

# MEMORANDUM

To: Selectboard

From: Peter B. Elwell, Town Manager

Re: Promoting Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity  
in the Community and on the Town Staff

Date: September 14, 2017



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## A REMINDER ABOUT CONTEXT

The Town government's consideration of these matters began during a Selectboard candidates' forum in February 2017 when the candidates were asked why there are no people of color on the Town's staff and what could be done about that. The Selectboard briefly discussed this topic at its meeting on May 2, and then had much more thorough discussions with extensive public input during the Selectboard meetings on June 6 and June 20. During those meetings and through other communications I was having around these topics with major employers in our region, it became clear that the core issues extend beyond compositional diversity (to intentional inclusion and equity, as described more fully below) and beyond recruitment and organizational culture (to retention and community culture). Recognizing that meaningful and sustainable Town action would need to be grounded in a better understanding both of this much broader definition of the problem and of what was already being done in our community to address it, I asked the Selectboard to allow me time to meet with people in the community around these issues before providing this report and recommendations.

## OUTREACH

Following the discussions regarding this matter at the June 6 and June 20 Selectboard meetings, I had a series of meetings with people in our community who have been working for racial equity and social justice. The purpose, as we discussed on June 20, was to **learn what work is already being done and to see where Town actions might add value and further this work.** Listed below are people and groups with whom I have had somewhat more formal and structured conversations. (For the group meetings, I have listed the members of the applicable group who participated in the meeting with me.) Due to the relatively high profile of this matter in Brattleboro and the very high profile of race relations issues nationally during this past summer, I also have had numerous less formal discussions on this topic both with some of the people listed below and with others, as well.

### **I met with the following individuals (listed in alphabetical order):**

Michelle Cromwell  
Alex Fischer  
Mary Gannon  
Christol Long  
HB Lozito  
Lyle Holiday  
Curtiss Reed  
Mikaela Simms  
Diana Wahle

**I also met with the following groups (listed in alphabetical order):**

Community Compassion Follow-Up Committee

Jeff Bower  
Darah Kehnemuyi  
Emilie Kornheiser  
Dora Levinson  
Jim Levinson  
Mel Motel  
Bob Oeser  
Marie Procter  
Ellen Schwartz

Community Equity Collaborative

Senator Becca Balint  
Julie Cunningham  
Lyle Holiday  
Michael Fitzgerald  
Emilie Kornheiser  
Donna Macomber  
Manny Mansbach  
Judith Palmeri  
Diana Wahle

Diverse Workforce Development Committee of the Community Equity Collaborative

Alex Beck, Workforce & Education Specialist, BDCC  
Michelle Cromwell, Chief Diversity Officer, SIT  
Carmen Derby, Executive Director, United Way of Windham County  
Michael Fitzgerald, Chief, Brattleboro Police Department  
Lyle Holiday, WSESU Superintendent of Schools  
Susan McMahon, Associate Director, Windham Regional Commission  
Bill Norwood, Director of Human Resources, Brattleboro Memorial Hospital  
Roland Ransom, Director of Human Resources, Health Care & Rehabilitation Services  
Curtiss Reed, Executive Director, Vermont Partnership for Fairness and Diversity  
Susan R. Rowell, Interim Director of Human Resources, Brattleboro Retreat  
Diana Wahle, WSESU Asset Development Coordinator

Keystone Teen Leadership Group at the Boys and Girls Club

Lost River Racial Justice

Claire Halverson  
Ethan Hazzard-Watkins  
Anne Louise Wagner

The Root Social Justice Center

Angela Berkfield  
Alex Fischer  
Shela Linton  
Ezlerh Oreste

In addition, on August 15, 2017, I attended the “A Conversation About Race” brown bag gathering at the River Garden led by Mikaela Simms and Christol Long with participation by approximately 20 people from throughout our community.

### **A PERSONAL NOTE ABOUT HAVING THESE CONVERSATIONS**

I am a white, middle-class, heterosexual, cis-male in a position of authority. I was nurtured by my family and my community as a child, and I have had a stable marriage, happy home life, and good health as an adult. I am a poster child for privilege. I was nervous as I began my summer of engagement on matters of racial and social equity in Brattleboro. I was not afraid of the topic, but I was afraid that my intentions would be questioned or that I would say the wrong thing and cause unintentional hurt. My aim was to establish connections and build trust, and I worried that my words might instead cause an unnecessary and unproductive increase in conflict or distrust. What I learned from the many people who are investing themselves in this work in our community is that almost all of us feel this way (regardless of our personal characteristics or backgrounds) and that we must get past our anxiety and have the conversations anyway. We can be good people wanting to build a more inclusive and equitable community and still stumble over how we express ourselves. Positive intent and sincere engagement go a long way in helping us to travel over the bumps in the road that are created by our ignorance, our assumptions, or just a moment of clumsy word choice. If we maintain a healthy respect for the fact that we all are imperfect human beings, we can move past the fear and the awkwardness to get on with building relationships and doing the work.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Based on the input I have received from the community and upon my own reflections on the conditions in Brattleboro, both historically and today, I have arrived at the following conclusions:

