

MEMORANDUM

TO: Sen. Jeannette White - Chair, Senate Committee on Government Operations
Rep. Sarah Copeland Hanzas - Chair, House Committee on Government Operations

FROM: Andrea Brett - Chair, Racial Equity Advisory Panel

DATE: January 14, 2021

SUBJECT: Annual Racial Equity Advisory Panel Report to the Legislature

INTRODUCTION

This past year will be remembered for two primary events—the COVID-19 pandemic and the reinvigorated racial justice movement sparked by the tragic death of George Floyd. While Mr. Floyd’s death was just one of far too many disproportionate deaths of black and brown men at the hands of police, it galvanized and energized the movement, resulting in some promising concessions and changes from governments, businesses, and the attitudes of the public, towards racial injustice. The COVID 19 crisis has highlighted the on-going racial inequities and disparities in health access and outcomes, employment, housing, education, and commerce (e.g. access to banking, loans, etc.).

With Vermont’s, almost prescient decision to create and staff the unique position of Executive Director of Racial Equity (EDRE) and the hiring of Xusana Davis into the job, the state was uniquely poised to tackle the complicated local issues raised by these two national events. The Panel has been humbled and energized by the tremendous efforts of Ms. Davis and her commitment to the hard work of helping Vermont agencies and departments implement programs and activities that address systemic racial disparities, and measure progress towards those goals. Her companion report contains detailed information about her work.

This report is provided to the House and Senate Committees on Government Operations in accordance with Sec. 5002(c)(3).

REPORT

I. Charge of the Racial Equity Advisory Panel (Panel) pursuant to 3 V.S.A. Sec. 5002(c):

- c) The Panel shall have the following duties and responsibilities:
- (1) work with the Executive Director of Racial Equity to implement the reforms identified as necessary in the comprehensive organizational review as required by subsection 5003(a) of this title;

(2) advise the Executive Director to ensure ongoing compliance with the purpose of this chapter, and advise the Governor on strategies for remediating systemic racial disparities in statewide systems of government; and

(3) on or before January 15, 2020, and annually thereafter, report to the House and Senate Committees on Government Operations on:

(A) the extent to which the State is achieving the performance targets and measures as developed pursuant to subsection 5003(c) of this title; and

(B) the nature and quality of the collaboration between the Governor's Cabinet and the Executive Director.

II. Panel Members

- Clarence Davis (Term expired Sept. 2020, seeking re-appointment)- Appointed by the Governor
- Andrea Brett, Chair (Term expires 2021)- Appointed by the Speaker of the House
- Stephanie Seguino (Term expires 2022)- Appointed by the Committee on Committees
- Karen Richards (Reappointed in 2019- Term expires 2022)-Appointed by the Human Rights Commission
- Judge Nancy Waples (Term expires 2023)- Appointed by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court

III. Panel Work

The Panel held nine meetings during 2020. The following represents progress made on achieving performance targets and measures:

- 1) Work with the Executive Director of Racial Equity to implement the reforms identified as necessary in the comprehensive organizational review as required by subsection 5003(a) of this title:

While the COVID-19 pandemic delayed and shifted some of the priorities, work continued and progress was made on a number of fronts that support a comprehensive organizational review, including the Statewide Equity Plan; a data collection policy; SOVEIAT (Equity Impact Assessment tool for budget & policy); creation of a SOV Racial Equity Team; Equity Recovery Group (ERG) Policy; and the Minority and Women Business Entities (MWBE) Executive Order.

In addition, the EDRE was instrumental in making sure that the Health Department's pandemic- related information was available to New Americans in languages that they could understand and in working with the Equity Recovery Group to analyze and report on racial disparities related to the COVID-19 outbreak.

The Panel will provide additional equity-related questions to the Department of Human Resources for consideration in the annual Employee Engagement Survey by its February 2021 meeting. In addition, the REAP website will be enhanced to provide a one-stop place for information related to the other government-sponsored task forces, committees, and groups working on racial equity issues, provide copies of their reports, and highlight the EDRE's work.

With additional appropriations of federal COVID Recovery Fund (CRF) funding, the Panel explored creation of an Equity Dashboard that could track the disparities identified by the COVID-19 crisis across all sectors of state government. Unfortunately, the requirements for expenditure prior to the end of the calendar year, required the

Panel to agree to reallocate the funding. Since quite a bit of the data already exists elsewhere in state government, we hope to provide links to that information on the REAP website. Additional CRF training funds will be used to have the EDRE certified in an Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) tool use. This tool can then be used by Ms. Davis in her work with state employees. Discussion is also underway to have all agencies and departments designate Equity Liaisons, who would then engage in advanced-level equity training. Finally, the EDRE is working with a group to revise the unconscious bias training, which would be a required training for all state employees.

On the legislative front, the EDRE provided testimony that helped to secure a \$5m CRF set aside for MWOB. She also assisted in legislation creating a general fund allocation, the Economic Stimulus Equity fund, for immigrant and undocumented residents who were not eligible to participate in the federal COVID relief programs.

- 2) Advise the Executive Director to ensure ongoing compliance with the purpose of this chapter, and advise the Governor on strategies for remediating systemic racial disparities in statewide systems of government:

The Panel struggled to determine the best method of providing advice to the Governor on strategies, beyond those articulated above. Public fora were discussed on a variety of racial equity topics and ultimately rejected, in part due to the pandemic, and in recognition that the information garnered by such events might not be the most useful. A survey of employees and stakeholders was also discussed and rejected with the exception of contributing additional questions for consideration in DHR's employee engagement survey.

Ultimately, the Panel decided that, given the number of groups working on racial equity issues statewide, and the reports generated by them, the Panel could serve as 'traffic control' by analyzing and condensing that information into recommendations for the Governor. Panel member Seguino's PowerPoint presentation, *REAP Economic and Social Data by Race and Ethnicity*, which highlights racial and ethnic disparities in Vermont, provides a basis for further state government analysis and focus. It is attached to this report for informational purposes.

- 3) The nature and quality of the collaboration between the Governor's Cabinet and the Executive Director:

The EDRE reports that the Cabinet has been very responsive to her efforts to create a more equitable workplace through promotion and analysis of the racial impact of programs and services offered by government. The Cabinet has received briefings and webinars from the EDRE on policy initiatives, including Equity Assessment Tools, the Strategic Plan, and recommendations from the Racial Equity Task Force. In addition, the EDRE has engaged in ad hoc interactions with some members of the Cabinet around specific agency-related equity issues and initiatives.

Enc. *REAP Economic and Social Data by Race and Ethnicity*- PowerPoint Presentation, July 2020.