforcement.

According to the Snohomish County Medical Examiner's (Medical Examiner) autopsy report, aside from a small abrasion on Ben's thumb, there were no other injuries on his body and there was no sign of drugs or alcohol in his system. In light of the fact that there were no signs of trauma to Ben's body, the Medical Examiner initially concluded and reported that Ben's death was a suicide. But Ben's parents, not believing that their son, who had never exhibited any signs of depression, anxiety, or psychological breakdown, would take his own life, pressed for more information. Later, the Medical Examiner changed the cause of death from "suicide" to "undetermined." In making this change, the Medical Examiner cited two reasons: first, that Ben's location was undetermined for six weeks and his body was discovered in an area that had previously been searched; and second, the rope that his body was found hanging with was tied an "unusual" height of 50-feet in the air.

The LSPD, the Washington State Office of the Attorney General, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation have all announced that they have opened investigations into this matter. Given that it is our understanding that these investigations remain pending, we write to highlight areas where we believe additional factual development may prove fruitful in providing more information about Ben's disappearance and death. Specifically:

- **There remain a number of unanswered questions that appear critical to understanding the facts surrounding Ben's disappearance.** It appears that on or around November 13, Ben stopped attending classes at Everett Community College and showing up at a local McDonald's restaurant where he was employed as a part-time worker. According to his mobile phone records, it also appears that Ben stopped sending text messages at or around the same time. It was only after Ben was reported missing, that his parents learned about some of these changes to Ben's conduct. To date, there has been no explanation about what may have contributed to these drastic changes and they believe that a better understanding of this period of time may provide additional information about his disappearance and death. Your agencies should further explore

what may have occurred on or around November 13 that may have caused Ben to alter his conduct.

- **Similarly, further work must be done to fully understand the situation surrounding Ben's death.** At this point, it is clear that Ben's death was caused by asphyxiation due to hanging from a rope. But how Ben's body got to that location in the woods and how long it was there are only some of the questions that remain unanswered. For example, the Keita family has not seen any evidence to suggest that Ben purchased the rope himself, nor do they know where it was purchased. In addition, the Keita family has never been informed about if the rope should or will be tested for DNA for additional information. The Keita family has similar questions about the flashlight that was also recovered near Ben's body.

Furthermore, the LSPD's investigative report seemingly indicates that a number of potential witnesses or individuals who were seen around the Keita residence both around the time Ben went missing and his body was found were not thoroughly questioned about any information they may have. Any individuals who are believed to have critical information about Ben's disappearance and/or death should be contacted and questioned thoroughly and extensively.

- **Law enforcement officials need to determine what role, if any, religious and/or racial bias played in Ben's disappearance and death.** Ben's death occurred at a time when hate crimes against Muslims, African-Americans, and immigrants are occurring at alarming rates in this country. Hateful rhetoric and violence has quickly swept across the United States, and many communities are fearful. The Pacific Northwest has not been shielded from this hateful bigotry and bias, as we recently witnessed in Portland, Oregon when a white supremacist stabbed three men on a train, killing two, when they attempted to intervene as the perpetrator shouted slurs at a Muslim woman and her friend. Just months earlier, a Sikh man was shot outside of his home in Kent, Washington by an individual shouting at him to "go back home."

And while Lake Stevens has generally been open and welcoming to the Keita family, there have been a number of instances, over their seventeen years in this community, where they have suffered harassment and discrimination. For example, Aicha, while shopping at her neighborhood supermarket, was once verbally attacked by a fellow patron who shouted slurs at her and told her to go back to her country. In another instance, one of the Keita family's cars was vandalized and spray-painted with a racial slur. While we do not yet know if bias played a role in Ben's disappearance and death, this angle must be fully explored as part of your investigatory efforts, especially in light of the many aforementioned unanswered questions.

It is our hope that as you continue your investigation into Ben's disappearance and death, you will consider these areas of concern and seek to resolve these outstanding questions. As the Keita family continues to mourn Ben's loss, we believe that further explanation of the details leading up to and surrounding Ben's disappearance and death will bring them some sense of closure and comfort.

To that end, we request an opportunity to meet with you and other representatives of your agencies to discuss this matter further and receive an update regarding the investigation. We are hopeful that with proper attention to this investigation, the Keita family will find answers to these lingering questions. If there is any additional information that we can provide, please do not hesitate to contact Muslim Advocates at johnathan@muslimadvocates.org or (415) 692-1484.

Sincerely,



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Muslim Advocates



Madihha Ahussain
Muslim Advocates



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