

City of Keene  
New Hampshire

# Racial Justice & Community Safety Committee Report

*March 18, 2021*

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## INTRODUCTION

As the nation witnesses acts of racism from unfair lack of access to resources and opportunities to brutal acts of violence against people of color, an examination of Keene, the community we call “home”, is important. It is essential to engage in sincere efforts to understand the lived experiences of people of color living and/or working in the community, to analyze systems, and to develop an effective and sustainable plan to address any concerns as key steps in creating an equitable and anti-racist community. The Ad Hoc Racial Justice and Community Safety Committee (the “Committee”) began meeting in July 2020 upon being charged with “developing recommendations to prevent or correct systemic and cultural inequities in Keene.”

Racism for many people in Keene is invisible while, for others, racism is present in their lives. The Committee held open forums during which people of color shared personal experiences in schools, in the workplace and in public settings that illustrated the realities of both blatant and implicit bias in our community. The City of Keene elected officials (in collaboration with others in business, education, law enforcement and others) have such an important responsibility to engage the greater community in stopping racism and bias; in moving toward equity, diversity and inclusion; in ending unfair treatment of people of color and making Keene a better place for all people.

This brief report serves to make recommendations that will both create a racial equity lens for the City, businesses, and individuals throughout the community and also build a foundation for what will, ideally, be beginning steps in a long-term, sustainable, and effective approach to advancing racial equity.

## THE PROCESS

### 1. Buckets

The Committee realized at the onset that the substantial and important work required would benefit if organized into key categories or bucket lists based on input received in the June 2020 public forum hosted by Mayor Hansel. The public provided comments in the forum that were grouped by the Committee along with members’ thoughts into the following “buckets”, and additional public forums were later held for each individual category.

- **Community Education and Schools**
  - Fairness and opportunity for all students, faculty and staff
  - Prevention of achievement and opportunity gaps
  - Strategic programs and curriculum that prevent implicit bias and that promote a culture of fairness
  - Multi-racial leadership development
- **Laws, Policy and Policing**
  - Advancement of racial equity
  - Development of policies that facilitate the integration of racial equity into decision-making
  - Identification of impacts desired of policy solutions
- **Social and Community Justice**
  - Implementation of tools to open racial equity discussions that lead to progressive change in the community
  - Identification of ways to change programs and practices that perpetuate implicit bias

### 2. Speakers

The Committee invited a number of guest speakers and subject matter experts with the intention of educating the committee and public on current practices and identifying opportunities. There were also

members of the SAU29 School Board, local teachers, City department heads and others who participated in the meetings.

- Steven Russo, Keene Police Chief  
Chief Russo reviewed the KPD use of force training and policy as well as KPD's Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA) accreditation.
- Elizabeth Dragon, Keene City Manager  
The City Manager reviewed City hiring and recruitment practices; the charge and activities of the City Human Rights Committee; the importance of the KPD's CALEA accreditation; the NH Commission on Law Enforcement, Accountability, Community and Transparency created in June 2020; and the KPD body camera trial program.
- Sheena Bice, Veteran and First Responder (VFR) Healthcare  
Ms. Bice provided a presentation overviewing the purpose of VFR Healthcare highlighting the high-risk, high-stress nature of first responder jobs and the importance of mental healthcare in this field.
- Robert Malay, Superintendent of Schools, NH SAU 29  
Superintendent Malay reviewed school curriculum, staff training and inclusionary opportunities; recent Keene School Board activities; and disciplinary data, policies and opportunities.

### 3. Public Forums

The Committee held three public forums in November and December 2020, one for each of the subject buckets identified herein. The Committee unanimously values the importance of public input in identifying the local Keene community's specific challenges and opportunities, and strongly recommends that the City provide ongoing opportunities for the public to provide input in a manner that is open and safe for members of our community. The input received was revealing and helpful, however, there is concern that more people might have participated if they felt their input had the potential to affect change and, importantly, if they were confident their input would not subject them to racist treatment or criticism resulting in negative outcomes.

## KEY OBSERVATIONS

There were common themes that became evident throughout the Committee's process of collecting information to form recommendations. Acceptance of these observations as truth is critical to the success of any actions taken to advance our community toward equity and inclusivity for black people, indigenous people and all people of color.