**“Doing the work” means different things to different people.** Some focus on studying root causes. Some are involved in broad regional or national movements. Some are primarily interested in improving conditions and promoting positive ally actions for specific marginalized groups of people in Brattleboro. Some are doing the same type of work for marginalized populations generally and/or for people beyond Brattleboro’s borders. We need all of these different efforts to “move the needle” on social equity in our community.

**The specific definition of “the work” matters less than the communication it inspires.** Individual action matters, but it is not enough. We need to be engaged with each other. We especially need to be engaged with our neighbors who have experience being marginalized and with people who have experience addressing injustice. We need to enter into these relationships knowing that we all have a lot to learn from each other and that, by definition, we can build a truly inclusive and equitable community only by working together. Therefore, those who are actively engaged together in the work also need to consciously reach out to the broader community to promote communication and understanding and progress.

**Town officials and other community leaders need to be visible in these conversations.**

As Town officials, we are especially well positioned to move this work forward with our engagement and our actions. We and our work are visible to the community and we have authority to act on behalf of the community. Particularly because of our positions of authority and other privilege, it is important for us to enter into these conversations with humility, ready to listen more than we talk and eager to learn from and partner with people who are experiencing inequity and/or already working to correct it.

**We are “your local government” for everyone in Brattleboro, so our engagement and actions need to proceed with the intent of improving inclusion and equity for all marginalized groups and individuals in our community.** This started as a conversation about racial equity and, indeed, we in Town government need to be committed to promoting a greater feeling and reality of safety, opportunity, and engagement with and for people of color. We also need to achieve that same progress with and for (in no particular order) LGBTQ people, indigenous people, women, people who struggle financially, people with disabilities, older adults, people from other states or countries, youth, people experiencing homelessness, people whose first language was not English, people affected by mental illness, people affected by chronic physical illness, people affected by addiction, and anyone else who is or feels marginalized in our community. It should be noted that people often identify themselves or experience their lives in ways that overlap two or more of the above populations. In taking governmental action, we should be aware of this “intersectionality,” but we should be cautious not to homogenize groups and not to prioritize the interests of some groups over others.

**There is an essential difference between a private individual’s voluntary commitment to advance a particular worthy cause and the government’s responsibility to serve the whole community.** While it is good and proper for individuals and private groups to focus their energy on improving conditions for a particular subset of marginalized people, it is important for the Town government to fulfill the broader responsibility described above by aspiring to improve conditions for all marginalized people. It also is important to recognize that progress we make toward this goal will benefit our whole community, not just marginalized people but privileged people, as well.

**Promoting diversity is only the beginning.** If we stop there, we will achieve “team photo diversity” or other temporary gains without making our community more welcoming and more equitable for the long term. It is important, therefore, for us to be mindful of the difference between diversity, inclusion, and equity as outcomes we are seeking through this work. For the purposes of this report and my recommended actions, I distinguish them as follows:

**Diversity** – Recognizing and appreciating differences among us.

**Inclusion** – Ensuring that our actions demonstrate our intent for all people, especially people from populations that are commonly marginalized in our society, to feel safe and welcome in Brattleboro. This will involve not just recognizing and appreciating diversity, but also engaging with diverse people and groups to leverage our differences and strengthen our community.

**Equity** – Achieving a state of affairs in our community where people *feel* welcome and safe, and *are in fact* welcome and safe, and where the impact of our intentional actions, individually and collectively, is that people of all backgrounds have an opportunity to thrive.

**Success should be defined not by “checking the box” in the short term but by staying with the work and achieving greater understanding and equity over the long term.** We have begun to take short-term actions to address “low hanging fruit” opportunities, especially regarding recruitment to fill vacant Town government positions. There are additional short-term actions we can and will take both inside Town government and to more broadly promote diversity, inclusion, and equity in the community we serve. However, to achieve sustainable progress, we will need to be patient, persistent, and collaborative. Short-term gains can be easily reversed if we do not also do the longer and harder work of incremental cultural change. This will require monitoring our progress and adjusting our strategies, as needed.

