

THE COMMUNITY EQUITY COLLABORATIVE OF THE BRATTLEBORO AREA

January 28, 2019

The Honorable Phil Scott
Vermont Governor

The Honorable TJ Donovan
Vermont Attorney General

The Honorable Mitzi Johnson
Vermont House Speaker

The Honorable Tim Ashe
Vermont Senate President Pro Tem

Dear Governor Scott, Attorney General Donovan, Speaker Johnson, and President Pro Tem Ashe:

We are members of the Community Equity Collaborative of the Brattleboro Area who need to express our outrage and concern. We were shocked to learn that Vermont law protects the kind of threatening and intimidating actions perpetrated upon Representative Morris and her family that led Attorney General Donovan to declare that "Kiah Morris was a victim of racial harassment." However, charges were not filed against the perpetrators. We want to support you – Governor Scott, Attorney General Donovan, Speaker Johnson, and President Pro Tem Ashe – in addressing this unacceptable weakness in our state's legal framework.

The Anti-Defamation League has reported that white supremacists and other far-right extremists have killed far more people since 9/11 than any other category of domestic terrorists. We live in a political climate in which Nazis, the Ku Klux Klan, and the Alt Right have grown in numbers and visibility throughout our country, including here in Vermont. Our State must consider how we will confront and counteract this white domestic terrorist threat. We support free speech and we know that public debates will sometimes include statements by some that are offensive to others. However, Vermonters must be protected from the kind of relentless harassment and personally directed threats that Representative Morris and her family and others have had to endure, up to and including last week's news conference in Bennington. Last year, there was a significant increase in Vermonters of color who ran for public office. Our collective obligation is to head off these kinds of hateful activities that could have a chilling effect on Vermonters of color who might consider entering electoral politics or other forms of civic engagement.

We urge you to use the unique authority of your leadership positions to ensure that perpetrators of hate are well monitored by Vermont law enforcement and to strengthen Vermont laws to protect individuals and communities throughout our state from the actions of anyone who intends to inflict hate, intimidation, or physical harm on any other person. But first – and this part is essential to the success of any initiative – *we urge you to deepen your understanding of how racism and white privilege impact communities of color. We discourage you from engaging in the practice of asking people of color to recount their racial trauma, rather we invite you to explore how "whiteness" contributes to the corrosive racial tension in Vermont.*

We believe the clear threat of violence presented by situations such as last week's news conference is as much a crisis for our State as the threatened school violence that caused the administration and legislature to move so quickly and effectively on the gun issue a year ago. We ask that you begin immediately and proceed diligently, but at a pace that allows you to develop a better understanding of how social identity informs discretionary decision making. Once you have a deeper appreciation of these issues you will be better prepared to build skill sets that increase your effectiveness to engage a cross-section of communities of color in the formulation of policy action(s).

Thank you for your leadership at this critical time. We look forward to hearing from you regarding your next steps individually or collectively. You may send correspondence to our CEC Convener, Diana Wahle, at dianawahle@gmail.com. We stand ready to support your efforts in any way that we can.

This letter is signed by the following members of the Community Equity Collaborative of the Brattleboro Area:

Becca Balint, Windham County State Senator
Julie Cunningham, Families First Executive Director
Carmen Derby, Executive Director, United Way of Windham County
Peter Elwell, Brattleboro Town Manager
Mary Gannon, Social Justice Consultant & Trainer
Nader Hashim, Vermont State Representative Windham 4
Lyle Holiday Superintendent of Schools Windham Southeast
Debra Kitzmiller, community member
Emilie Kornheiser, Vermont State Representative Brattleboro District 1
Starr LaTronica, Director, Brooks Memorial Library
Dora Levinson, community member
Prudence MacKinney, community member
Donna Macomber, Legal Justice Project Coordinator, Women's Freedom Center
Manny Mansbach, meditation teacher and community member
Mel Motel, Brattleboro Community Justice Center Executive Director
Tara O'Brien, educator and community member
Judith Cleveland Palmeri, Licensed School Counselor, Academy School
Curtiss Reed, Jr., Executive Director, Vermont Partnership for Fairness & Diversity
Mikaela Simms, WSESU Diversity Coordinator
Peter T. Smith, community member
Rev. Dr. Lise M. Sparrow, Vermont Conference of the United Church of Christ, Diversity Chair
Diana Wahle, WSESU Developmental Assets Coordinator and CEC Convener

THE COMMUNITY EQUITY COLLABORATIVE OF THE BRATTLEBORO AREA

Our Vision The greater Brattleboro area is recognized as an open and welcoming epicenter celebrating diversity free of prejudice and discrimination of all kinds.

Our Mission Our mission is to sustain existing and support new initiatives, activities and programs that unify and galvanize our community to achieve our vision.