### 1. Racism Exists In Keene

Based on the lived experiences spoken by people of color in Keene, the Committee concludes that racism exists in Keene. The public is calling for community leaders to immediately take a clear anti-racism position by addressing systemic, cultural and individual manifestation of racism.

*"There are people of goodwill who haven't experienced racism. If it's not part of your everyday consciousness, there is a blindside. We often think that racism is about a person's behavior. Some people, we think, act in explicitly racist ways toward racial minorities. Those are the 'real' racists, we tell ourselves. But racism is not merely a function of individual attitudes, and it can't be eradicated by changing hearts and minds. Racism is the social, legal, political, and economic distinctions that mark and maintain unequal access and entry points to privacy, property, protection, prosperity, and*

*personhood. Racism is embedded in structures, institutions, and ideas, especially those about work, deservingness, representation, redistribution, and government's role."*

(source: [global.cornell.edu/themes/silence-racism](http://global.cornell.edu/themes/silence-racism))

The Committee received clear public testimony from members of the community who experience racist slurs, aloof comments about slavery, school curricula that are inadequate regarding the important experience and influence of black Americans, lack of anti-racism policy, fear of reprisal for any response to racist activity and lack of racial diversity in important services such as medical services, for example. These are just brief examples of the bigger picture of racism that plague many quiet American communities, and Keene is no exception. A recurring acknowledgement amongst both Committee members and the public is that there is a need for everyone to understand that everyone is harmed by racism. It will take our community as a whole to make changes that effectively improve equity and inclusivity for all people of color which will, in turn, make our community better for all.

## 2. Implicit Bias Must Be Identified

Many members of the Keene community have not experienced racism and, yet, may unintentionally perpetuate racial inequities, discrimination and biases. The purpose of identifying sources and practices of implicit bias is not to cause conflict, but to ultimately unearth unconscious bias and teach people and organizations to use a lens of equity in working together as a community to promote health and wellbeing for everyone. The creation of processes to "call in" each other (or organizations) into dialogue when addressing problematic and potentially harmful behaviors will help affect positive change.

## 3. Open Dialogue Requires Significant Expansion

In every meeting of the Committee, the need for open and ongoing dialogue was identified as paramount to achieving progress toward eliminating racial inequities and improving outcomes for all racial groups. The group considered the use of one-time surveys, regular climate surveys, citizen and stakeholder groups, student groups and other inclusive opportunities for open dialogue. The activity is community engagement, but the specific goal here is for victims of racial injustice to have safe and effective channels to share their personal experiences and ideas and for people who may have implicit biases to listen, learn and engage.

## 4. Community Education is Essential

The Committee received numerous ideas from members of the public highlighting the importance of community education. Ultimately, overcoming racial inequity and bias in Keene will require disrupting local complacency and expanding the knowledge base of everyone in the community. Educating citizens, organizations, leaders and community groups about the experience of people of color in our community as well as teaching how to identify implicit bias and adoption of newly embraced policies, procedures and practices rooted in the principles of equity are essential.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee makes the following recommendations to the City Council and to the community at large based upon information gleaned from its research, discussion and public input. Though this is the result of the work of a City committee, the recommendations will be most effective as adopted by an intended audience including all businesses, educational institutions and government agencies throughout Keene and the greater region. It is acknowledged that this will likely include some overlap and coordination with additional local and state initiatives focused on racial justice.

