

Social Justice and Rotary

Recent events have renewed important discussion in our communities, in person, in mass demonstrations, and on social media about social justice issues, particularly issues about race, and more specifically, the use of violent and often deadly force by police against African Americans. Protests continue to bring attention to statistical and narrative testimonies of the violence that African Americans continue to endure across America.

They protest because many people across our District and our country are hurting, especially African Americans, whether as victims of violent policing, as residents of areas that suffer from inequitable access to health care, jobs, education and capital, or as property and business owners and their employees who have suffered from vandalism, looting and loss of employment and income. We hope that our communities and our nation emerge from this period with greater understanding and compassion for each other, and benefit from the conversations taking place, despite the pain that many are suffering.

Yet, hope alone is not enough. When Rotarians see problems in their communities, they act, with focus, fervor and urgency. We must acknowledge the systemic problems that adversely affect African Americans in our country, in policing, health care, educations, and opportunity. As Rotarians, how do we respond?

Rotary International has issued this statement last week:

“At Rotary, we have no tolerance for racism. Promoting respect, celebrating diversity, demanding ethical leadership, and working tirelessly to advance peace are central tenets of our work. We have more work to do to create more just, open and welcoming communities for all people. We know there are no easy fixes and that challenging conversations and work lie before all of us. Rotary's strength has long been our ability and commitment to bringing people together. We will tap into that strength now as we stand with those who are working for

peace and justice. Rotary will do our part to listen, learn and take action to ensure that we continue to contribute to making positive change.”

We agree with the statement. We oppose racism. We celebrate diversity. Many Rotarians would say that this statement does not say enough – it does not address the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and so many others. Black lives are being taken and it is a problem that our communities should address. Condemning racism, by itself, does not solve anything. Rotary does invite “challenging conversations” and acknowledges “the work that lies before us” to bring people together. There is an urgency to address systemic issues that cause African Americans to live in fear of being treated violently by the police.

Paul Harris founded Rotary for friendship and business reasons. Still, in his lifetime, Rotary evolved as did his vision for what Rotary could be – a catalyst for peace, respect and understanding among the people of the world. For a century, Rotary has funded and encouraged global programs that promote goodwill and better understanding between people of different cultures and nationalities. We need to do the same locally.

We acknowledge the perception that Rotary historically has not been welcoming to everyone – to women, to minorities, to young people, to those who were not professionals or business leaders. In recent years, we have seen those barriers breaking down, but no doubt remnants remain. In our District, we are fortunate to have a higher percentage of female members than in most places in the Rotary world, and to have had the benefit of many women serving in leadership roles in our Clubs and at the District level. That level of growth, so far, has not extended to people of color. Only focusing on gender equity, and not race, will not create harmony in our communities. It will not make Rotary a place where African-American and other community people of color see Rotary as a place for them. We must foster the advancement of

all who come to Rotary for the opportunity to serve and to lead, and give all an equitable opportunity to serve within Rotary.

Rotarian work on social justice and race issues need not be divisive or political. Rotarian David Forward, writing about the history of the Rotary Foundation, said, “Throughout its history, Rotary has reached out with hands of friendship, putting aside matters that divide us and embracing those characteristics we hold in common: the human desire for love, for health, for peace, and for the opportunity to raise our families in safe environments.” Surely, all Rotarians can rally around projects and programs that share these goals, address racism, and advance us towards a more inclusive organization.

Our Clubs already do much locally to foster stronger communities, and our work on these existing programs – in education, health care, food security, and social services – must continue. We can also contribute to the efforts to eliminate the harmful effects of racism, the inequities that much of our population is born into, and the injustices that exist in our justice system. Rotarians in our District have already begun such work in ways that can bring people together and do not divide.

We support the American right to protest peacefully. We stand with those who oppose injustice. Moving forward, Rotary Clubs could facilitate public forums and other means of communication to focus on solutions to the problem, and can support more projects that address inequities in their communities. Our goal should be lasting, sustainable peace here at home.

Our District Membership Committee and New Club Committee will expand efforts to grow Rotary in the coming year, and will make special effort to increase racial diversity among

our Members, and to add new Clubs that focus on particular issues consistent with Rotary's ideals. One example is a proposed new Rotary Club for Social Justice. In addition, the District will support Clubs to build an inclusive environment to create a Culture of Excellence, meaning that the racial diversity that is attracted to Rotary Clubs will be empowered to act and welcomed fully into the fold of Rotary Clubs.

Our Public Image Committee will work hand in hand with the other Committees to spread the message of the positive work that African American, Latinx, Asian American, and Indigenous Rotarians of our Clubs are doing in our communities, and that the door to Rotary is open to all who want to serve.

Our District recognizes the need to identify and implement quality, in-depth Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Training and workshops to challenge us as an organization on our processes and practices and to push us forward towards a more inclusive and welcoming environment for people of all racial backgrounds. We invite guidance and input from Rotarians and leaders with expertise in this area.

Our District Foundation Committee will work with Clubs to maximize Rotary Foundation and District resources available for Club projects that address these issues. For example, we will, this coming year, provide special District Grant money to Clubs to use specifically for early childhood education purposes, as all children, especially children in areas of fewer resources, have been affected by the shuttering of schools because of COVID-19.

We will continue the work of our current District Governor and recent past District Governors to increase the diversity of representation on our District Board and Committees. We also welcome diversity of thought, of life experience, and of ideas. We will offer

opportunities for Rotarians to discuss race and Rotary, as we have offered forums to discuss Women in Rotary. I will meet with people of color in our District to discuss their fears, their hopes and their plans to make Rotary better for all and more inviting to all.

As the Birthplace of Rotary, our District is looked to for leadership in the Rotary world, and we aspire to be leaders in what we do, both in Rotary and in our communities. We are open for suggestions on how Rotary in our District and in our Clubs can help address social justice issues in our communities. We will support Rotarian actions that will cause positive changes in our communities.

“Rotary Opens Opportunities” – that is the theme for the coming Rotary year. We have the opportunity to make a difference in our communities and to be leaders in the movement for greater social justice, here and now. Let us work together to do so.

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