



## Colchester Youth & Social Services

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Dear Board of Selectmen,

As the Director of Colchester Youth & Social Services, I am writing today to respond to recent comments regarding our Youth Uprise program. For accuracy's sake, Youth Uprise, a program that we created in June, is designed to give youth opportunities to tackle big topics in an engaging and meaningful way. The group was formed to give youth opportunities to share their views, develop an understanding of racism and social justice, and reflect on current events, and was not formed based on the suggestion, recommendation, or input from the First Selectman or the Diversity Committee.

After listening to the Board of Selectman meetings myself, I feel I must address the on-going criticism and mischaracterization of this program. Youth Uprise members responded to an article published in the Rivereast on 7/24/2020 about the need for a Diversity Commission. The article stated that "one Selectman argued there was not enough evidence of racism in town to justify creating such a committee." When the students read the article and watched the video of the meeting, they felt as though the comment was not consistent with their knowledge and experience and that it was their responsibility to respond. The youths who wrote the response are seniors at Bacon Academy, fully capable of forming their own opinions and using their voices to speak to power. Quite frankly, the notion that they are being used as "political pawns" is offensive to all of us.

I am a member of the Board of Directors for the CT Youth Services Association and on June 15, 2020 we collectively released a statement on anti-racism. This statement was primarily authored by my colleagues at the Middletown and Hartford Youth Service Bureaus with input from the rest of the Board. The statement is attached, and I hope you take the time to read it as I believe it helps define our role in this area. I'll highlight one excerpt for you:

***"We have an obligation to promote youth-led social change. We cannot, nor should not, shield youth from issues of race. The crafting of racial identifiers and constructs happens as early as three years old, so it is never too early to begin this work with them. Proactively teaching tolerance, inclusion, and allyship can profoundly mitigate the effects of racism and white supremacy as a socialized and engrained mentality. Youth leadership programs at any level should be given opportunities to discuss race and develop solutions."***

Fostering youth-led social change and empowering teens to use their voices is our job and I hope this clarifies any confusion or misunderstandings about our Department and our role in youth development. If I can provide additional information or answer any questions, please let me know.

Sincerely,

Valerie Geato



The Connecticut Youth Services Association (CYSA) promotes the well-being of Connecticut's children, youth and families. To that end, our children, our youth, and our communities are not well. While in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic, our society has once again been reminded that we have failed those who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. While the pandemic has magnified the inequities that have always existed, the light now shines even brighter on these systemic disparities; however, it is in this "now" of turbulent unrest and mass protest that CYSA unequivocally stands against the destructive racism that has plagued our communities of color, and our nation as a whole, for far too long.

It is one thing to state that CYSA stands in opposition to systemic racism and white supremacy, but those words are empty without action. Connecticut's BIPOC youth need our accountability and leadership. Our goal as a statewide association is to strengthen and support Youth Service Bureaus (YSB) in Connecticut. Our support for youth is unwavering, and collectively, we must play our part in this anti-racism movement. To that end, we commit to the following:

1. Reimagining our youth justice system and diversion programs. Juvenile Review Boards are a uniquely YSB-led institution and we are beginning to move those spaces from retributive to restorative. The Black experience in America is one built on pain and trauma, and the spaces we hold should not add to that. We can and should be healers; and that can happen when we separate pain and punishment from accountability. While all youth will benefit from a remodeled process, we know that BIPOC youth who have been historically marginalized and over-represented in the justice system will benefit greatly by having their humanity centered in this way.
2. We can and should be loud in the dismantling of the school to prison pipeline. Our advocacy here is vital as is our programmatic support to ensure youth get support when they need it instead of having to try to find it in the justice system. We need to disrupt the thinking that sees young Black men as threats, that doesn't listen to the pain of Black girls, and often sees both groups as being "older, more mature and thus more in need of accountability and consequences" than their peers of the same age. Again, while all youth will benefit from the decriminalization of adolescent behavior, it will make particular strides for BIPOC youth.
3. We also have an obligation to promote youth-led social change. We cannot, nor should not, shield youth from issues of race. The crafting of racial identifiers and constructs happens as early as three years old, so it is never too early to begin this work with them. Proactively teaching tolerance, inclusion, and allyship can profoundly mitigate the effects of racism and white supremacy as a socialized and engrained mentality. This is true for both the youth themselves, and the caring adults that work with young people. Youth leadership programs at any level should be given opportunities to discuss race and develop solutions. Furthermore, we ask you to actively seek out

organizations in your community that are centering BIPOC youth and seek out what their needs are or what actions they are calling for. If you live in a community that does not have such organizations or many BIPOC community members, spend time with youth deconstructing why that is.

4. Our Professional Development Subcommittee is beginning the work of addressing the needs of our system around this issue. They plan on crafting a series of workshops for this summer and fall focused on race as well as an anti-racism toolkit for youth workers. This will work in parallel to CYSA's current commitment to trainings focused on youth justice reform via our JRBs.

Finally, we recognize that this anti-racism work needs to also be personal, as we can't change these systems properly if we don't also commit to our own internal work. For our BIPOC colleagues, let us know how we can create spaces of healing and support. This is a complicated moment in time but you have once again shown us your brilliance in the face of unwarranted adversity.

For our White colleagues, we challenge you to be better and do better. This moment is littered with symbols and tokens of support that are quick and easy but are at the end of the day, meaningless; let us seek depth over speed. Walk towards the path of a developed racial consciousness, no matter how uncomfortable or anxious that may make you. Just as we teach our children, listen, learn and act. Again, if we began our racial conditioning at the age of three, that means we have decades of bias to unpack. These messages have been both overt and covert in their dissemination and absorption. Let us move past the notions of performative allyship and take on the work of truly being anti-racist because much like other large issues of the day, if we simply behave in non-racist ways we do nothing to dismantle this pervasive system. We would encourage folks to use the scaffold resource to assess where you may be in this journey and what some of your next steps in learning and growth may be (find these resources [HERE](#).)

History will ask us where we stood in this defining moment. Let us be bold here. It can happen in many different ways,

...but please, let those ways be bold.

*"It is insufficient to only tell your children that racism and racists are bad. It is insufficient to simply explain "We love people of all colors." It is lazy and near damaging to proclaim a love for all people but never make the leap of actually reaching out to people of color or adding tangible diversity to your life. In a world filled with empty rhetoric, our children don't need to hear words from us without action. They need to see us embody the beliefs we claim to hold dear." — Bellamy Shoffner*