**Long-term, sustainable progress must be achieved by the community; it cannot be dictated by the government.** While there are actions we can and will take to show Brattleboro town government's visible support for this work in our community, we must recognize that enduring cultural change is organic and multifaceted. It cannot be legislated by the Town.

**Our community is becoming more diverse right now.** The adult population of people of color is increasing slowly in Brattleboro and students of color now account for approximately 20% of Brattleboro's school enrollment. That is far more racial diversity than existed in local schools during prior generations. Other measures of diversity are harder to quantify, but anecdotally the streets of Brattleboro present visual diversity to a far greater degree than I remember during my childhood here in the 1960s and 1970s. The key to success, therefore, is less about creating diversity in Brattleboro and more about celebrating and sustaining diversity here through increased inclusion and equity. Stated in employment terms, effective recruitment can add diversity but only real inclusion and equity will sustain that diversity through retention.

**Brattleboro's resilient history and progressive spirit provide reasons for optimism.**

We live in a community that is characterized by its progressive spirit and cultural richness. However, much of what we accept as defining commercial, cultural, and political activity in Brattleboro today stands in contrast to the character of our community 50 years ago. Beginning in the late 1960s, an influx of people from outside Vermont slowly (and not always smoothly) changed Brattleboro, moving us to the left politically and establishing a vibrant arts community. Businesses and other local institutions reflect and reinforce these cultural changes. This most recent transformation has occurred against a backdrop of resiliency that has been an important part of Brattleboro's history since the 1800s. As a community, we do not need to prepare the soil for planting seeds of social equity, our task is to nurture seeds that have already been planted. We are well positioned to do this and to continue to make real and sustainable progress.

## **UPDATES ON ACTIONS PREVIOUSLY TAKEN OR RECOMMENDED**

The Selectboard previously approved the following recommendations:

- Invite anyone to sign up to receive our job postings.
- Ask for community organizations to sign up and to:
  - (1) distribute our postings to their email lists, and
  - (2) recommend additional organizations that can help us cast our recruitment net as wide as possible.
- Conduct training of the management team, the Selectboard, and the entire Town staff:
  - (1) to raise awareness of bias (both conscious and unconscious), and
  - (2) to promote a welcoming and inclusive workplace environment.
- Through our Town government service, find ways to increase cultural awareness and appreciation of diversity throughout our community.
- Consider additional ideas from the community. Implement those that are both consistent with the Selectboard's intent and compliant with the applicable laws.

In addition, we previously created a section on the Town's website (accessed by one click on the homepage) where we are building a collection of documents and links related to "Promoting Diversity in Our Community."

Here is an update on what has happened this summer:

- The Town’s website now includes links to the following websites and Facebook pages:
  - AIDS Project of Southern Vermont ... <http://www.aidsprojectsouthernvermont.org/>
  - Boys & Girls Club ... <http://bgcbrattleboro.com/>
  - Brattleboro Solidarity ... <https://www.facebook.com/brattleborosolidarity/>
  - Charter for Compassion ... <https://charterforcompassion.org/battleboro-vt>
  - Community Equity Collaborative ... <https://www.facebook.com/brattleboroCEC/>
  - Green Mountain Crossroads ... <http://www.greenmountaincrossroads.org/>
  - Groundworks Collaborative ... <https://groundworksvt.org/>
  - Health Care & Rehabilitative Services ... <http://www.hcrs.org/>
  - I am a Vermonter ... <http://www.iamavermonter.org/>
  - Inclusion Center ... <http://inclusioncenter.webs.com/>
  - Lost River Racial Justice ... <http://lostriverracialjustice.org/>
  - Senior Solutions ... <http://www.seniorsolutionsvt.org/>
  - Southeastern Vermont Community Action ... <http://www.sevca.org/>
  - The Root Social Justice Center ... <http://www.therootsjc.org/>
  - Turning Point of Windham County ...  
<https://www.facebook.com/Turning-Point-of-Windham-County-176648375716897/>
  - Vermont Center for Independent Living ... <http://www.vcil.org/>
  - Vermont Partnership for Fairness and Diversity ... <https://vermontpartnership.org/>
  - Youth Services ... <http://youthservicesinc.org/>
- This message is now printed on all advertisements of job openings (instead of just referencing the Town as an “Equal Opportunity Employer”): **“The Town of Brattleboro is committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion, and we strongly encourage people of color, people with disabilities, LGBTQ applicants, and people from other underrepresented groups to apply, recognizing and respecting that diverse perspectives and experiences are valuable to our team and essential to our public service.”** We also have added that statement at the top of our application for employment, where it supplements the following assurance that we do not discriminate against legally protected classes of people: **“It is the policy of the Town of Brattleboro to guarantee equal opportunity to all qualified applicants and to all employees. The Town will not discriminate with respect to initial appointment, advancement, and general working conditions against any person regardless of their age, race, biological sex, gender identification, sexual orientation, marital status, national origin, religious or political affiliation, or disabilities.”**
- 17 people have signed up for the Town’s Employee Recruitment Outreach Network.
- The Town’s August 2017 filing with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission reflects the following:
  - 0% people of color on the full-time staff
  - 8% people of color on the part-time and seasonal staff