## 1. Government Leadership

- A. **It is recommended that the City of Keene take a position against racism starting with a strong anti-racist statement.** The Committee received multiple suggestions that the City Council issue a strong and clear public statement stating its anti-racist position and commitment to racial equity and inclusion. The public is looking to the City for leadership at a time when acts of racism around the nation are a cause for alarm and a call for change. In addition to issuing a statement, it is recommended that the City Council adopt a Council Goal specifically focused on achieving racial equity in Keene.
- B. **It is recommended that the City work with community stakeholders to establish clear community racial equity and inclusivity goals and that the goals be widely adopted by the City and Keene agencies and businesses.** This report is just the beginning of a process. Next steps will require identification of clear and measurable goals and accountability measures together with other organizations across the community as well as a plan for implementation and review of progress made over time. This process can only be successful if built upon information gathered in section 2 of this document, “Public Input and Community Education”, which aims to specifically identify the local challenges and biases to overcome.
- C. **It is recommended that the City continue its commitment and efforts toward racial justice and community safety whether via an existing committee such as the Human Rights Committee, a new equity and inclusion task force, or a joint effort of multiple community organizations and agencies.** Again, this report is just the beginning - just the first step. There is much work to be done and much motivation to make a difference. A strategic approach to moving Keene toward racial justice and inclusivity will require consistent effort, analysis and adjustment including regular follow-up on the recommendations in this report. There is also much data available that, when collected and analyzed, can help identify where and to what extent bias exists in our community. This data will help build awareness of the situation and emphasize the danger of complacency.
- D. **It is recommended that the City promote diversity in its boards and commissions membership and responsibilities.** Racial diversity amongst City committee members will provide important diverse perspectives that benefit the community and will help build sensitivity to and eliminate implicit bias over time. Committee charges and responsibilities should be evaluated to determine if they welcome diversity and provide realistic opportunities for inclusion.
- E. **It is recommended that the City promote festivals that celebrate racial diversity.** The International Festival and Martin Luther King, Jr. Breakfast are good examples of existing local celebrations that welcome and promote racial equity. Juneteenth, Holi Festival, Pride Celebrations, Cinco De Mayo, and other celebrations provide additional opportunities to appreciate diversity and to overcome stereotypes, build awareness and encourage unity.

## 2. Public Input & Community Education

- A. **It is recommended that the City, school systems (k-12-college) and community organizations and groups provide regular, safe and open opportunities for difficult conversations about local, personal racial justice experiences allowing input to be in-person or written, anonymous or personally identified.** The purpose of this effort must be specifically focused on welcoming and encouraging testimony from black people, indigenous people and people of color about their experience in Keene – including those who are reluctant to share or who may not trust that their input will improve racial equity in Keene. It is also of utmost importance that those who wish to share anonymously have the opportunity to and that they feel comfortable doing so.

There are members of the public who are reluctant to speak about their concerns. People have stories that they are not sharing. Personal conversations are needed to get tangible feedback, but being vulnerable and exposed is not comfortable. The committee did hear some testimonies and agreed that bringing these personal experiences to light will be necessary to disrupt local implicit bias and complacency, to build a broader awareness of the true extent of the problem in Keene. This will require multiple platforms such as anonymous surveys and strategic dialogue including public bodies and key stakeholders. There are two important objectives here: to provide a safe and welcome means for victims of racism to share their experiences without fear of negative consequences, and to engage those who do not experience racism in order to increase awareness of the existence and the consequences of silent racism.

- B. It is recommended that the City meet regularly with other businesses to share local observations and data and to develop, implement and measure organizational and community programs designed to 1) improve racial equity and inclusivity and 2) build public awareness of and knowledge to combat implicit bias.** Keene is not alone in its motivation to address racial inequity and to improve inclusivity. There are well established programs and standards that can establish key objectives and a framework for this work. Examples include the NH Governor's Advisory Council on Diversity and Inclusion, the New Hampshire Commission for Human Rights, the "Restorative Justice Vehicle for Dialogue, Organization For Chief Diversity Officers Tenets", and the "Race and Equity in New Hampshire Series", to name a few. Businesses engaged in this process should include the following, at minimum.

Government Agencies	Regional NAACP
Schools	Regional ACLU
Churches	Cohen Center For Holocaust and Genocide Studies
Healthcare Providers	Keene State College
Chamber of Commerce	Franklin Pierce University
Keene Family YMCA	Antioch University New England
Keene Police Department	River Valley Community College
Cheshire County Sheriff	Keene Public Library

This will likely require implicit bias training for the people involved, and meetings should be facilitated by a professional with racial equity experience and skillset.

- C. It is recommended that the services of local colleges and universities be engaged to conduct community racial equity and inclusion climate surveys every two years and that survey results and findings be shared with community leaders, the City Council, the general public, and organizations listed in section 2.B. for their education and response.** Racial equity climate surveys measure a community's – or an organization's – or a group's – level of adoption of a racial equity lens in its employment, programs and services. A regular effort is important to both increase people's receptivity and cooperation which yields better information and to assist in identification of specific needs and opportunities to advance racial equity.

