

# UPDATE

To: Agency Leaders

From: Pam Iorio, President and CEO

Date: June 8, 2020

## Defending Potential



Dear Agency Leader,

We can all feel the change, the ground shifting under our feet. Sometimes it takes the luxury of years, of hindsight, and perspective to know when a society has changed. But in the spring of 2020, we can see it happen before our very eyes.

It is change born in 1619 and woven into the history of the United States starting with the atrocities of human rights abuses and slavery.

It is change from the unlawfulness of segregation, racial profiling, wrongful imprisonment, inequitable sentencing practices, and unchecked police brutality that has left millions of Americans living in an unequal and repressive world.

It is change born from the words of civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer, who famously said in the 1960s, “I am sick and tired of being sick and tired.”

It was George Floyd’s murder on May 25<sup>th</sup>, on the heels of the senseless murders of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and before them many others, that finally unleashed what has been building for so long. Systemic racism came into full view for all to see, a seismic moment of clarity.

Almost overnight, Black Lives Matter evolved from a movement to a simple truth that a Black life must be valued equally to all lives. When a Black person is wrongfully targeted and killed at the hands of the police, it must matter as much as any life and we must stand against this injustice. There cannot be two Americas. We must strive to be one equitable, inclusive and just union.

It is our collective honor at this point in our history to be a part of the Big Brothers Big Sisters mission. We are tasked with defending the potential of all young people we serve, our Littles. In 2019, more than 70% of the children we served across the country were children of color.

There have been so many thoughtful writings over the past weeks. One line from Jeannine Gant, our leader from Detroit illuminates our role: *“Mentoring helps youth deal with trauma brought on by generations of oppression, solely based on the color of their skin, a dehumanizing construct that reverberates through every fiber of our country.”*

At this historic moment, when change can be felt, what actions can Big Brothers Big Sisters take to strengthen and elevate our work with youth?

First, we must take every opportunity to denounce racism, bigotry and prejudice. Defending potential means we openly and consistently address the systemic barriers our children of color face. Racism is part of the trauma in many young lives. We must name it and act upon it every single day.

Second, we will create trainings for our volunteer Bigs and our BBBS staff members across the country so they can be best equipped to talk to their Littles about this prevalence of violence and racism. We don’t want to compound trauma in our youth by being ill-equipped or misinformed on how to best support our Littles.

Third, this is an opportunity to examine and improve upon our Bigs in Blue/Bigs with Badges program. This program is designed to develop strong one-to-one relationships between police officers and our Littles. The vision of the program is to provide a structure within our mission to help disarm bigotry, racism, and preconceived stereotypes at all levels. It is connecting police officers to the young people they serve, for a better appreciation of communities, families, and the adverse conditions many live with every day. Many of our agencies report very positive results from the dialogue and greater understanding resulting from these matches. Jeri Swinton, our leader from Louisville shared a staff member’s idea that we have a dialogue with our law enforcement partners about policing best practices. There are many ways this important program can be improved and towards that end, we are establishing an agency-led task force to examine and make recommendations on how we can be advocates for change in our local communities and how this program can better serve young people.

Fourth, we must engage in a dialogue with each of our funding partners to ensure that our respective values on racial justice and equity are aligned. We are an inclusive and equitable organization that values everyone from our staff, board members, volunteers, and Littles. Our partners must embrace the differences and the uniqueness of all people who will help support our organization in building bridges and igniting, empowering and defending the potential of the youth we serve. All of us as human beings are works in

progress; learning, evolving, and changing. We must leverage this moment in our nation's history to make progress together.

Finally, the National Office, working with the Nationwide Leadership Council's (NLC) Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, (DEI) Committee (which comprises 32 members) will continually produce information you can use for your staff, boards, Bigs, Littles and their families, and funders. Under the title, *Race, Relationships, & Resources*, we will facilitate national conversations to further understanding and actions, and provide quality material and host webinars dedicated to educating our communities about race, as well as provide resources on how to facilitate meaningful reflection, connection, and action to create racial justice. The NLC's DEI Committee, along with our internal DEI Champions Committee will also begin examining our policies and procedures (hiring and staff retention, background checks, job descriptions) and the Standards of Practice.

This is just the beginning of what Big Brothers Big Sisters can accomplish. The list will expand as all of you, individually and collectively, add to the ideas that can be implemented. "Be the change you want to see in the world."

From all of this, I have hope. Perhaps it comes from seeing so many young people organizing and engaging in peaceful protests. Young people have always been at the forefront of change. They personify Martin Luther King's words "*Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.*" Today, thousands are rightfully marching and asking for a more loving and equitable America that must immediately reform its social justice institutions. And we must be a part of this change.

As always, it is an honor to work with all of you. We at the National Office hear you and encourage your engagement and voice. We have all been given this opportunity to lead and defend the potential of all youth, and to stand against racism, bigotry and prejudice to help make our country a place where there truly is liberty and justice for all.

Onward,

Pam

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President and CEO

Big Brothers Big Sisters of America