

June 14, 2020

My Fellow Colleagues,

Devereux's mission is to nurture and unlock human potential every day—for our team members and the individuals we serve. Our legacy of changing lives began 100 years ago, which means our organization was born in America's Jim Crow era, and our evolution occurred alongside America's tumultuous, repetitive struggles to rectify racism. And now, once again, our country finds itself braced for change. It's long overdue and Devereux is poised to take action.

I am one of only two Black people on the senior leadership team. I am the only Black person in the Office of the President. My journey to this position began in a small town in South Georgia where anti-Black racism was the norm—in housing, healthcare (actually a lack thereof), education, access to jobs with equitable pay, and much more. I am intimately familiar with the symptoms of the disease that has robbed Black people of their dignity and quality of life. That disease is racism.

Perhaps the most important event that impacted my future was a death that happened before I was even born. My grandmother died at age 42. And while her death certificate lists breast cancer as the cause of death, today, as a medical professional, I'm certain it was the legal segregation laws on where she could live and work, and the lack of access to basic healthcare that killed her. My mother became an orphan at 12, under the same conditions that took her mother's life. She became a mother at 18 and her struggle became mine.

Luck, grace and fortunate timing paved the way to my current seat at this table. And too, my mother and grandmother's resilience is within me. Like them, I have faced people in positions of power acting as gatekeepers who questioned my intellect, doubted my ability and capacity, offered less pay than my non-Black peers, expected more work and dismissed my ideas only to co-opt them as their own. Sadly, far too many Black, Indigenous and people of color still face the same gatekeepers at every intersection in their personal and professional lives. My goal as a leader in this organization is to lend my voice in the collective dismantling of barriers at Devereux, allowing team members to reach their full potential.

To my fellow Black colleagues, I see you. We are collectively grieved and hurting. The impact of racism on your life is not a new conversation. In this moment, it is not your responsibility to educate your fellow non-Black colleagues about your lived experience. Too often, this has been a trauma superimposed on us and you are under no obligation to contribute to these early conversations. We want you to take care of yourselves. Black people are not a monolith and I am clear that I cannot speak for our entire race; nor can you. However, if you want to be involved, then by all means, please do! As we begin to implement action steps we will need your voice in sharing what real change looks like, and we will rely on you to hold us accountable.

To my non-Black colleagues, we are in a state of reckoning, a state of change. The bandage has again been ripped off a wound that has festered for generations. Like any wound, it has to heal from the inside out. That healing has to begin within you. We are making resources available for all who wish to learn and grow. We are creating safe spaces for dialogue about the impact of racism and the work of antiracism. Safe does not mean comfortable, so we are

committed to creating an environment of growth, where you feel secure and supported in this journey. We are open to your thoughts, but we need your action. Take advantage of the resources provided for an honest self-examination of your beliefs. Engage in these conversations at work and outside of work with your family and friends.

While the current worldwide civil uprising is focused on the systematic racism that disenfranchises Black people and Black communities, we know all people of color are subjected to racism. We stand together in supporting Black people, Indigenous people, people of color, women, LGBTQ+ people, persons with disabilities and any person who has been systematically marginalized. Devereux is committed to full representation, which means we are committed to each of you.

Centers are asked to take action, not only because it is the right thing to do, but because our country is in crisis. The first action is the creation of departmental forums to discuss racism and its impact on our employees, our practices, and the individuals we serve. Conversations should allow employees and clients to voice concerns and process their feelings about structural and systemic racism and its impact on their lives – things they may now be considering for the first time. These team conversations must be led by a volunteer who is comfortable in doing so; it need not be a member of that department. We encourage you to seek out volunteers and create opportunities for them to assist. Start with 1-2 meetings per group for every department (e.g., nurses, therapists, maintenance, food services) and continue the discussions with the clients. Short media resources provide an opportunity to facilitate focused discussions; employees can use the resources we provide or find their own content (there's a lot of good stuff out there!), but it should be vetted by a supervisor for feedback prior to making selections. The forum can also be open-ended or based on local events.

Emotional safety is critical during these discussions. I am sure there are widely divergent views on any aspect of racism, and teams need to be able to speak, but even more importantly, to listen to learn. General safety and respect rules include:

- Make participation voluntary.
- Encourage everyone to share freely; it's hard to change what we can't acknowledge.
- Educating the group on language and examine how words cause harm.
- Use any discriminatory or inflammatory remarks as an opportunity to educate and correct misconceptions. Invite that person to listen as a learning opportunity.
- Practicing empathy in the moment.

“What is Devereux going to do next?” many of you have asked, and I'm glad to hear you're ready for action. We don't have all the answers— if we did we would be much further along in this process. If we are to make permanent, emancipatory change across this organization, we cannot attempt to dismantle over four hundred years of oppression in a few weeks or months. We don't want to cause more harm in righting this wrong, but I can assure you this is not a fleeting moment or initiative—we are committed to lasting change.

Here is an outline of immediate and future next steps we are taking as an organization:

1. People Operations has created a SharePoint site with resources that will include suggested books, movies, YouTube videos, websites, and social media platforms. These can be used to educate yourselves and to stimulate departmental and client discussions. Look for that announcement early this week.

2. Our national steering committee's next step will be forming subcommittees that focus on specific areas, such as training, vetting and distributing resources, and examining inclusion at all levels. We will be asking for people from ALL departments at the Center level to participate on these subcommittees so decisions are guided by the people they impact. If you have an interest in this work, please let your supervisor know and send those names to your Executive Director. We need your passion locally and nationally.
3. We are enlisting the guidance of experts in diversity, equity, and inclusion to look at every level of our organization and develop strategic initiatives with key performance indicators for accountability and as markers of change.

Devereux's leadership team recognizes systems of marginalization, inequity and oppression are real and present. Our president, Carl E. Clark II, is clear in his charge to us: "ALL Office of the President leaders must examine, confront and ultimately overcome both overt and insidious forms of racism. The buck stops here." We, the leadership team, accept the charge and trust his commitment to lead Devereux through this moment and beyond.

We ask a lot of you in your role every day, and now we have one more ask—that you commit to the vision of inclusion and equity at all levels. We come from different starting points, but here we are, together as one Devereux, healing, growing and breaking down barriers. Thank you. Let's get to work!

#DevereuxStrong

Yolanda

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Yolanda', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Yolanda Graham, M.D.
Senior Vice President and Chief Clinical/Medical Officer
Devereux Advanced Behavioral Health