In June of 2020, for example, Living Cities administered their fourth such annual climate survey and provides the following feedback which shows how helpful this approach can be in designing programs that address the specific needs of an organization or community.

*"In comparison from past years, we saw that staff were more willing and have more language to name tensions that they're holding as well as dissonances they are seeing within the*

*organization. Many of the dissonances named are a direct result of how adding elements of pro-Black culture without actively dismantling white supremacy culture is insufficient to grow an organizational culture that is pro-Black... Last year, staff reported deepened understanding of interpersonal, institutional and structural racism. This year, we saw even deeper analysis and interrogation on what it might take to address the different levels of racism and how much they are interconnected. At the same time, staff felt the tools they have for addressing racism within the organization are insufficient.”*

(source:<https://www.livingcities.org/resources/372-internal-scan-2020-racial-equity-and-inclusion-competency-survey-results>)

### 3. Public Safety

- A. **It is recommended that the Keene Police Department continue its CALEA accreditation and continue to publicize what is required for the CALEA accreditation as well as its most recent assessment report.** CALEA accreditation is voluntary, and in August of 2020 the KPD was one of just fifteen NH law enforcement agencies with this accreditation, which it has held since 2009. It requires a lengthy annual review and regular audit of policies, procedures and records for the ultimate purpose of fairness in the application of justice. Among the many practices carefully reviewed by CALEA are hiring processes and use of authority and force, for example.

The Committee’s efforts involved a general overview of KPD reports, training practices, use of force and other policies. The City Council and public are encouraged to visit the KPD website, “About” and “Resources” pages which include detailed information about training required by the KPD and its most recent CALEA assessment report which provide in-depth information including recent data and activities. The Committee found this information to be helpful in its review.

- B. **It is recommended that the KPD and other local law enforcement and first responder agencies engage external resources to conduct a review of recruitment and job application processes to identify and correct any possible bias that may limit applications from or the advancement of black people, indigenous people, and people of color.** Diversity in law enforcement personnel is essential for effective law enforcement and for community relations. Chief Russo made it clear that the Keene Police Department is actively seeking applicants, and racial diversity is desired, but a shortage of applicants in general continues to be a challenge in law enforcement in and well beyond the Monadnock region. In addition to the CALEA accreditation process which includes a thorough review of hiring practices, there is an opportunity to look more closely at the recruitment and skills testing processes used by the KPD and other local law enforcement and first responder agencies to attract a diverse workforce. There may be opportunities to reach a more diverse applicant pool, to improve the message of racial equity and inclusion within recruitment programs, and to post job openings with services that have a more diverse following. It is also recommended that the Keene Police Department review and update its recruitment video with these goals in mind.
- C. **It is recommended that the KPD provide public education on what methods are trained and used by the KPD to limit any necessary response to what is reasonable within various circumstances.** Committee discussions included a review with the KPD of what is commonly referred to as “use of force”. There were questions about what is legal and what is not, what is considered reasonable response to resistance and what is not, how KPD personnel are trained to respond in various circumstances, and how data regarding incidents involving use of force is recorded. It became clear in these discussions that the KPD has specific and ongoing training, review and reporting requirements regarding its response to resistance activities and policies that the public is not

generally aware of, and that could aid in improving public knowledge of KPD practices.

- D. **It is recommended that the City Council support the need for more community mental health services and any opportunities to assist the KPD in its response to emergencies requiring these services.** This recommendation is specifically focused on community safety and addresses the concern that some emergencies that involve psychological or behavioral crises have the best possible outcome for all involved when assisted by or managed by mental health professionals.

The Committee considered mobile crisis intervention services that could possibly provide immediate stabilization in cases of psychological or behavioral crisis. These types of services, however, do not transfer the responsibility of response from law enforcement to the mobile crisis resources because, in times of emergency, the dispatching of services must be immediate and, thus, cannot include a level of questioning or decision making required to determine whether mental health services might be needed. The immediate dispatch of law enforcement response continues to be required to meet public safety requirements and expectations. The potential promise of fewer crises if there are more community mental health resources, however, is a good reason to support any increase in these services to our community.

