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June 8, 2020

League Officers' Statement on Race Equity and Leadership

Dear Mayor:

All of us get involved in municipal government because we care, deeply, about the communities we live in. We want to preserve the positive accomplishments of our predecessors. We want to make the changes that are needed to address the problems and the developments that our predecessors either couldn't have foreseen, or chose to ignore. There is no way that any of us could have predicted the impact of COVID-19 on our hometowns, our State, our Nation, and our World. And with the brutal death of George Floyd and the protests that have followed, there is no way that any of us can ignore the need to work to address the racial inequities that have plagued our America since even before its founding.

Anthropologists tell us that communities are created and sustained in one of two ways – positively, on the basis of what the members of the community stand for, or negatively, on the basis of what they stand against. Looking back to our country's beginning, we can rebuild community by doing both. We all need to stand up for the principles of equal human value and equal civil rights included in the words of the Declaration of Independence. And today, looking back at least that far, we all need to stand against the cancerous practices of those who would devalue other human beings and deny them equal rights based on the color of their skin.

Chronic inequitable outcomes serve as stark indicators of chronically inequitable opportunities. The disproportional impact of COVID-19 on communities of color has forced America's leaders to focus on the long-standing racial gap in the area of public health. From infant mortality and deaths during pregnancy to access to healthcare and life expectancy, Black Americans suffer at levels too large to explain away.

The choices people make are constrained by the choices people have. Black Americans are five times less likely to live in census tracts with supermarkets than white Americans. Black and Latino neighborhoods also have fewer safe places to walk, jog, bike, or play. Factors like these all contribute to higher obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease rates among people of color, especially poor people of color, beginning at young ages and continuing into adulthood.

Statistics reveal institutional inequities and should inform public policies. But the focus for local officials right now needs to be on the strength of our communities. What will we stand together for, and what will we stand up against? We've come a long way together since the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. We know that we still have a long way to go. Our thoughts and prayers are needed. But actions are needed, too.

The image of the killing of George Floyd has forced us all to look in the mirror and to ask ourselves what more we can do to ensure equal human rights and equal opportunities to all of our fellow citizens. As the Officers of your League of Municipalities, we feel the anguish of George Floyd. We promise to stand against all forms of racism. We share the outrage of the thousands who have gathered in the streets. We promise to support peaceful protest. We share the sorrow of his family. We promise not to let this moment pass.

We all begin every meeting we hold together by affirming the same solemn pledge. We need to remember in all that we do to honor that commitment to better serve this "one Nation, under God, with liberty and justice, for all."

There are those of us who have not known the burden of inequality. The first thing we need to do is listen. Sadly, there are those of us who have experienced prejudice and institutional injustice. Please, help the rest of us understand.

James J. Perry, Committeeman, Hardwick Twp.
NJLM President

Janice Kovach, Mayor, Clinton Town
NJLM First Vice President

William J. Chegwidan, Mayor, Wharton Borough
NJLM Second Vice President

Sue Howard, Mayor, Monmouth Beach Borough
NJLM Third Vice President

Link to related resources <https://www.njlm.org/CivicAlerts.aspx?AID=1302>





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