

Dear AoH Community,

As we begin a new school year and as we close out Black Philanthropy Month, we—the current members of AoH’s Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Task Force—are reaching out to share the important and ongoing work we are doing at AoH to put our REDI (Racial Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion) initiatives to work.

A year ago, we were in the midst of both a heightening global viral pandemic and a racial pandemic that drove many to the streets and many more to speak out on the issues of race that have plagued our country since its founding.

We are proud to say that AoH began our own organizational work on prioritizing racial equity before last year. Historically committed to aiding the underserved, Academy of Hope was founded to provide overlooked adults with the assistance they need to complete the critical step of earning a high school diploma. While learners are almost entirely people of color, we did not begin the intentional, consistent work of making sure our organization was not perpetuating systems of oppression until 2018.

In the summer of 2018, we took a deeper look into where our organization was in the equity cycle. Later that year, through generous donations and grants to support our DEI work, we contracted an organization to continue developing and framing that work. We ended that first year with the founding of a Race Equity Task Force made up of a diverse cross-section of staff members.

This Task Force began nebulously with lofty but meaningful goals of reducing microaggressions among co-workers, building an understanding and framing of how oppression has influenced the necessary work that we do, and how we can provide a space for our stakeholders that is trauma-informed and actively anti-racist.

Racial Equity became the focus of our work. With an incredibly diverse staff and a Black woman as our CEO, it may seem from the outside that much of that work was already done for us and in the fabric of the institution, but **in doing this work, we learned the hard truth of the real work that goes into moving beyond diversity to real racial equity.**

This meant that, as an organization, we needed to have real conversations about race. We had to talk about the seen, the unseen, and the perceived. We examined the different ways that race shows up and is presented in the makeup of our classrooms and with our staff. Those conversations were not easy, but they were necessary.

From those conversations and through subsequent surveys, we were able to develop more realistic, achievable, and targeted goals related to our race equity work. We provided training on shared DEI language with our staff and volunteers and training on oppressive systems and mechanisms of change with our board.

Almost three years and two dueling pandemics later, the work continues, as it always will and should, in an effort to make our services accessible to all and our workplace equitable for all.

Our commitment to this work is now captured in a DEI statement, a living document that not only encompasses our mission but demonstrates how we act on it through an equity lens, as well as in our CARES (Community, Action, Respect, Empowerment, and Service) framework, which details how we view learners and the community at large that we serve.

Racial Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (REDI) is part of the work that we do at Academy of Hope when the world is watching, as it was in 2020, and when no one is looking. Our Race Equity Task Force is now in the midst of transitioning into a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Task Force to demonstrate the importance of recognizing the uniqueness of everyone in our community. **We are REDI. Are you?**

Sincerely,

Graciano Petersen, Co-Chair

Jamie Fragale, Co-Chair

Elizabeth Early

Sheila Izlar

Mary Gabriele

Ayanna Welsh

Jamela Love

Jamal Jones

Lateefah Montague