- E. **It is recommended that the KPD continue to engage the services of organizations such as the Veteran and First Responder Healthcare organization to support the needs of KPD personnel.** First responder jobs come with high risk, big expectations and nontraditional work hours. Recognition of stress response and engaging support services when needed is important for first responder health which is directly related to job performance and community relations.

- F. **It is recommended that the KPD continue to engage directly with Keene youth and families to maintain and build upon community relations and acceptance.** The KPD has a great track record with programs such as the Police Athletic League (PAL), for example, which helps children in the community build relationships with and see the human side of Keene's law enforcement personnel. The very visible reporting of nationwide incidents of racism including law enforcement makes it incredibly important now to build and maintain a positive rapport between the KPD and Keene children and families. It is understood that the COVID-19 pandemic limits these types of opportunities, but, even in this difficult and unusual time, the KPD can use creative ways (such as a pen pal program, for example) to proactively connect with Keene youth and families and is to be commended for their efforts thus far.

#### 4. City and Community

The path to racial equity in the Keene community will require organizational change, and it will require leaders amongst Keene's employers to serve as catalysts for change. The goal is to create and use a racial equity lens and implement a community process to empower businesses to advance diversity and inclusion. The following recommendations are intended both for the City of Keene as well as all Keene businesses. Many of these actions will require the assistance of experienced diversity and inclusion consultants.

- A. **It is recommended that the City assign an administrative role within the City government moving forward the mission of diversity, equity and inclusion set forth by this Committee.**

- B. **It is recommended that the City and Keene employers regularly conduct diversity, equity and inclusion training for employees that fosters an open and welcoming workplace culture for all people.**
- C. **It is recommended that the City and Keene employers review employee recruitment, retention, pay and promotion policies to achieve improved diversity and equity amongst applicants and throughout organizational personnel at all levels.**
- D. **It is recommended that the City and Keene employers expand and regularly provide internship positions that specifically attract underrepresented populations and create career opportunities.**
- E. **It is recommended that the City and Keene employers Identify where skills are transferable amongst potential applicants to help provide opportunities and widen the applicant pool (military to law enforcement, for example).**
- F. **It is recommended that the City and Keene employers update traditional skills testing procedures that may unnecessarily disqualify black, indigenous and people of color and that the parameters of applicant tracking systems be broadened.**
- G. **It is recommended that the City and Keene employers seek and generate incentives to promote equity in employment.**
- H. **It is recommended that the City and Keene employers review and update initiatives, systems, operations and mission statements to identify practices that limit or thwart diversity.**
- I. **It is recommended that the City intentionally factor diversity into community driven development projects such as the arts corridor and the skate park, for example.**
- J. **It is recommended that the Keene Public Library as well as school libraries expand collection diversity, that feedback be sought from the community for this purpose, that the Keene Public Library facilitate reading groups to promote diversity within its collection, and that libraries seek financial donations to help expand the collection diversity.**
- K. **It is recommended that the City review Cheshire TV programming and encourage additions and changes that promote diversity and inclusion.**

## 5. Education

Building and appreciating racial diversity in ways that create real opportunities and promote long term community success starts with youth and, therefore, must involve Keene's schools. This will be a very effective driver for long term positive outcomes in racial equity in the Keene community. It is understood that the City of Keene does not govern Keene public school policy, however, racial equity and community safety throughout our city will require efforts outside of City Hall.

The following recommendations are made as a reflection of comments and concerns received by the public for the consideration of Keene school leadership, and the City Council is respectfully asked to support these recommendations upon any opportunity to do so. The Committee appreciates the participation of Keene School Board members and SAU29 Superintendent of Schools, Robert Malay, in the discussions had on this topic.

