Civil rights group joins team seeking answers in death of Black teenager

Mississippi officials say investigation ongoing

Bianca Flowers and Kat Stafford
REUTERS

CHICAGO – The NAACP announced on Aug. 17 it had joined the legal team representing the family of Nolan Wells, an 18-year-old Black teen whose body was found on a Mississippi barrier island last month after a Fourth of July trip with three white friends.

The U.S. civil rights organization said its Office of General Counsel will work with the family's lawyers, including prominent civil rights attorney Ben Crump, to seek a comprehensive investigation and greater transparency from authorities into Wells' death.

"We're taking up this fight to search for truth and transparency surrounding the death of Nolan Wells," Kristen Clarke, general counsel of the NAACP, said in a statement.

The NAACP's involvement underscores how Wells' death has evolved from a local investigation into a case drawing national scrutiny. Although authorities have not announced final findings or alleged foul play, questions raised by family members, civil rights leaders and others about race, transparency and accountability have fueled calls for greater scrutiny.

Last week, the Congressional Black Caucus issued a letter to U.S. Attorney General Todd Blanche and FBI Director Kash Patel urging the U.S. Department of Justice to launch an independent federal review of Wells' death. The case has also prompted broader conversations among some Black Americans about racism, safety in predominantly white spaces and disparities in attention to cases involving Black victims.

Clarke said the organization would bring additional investigative resources to ensure that "no stone is left unturned" in the Wells family's quest for answers.

Wells' body was found on July 6 on the northwestern end of Horn Island, a barrier island off the Mississippi Gulf Coast, after he went missing during a Fourth of July weekend trip there with friends from nearby Ocean Springs, Mississippi.

The Jackson County Sheriff's Office, which is leading the investigation, has said the case remains ongoing. Investigators have not publicly released final conclusions about how Wells died.

Crump previously said the family was seeking answers about discrepancies in accounts of Wells'final hours, including why his phone was found with one of the friends rather than with his body. He also cited unverified videos circulating online that purportedly showed Wells arguing with friends before he vanished.

An attorney for one of the friends could not be reached for comment.

An independent autopsy commissioned by the family found that Wells' manner of death remained undetermined. The results were announced at the organization's 117th national convention in Chicago in

July.

The NAACP has long intervened in cases that drew national attention, helping push for investigations, legal action and public accountability in matters ranging from the brutal 1955 killing of Emmett Till to recent highprofile incidents involving Black Americans whose deaths prompted calls for answers.

“The world is watching and Nolan Wells’ family deserves a thorough accounting of what happened,” NAACP President and CEO Derrick Johnson said in the statement. “Our involvement in this case is part of our ongoing commitment to make sure those answers are pursued with urgency and respect for Black lives.”



Attendees pray after Ben Crump, a lawyer for the family of Nolan Wells, announced the results of an independent autopsy of the young Black man whose body was found on an island off the coast of Mississippi after he traveled there over the Fourth of July weekend. PHOTOS BY JIM VONDRUSKA/REUTERS FILE



An independent autopsy commissioned by the family found that Nolan Wells’ manner of death remained undetermined and the family continues to seek answers.

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