COMMISSIONER’S MESSAGE

June 2, 2020

This past weekend, I spent a great deal of time thinking about the senseless killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and many other African-American men and women - and the nationwide reaction.

I, like millions across our country, feel deep pain and outrage. Mr. Floyd was a victim of virulent racism and discrimination which have had devastating impacts on people of color, and our country for hundreds of years. I understand the pain, anger, and hopelessness that many in our country feel; yet, I too recognize my own privilege. As I watched what was happening across our country, I couldn’t help but think about our staff and clients, many of whom have been similarly affected by Mr. Floyd’s death. While I have struggled with what I want to say in this message, a couple points are clear: I and DMHAS are opposed to racism and discrimination in any form. Our collective challenge as an agency, community and country is how we can transform this unthinkable tragedy into something that leads to positive and enduring action and change.

I have always valued DMHAS’ emphasis on increasing our cultural humility and responsiveness. DMHAS has always taken a proactive approach by examining the issue of discrimination. This is evident in trainings we have been doing for the past several years related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. I believe that our Office of Multicultural Healthcare Equity helps us to learn to “walk in each other’s shoes.” It helps us to see the humanity in our co-workers and clients, to recognize our similarities, and to understand that our differences should not be feared. As Maya Angelou said: “we can learn to see each other and see ourselves in each other and recognize that human beings are more alike than we are unalike.”

At times like these we may struggle with feelings of hopelessness. But this tragedy and others like it call us to action. John Meacham is a presidential historian who speaks often about the “better angels of our nature,” a phrase drawn from President Lincoln’s inaugural address. While some may see a religious connotation in this phrase, better angels refer to that part of our selves which helps make for a better world. This better self reflects our aspirations and dreams and the positive actions we take to achieve them. This is the better part of our nature. Meacham talks about how in times of national crisis our country has progressed when we and our leaders have tapped into our better selves to take action. As we currently face an unprecedented national crisis, it is clear that we all have to find a way to harness our better selves to effect positive change.
I encourage all of you to try to use this tragedy to help promote equity and justice. There are many small ways we can do that. We should not turn away from this moment. Each of us should consider ways in which we can fight racism and injustice in our daily lives. It is important to listen respectfully to each other while honoring each person’s perspective. Peacefully protesting, voting, organizing for change, tutoring a child, feeding the hungry and housing those who are homeless, participating in community conversations, ensuring our clients get access to quality healthcare, and simply treating co-workers with dignity, kindness and respect are small ways we can and do express our shared humanity. As we face a national emergency, it is important that we all tap into that part of ourselves to bring about real and sustained change.

I recognize that we see the world through different lenses, but I hope that we can agree that racism and discrimination cannot be tolerated. DMHAS is opposed to any form of racism and discrimination. Our core mission is to serve individuals with a range of behavioral health conditions, many who have encountered racism and discrimination in their lives. I know that we all work tirelessly on behalf of our clients to break down barriers, obtain quality healthcare, decent housing and promote recovery. We work to reduce stigma and end discrimination for those impacted by mental health and substance use issues. I ask that we use these same values to oppose racism in any way we can and to come together to form “a more perfect union.”

Thank you,

Miriam E. Delphin-Rittmon, Ph.D.
Commissioner