- A. **It is recommended that Keene schools develop specific anti-racism policies and appeal to the State of New Hampshire to establish a standard anti-racism policy as a baseline for all schools.** The Committee heard concerns from the public that the current general anti-discrimination and anti-bullying policies in Keene schools are not sufficient in handling situations of racism. The use of racial slurs and other types of racist behavior call for a clear and specific response that sends a message of zero tolerance, tends to the needs of the victims and helps to break down implicit bias. The reports of racist behaviors and the fear and hesitation that victims and victims' parents have to report incidents give credence to the need for specific anti-racism policy and practice.
- B. **It is recommended that Keene schools review discipline data regularly and address systemic issues of racial inequality.** The purpose of this recommendation is to take a proactive approach to address inequalities in schools at all levels rather than a response-oriented approach. Superintendent Malay reported that a new model at the Keene High School includes a Dean of Students position that oversees all student discipline that will help make progress in this direction at that particular school.
- C. **It is recommended that Keene schools facilitate and maintain recurring student forums for student input and conversations about racial equity and inclusion at all levels.** Much like public input is key to achieving racial equity and inclusion in the greater community, student input is key to making progress in this direction within the schools. The intent is to provide a safe and welcoming means to build awareness of the problems that exist and to reveal and correct implicit bias in the school system.
- D. **It is recommended that Keene schools conduct regular, anonymous equity and inclusivity climate surveys and youth risk behavior surveys.** Parents and students of Keene schools represent a significant portion of Keene's population. This provides the schools with an opportunity to use annual surveys to measure racial equity and inclusivity awareness and experience and to implement programs to affect positive change.
- E. **It is recommended that schools thoroughly review special education, food security and other student and family assistance programs to determine where racial bias exists and make efforts to correct it.**
- F. **It is recommended that Keene schools review all curricula with a lens of racial equity and change or replace curricula as necessary to eliminate bias and help ensure all students feel respected and included.** This is an issue that came to light during Committee meetings and public forums where it was made clear that students of color have found themselves in uncomfortable situations due to biased or inadequate texts and topics. The National Education Association conducted an initiative to eradicate institutional racism in public schools and provides helpful information and resources to help with this type of effort. Superintendent Malay suggested Social Studies content as a good example of material that needs updating to eliminate bias that has been otherwise overlooked to date.
- G. **It is recommended that Keene schools ensure equity in the education system by promoting diversity amongst faculty including concerted outreach to organizations and institutions where diversity exists.** Having teachers of color can help schools improve curricula selection, mentor all students and challenge implicit bias. The opportunity exists to review position descriptions, postings and recruitment practices, remove any inherent bias and adjust as necessary to appeal to a more diverse pool of candidates to the extent possible. It is understood, however, that faculty diversity is stagnant nationwide – Keene is not alone.

- H. **It is recommended that Keene schools conduct social equity and justice training for teachers and implement culturally responsive pedagogy.** The Committee heard from a local teacher who noted that the use of common social innuendos, stereotypes and practices of assimilation occurs in schools, and that there are training programs available to help teachers recognize and adjust these practices. The goal is a comfortable and enriching academic experience for students of all races.
- I. **Additional creative programs and approaches in schools that promote awareness and support of diversity and inclusion are encouraged,** such as international pen pal programs with local elementary students, for example.

## CONCLUSION

“The whole of us is affected when the least of us is affected.” (*Gail Somers, Keene Resident*) The specific number of complaints received does not reflect the impact or severity of the problem – this is one of the challenges. Our City has limited diversity to begin with, and that fact means we may not get mass complaints. This does not make the reality of racism in Keene insignificant or unimportant. Ultimately, the goal is to “build a community that is safe, just and accessible to all through ongoing community and government commitment that is codified, measurable and accountable in and for every single member of our community. This puts forward the values we believe in.” (*Pierre Morton, proud member of the Keene community*)

The Racial Justice and Community Safety Committee presents this report to the City Council with both sincere concern and optimism. Keene is a beautiful and safe community, but the existence of racism and implicit bias cannot be denied. It is important that the City assume a leadership role in affecting change that builds racial equity and inclusion. Committee members agreed that there is much work to do, and it is difficult to stop meeting because there are many opportunities for further examination in addition to positive community energy on this topic, however, in the important interest of making an immediate impact, these recommendations are advanced. The continuation of this process with community involvement and to include ongoing examination, dialogue, measurement and change will be key to long term movement in improving racial justice and community safety for Keene.