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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

UPDATE June 3, 2020: We are pleased to announce that since the release of this statement Monday afternoon, additional organizations have joined the coalition condemning the recent detentions of local journalists. Their names have been added below.

ATLANTA — A coalition of Georgia journalism organizations strongly condemns the recent detentions of former SPJ GA President and freelance journalist Haisten Willis and Atlanta Journal-Constitution staff photographer Alyssa Pointer.

The coalition consists of the Georgia Pro Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists, the Atlanta Chapter of the Asian American Journalists Association, The Atlanta Association of Black Journalists, The National Association of Black Journalists, The Atlanta Chapter of the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, the Georgia First Amendment Foundation, the First Amendment Clinic and the Atlanta Press Club.

Willis was on assignment as a freelancer for The Washington Post on May 31 in Atlanta, covering the George Floyd protests. He was detained and handcuffed by Atlanta police, and officers refused to allow Willis to show his digital press credential, making claims it was illegitimate. Police unlawfully confiscated Willis' phone, which held his press credential, along with the pen he was using to take notes. Willis was later released after showing officers business cards from his wallet, which listed his title as "freelance journalist."

Pointer was on assignment for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution on June 1 in Atlanta, also covering the protests, when officers from the Georgia Department of Natural Resources detained her. She identified herself to law enforcement and her press badge was clearly displayed. She was not released until two other members of the press interceded.

The detentions of Willis and Pointer were clear abridgments of press freedoms. The confiscation of equipment, cell phones and other supplies hinders the ability of reporters to uphold responsibilities granted by the First Amendment. It is vital that members of law enforcement, who have sworn to serve and protect their citizens, do so without endangering journalists' safety, press freedom and civil rights.

This week, we have seen journalists tear gassed, pepper sprayed, attacked, and arrested by law enforcement across the country. Journalists wearing visible credentials have also been arrested and targeted by police and protestors with acts of violence. Law enforcement must respect journalists' role in covering events of civil unrest.

“While the police ultimately released me after seeing business cards in my wallet listing me as a freelance journalist, the situation could have been resolved much more quickly if they had simply allowed me a few seconds to produce a digital credential The Post had issued on my phone, which included the cell phone number of the editor I was working with,” Willis said. “In today’s digital age and with more journalists than ever working as remote freelancers, digital credentials are a commonly used and accepted form of identification. There was no need for handcuffs or confiscation.”

The Washington Post expressed support for Willis on Monday in a statement to the coalition.

“The Post condemns all efforts to impede the work of journalists covering stories of public interest. That is especially true as journalists cover demonstrations such as those we’ve witnessed over the past week,” said Marty Baron, executive editor for The Washington Post. “Journalists have been respectful of the role of police, and they’re owed respect for their role in providing information to the public. Any deliberate targeting of journalists for detention and arrest or, worse, violence is an intolerable and dangerous assault on freedom of the press.”

AJC Editor Kevin Riley expressed support for Pointer.

“The journalists at the AJC, including Alyssa Pointer, are documenting an important story and one that citizens need to have information about,” Riley said. “While we are still getting details of what happened, there is no acceptable reason for a working member of the media — who clearly identified herself — to be detained. She was doing her job.”

We have spoken with the Atlanta Police Department, which has voiced their “deep respect” of our mission as journalists.

SPJ GA, AAJA Atlanta and AABJ/NABJ are calling upon news organizations to properly equip freelancers with press credentials. In the event police or other law enforcement request documentation, freelancers should be able to offer printed identification. We also strongly encourage freelancers to insist on receiving proper printed credentials from their news organizations.

We also ask that news organizations provide freelancers the same protective equipment that they give their staffers. Respirator masks, first aid kits, and other safety gear are essential to the safety of all journalists.

In the event that a freelancer finds his or herself in need of legal advice or protections, we recommend you refer to [this resource list](#) put together by the Georgia First Amendment Foundation and the UGA Law School’s First Amendment Clinic in response to these detainments.

SPJ GA is issuing temporary printable press credentials for journalists and freelancers who currently lack any form of identification. SPJ GA members seeking a temporary press credential can fill out this [Google Form](#). You must be a member of SPJ in order to request a credential.

SPJ GA is in no way claiming that these printable press credentials will render journalists and freelancers immune to police inquiry or questioning, or that this will ensure a journalist’s release should one be arrested or detained. The coalition recommends journalists use their best judgment when navigating these situations in order to ensure their safety.