

Message To DJJ Employees: A Call To Action (Part 2)

I write to you as Part Two to the e-mail that I sent on Monday when I forwarded the Governor's message about the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery. Thanks to those who read the message and have begun to reflect not only on their own feelings but also what we can do individually and collectively to take action.

Today, the Governor has taken an even bolder step in an effort to heal the racial divide among us by ordering the removal of the Robert E. Lee statue from state land on Monument Avenue in Richmond. The statue (erected about 25 years after the Civil War) while for some represents history, it represents a painful history for many and is viewed as a sign of division. Among others, Rev. Robert W. Lee, the fourth great-nephew of General Lee, stood with the Governor and on behalf of the Lee family in support of removal of the statue because of the symbol that it has become. I am sure that this move has created different emotions among many of us. I do hope that it provides an opportunity for us to find a way to move forward together.

As I stated in the earlier e-mail, when challenged with difficult times and trying to figure out what one might do, it is often helpful to look in the mirror first. It can be difficult to take an objective look at our views, our language and our actions. While I ask that we all do that individually, I am also asking that we do that as an agency, as well. Let's take a look, **together**, into the DJJ mirror. In light of the current crisis about race in America, what are our agency views, language, and actions?

Youth of color are overrepresented at every decision point in our system. We have begun looking at the issues of overrepresentation during our DJJ transformation journey. DJJ has adopted the values of safety, purpose, connection and fairness in recent years. Addressing fairness has required us to look at our practices to see if they are fair and equitable. The state has instituted some new policies regarding hiring practices to remove bias. Similarly, we have begun (in our operational practices) to use tools to try to remove the subjectivity in our decision-making in an effort to be fairer. Team, we all have bias and I do mean all of us, including those of us representing different minority groups. The bias can also exist, whether intentional or not, in our systemic practices.

Today, I ask that we all take a deeper look at our behaviors and work practices. That is the only way that we will continue to grow and develop as an agency that truly believes in and operates as a system grounded in fairness. I don't have all of the answers but I know that we can do more. **I am proud of the progress that we have made and I know that we can find ways to do even better work and have an even greater impact.** Here are a few questions to ponder:

- Do we meet people where they are, colleagues and clients?
- Do we seek ways to better understand the perspective of others? Is it easy for us to respect individuals who don't look like us, speak like us or share the same values?
- Do we work with our system-involved youth in ways to help them navigate our system and the others that they are confronted with?
- Do our goals include helping youth to change the trajectory of their experiences and not only survive but thrive, sometimes in spite of their circumstances?

· Do we look beyond our code-mandated requirements to identify needs and seek resources to support, as early as possible, the most vulnerable populations in our communities?

I recognize that, in many ways, I am asking that you not only look at what we currently do but look beyond and seek possibilities and opportunities that perhaps we have never considered. As you ponder the activities of late and the questions that I have posed, I am asking that you send your thoughts and any possible actions that come to mind to our Equity Work Group. As many of you are aware, DJJ started an Equity Work Group in 2019. Our Equity Work Group has been meeting and working, initially, on ways to promote more education and awareness. Some of their work has been delayed a bit as a result of the pandemic; however, they stand ready to continue the work. We need to broaden the dialogue and have courageous conversations that are needed not only within DJJ but across this Commonwealth and nation if life is to get better for all of us.

Please send your constructive ideas to the Equity Work Group at (equity@djj.virginia.gov). I am asking Jenna Easton and Jerri Smith, co-chairs of the work group, to find a way to share the recommendations so that we might incorporate thoughtful suggestions into a doable **DJJ Equity Work Plan**.