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDITIONAL ACTION**

I am committed as Town Manager to implementing as many of the below listed actions as I can within the authority of my office. I urge the Selectboard to adopt this updated and expanded set of actions as a statement of the Town's intent to be actively engaged in this work going forward. Some actions require only our sincere and sustained commitment. Others require financial and other resources that may affect their timing or even their feasibility. However, I believe stating our official support for all of them is an important part of providing governmental leadership in the long-term effort to ensure social equity for all people in our increasingly diverse community.

The list below is meant to incorporate and expand upon the actions that were already approved by the Selectboard earlier this summer. Because this list is becoming longer and more complex, I have separated the overall list into three sections. The "Town Government's Team" section describes ways in which we intend to build our capacity internally for addressing issues of diversity, inclusion, and equity both in our Town government organization and in the community we serve. The "Town Government's Work" section describes how we will demonstrate that increased capacity through intentional local government actions on these matters and through anticipating how our actions on all matters may positively or negatively impact social equity in Brattleboro. The "Supporting the Community" section describes how the Town can support and collaborate with individuals and groups outside of local government to achieve a lasting positive impact upon the culture of our community.

### **TOWN GOVERNMENT'S TEAM**

- Training:
  - Involve the Selectboard and all employees.
  - Ensure a safe, inclusive, and equitable working environment for Town employees.
  - Start with educational sessions on implicit/unconscious bias in 2018 and add other educational sessions in the future to develop a more sophisticated understanding of bias and inequity so that the Town's elected leaders and staff can develop greater capacity to address these issues both internally and in the community.
- Recruitment:
  - Ensure job descriptions and advertisements use inclusive language.
  - Conduct broad outreach during external recruitment for vacant positions by:
    - Direct Town action, and
    - Sustaining and expanding the Employee Recruitment Outreach Network.
  - Use targeted recruitment to obtain diverse applicant pools for some positions.
- Hire a Human Resources Professional:
  - Needed anyway for an organization of our size and complexity.
  - Will improve recruitment practices.
  - Will increase and improve training programs.
  - Will reinforce Town's commitment to maintaining a workplace that is safe and welcoming for all employees.

## TOWN GOVERNMENT'S WORK

- Visibly Support Social Equity in All of Our Work:
  - Be mindful of the equity and inclusion impacts (positive and negative) of all our decisions and actions. (This builds upon the commitment we made earlier this year to act with compassion in all our governmental actions and decisions.)
- Explore Increased Town/School Collaboration:
  - Provide Town government information and experiences to a broad cross section of our community's youth.
  - Conduct joint recruitment, as appropriate.
  - Consider jointly sponsoring community projects and programs.

## SUPPORTING THE COMMUNITY

- Organize and/or Support Community Gatherings to Promote Understanding and Progress:
  - Ensure that "An Evening with Langston Hughes" at Brooks Memorial Library on January 3, 2018, is visible and well attended, and potentially create or assist with related events before and/or after.
  - Help reinvigorate "Celebration of Diversity Day" (first Friday in May).
  - Collaborate with individuals and organizations to broaden community involvement in other events, activities, and programs with a social justice focus.
- Seize opportunities to concretely support the work of organizations that are committed to improving inclusiveness and equity for marginalized populations in our community.
  - Maintain and expand website linkage.
  - Maintain and expand Human Services Program funding through the Town budget. (Note that this funding is subject to the recommendation of the Human Services Committee and the approval of Representative Town Meeting, and is beyond the authority of the Selectboard and Town staff.)
  - Promote volunteerism among Town employees and people in the community.
  - Keep listening and learning to find additional ways to promote social justice and to improve inclusiveness and equity in both the atmosphere and the reality of our community.

PBE: