

A Memo from the County Manager: A Reflection about Equity Policy and Practice in Arlington

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Sat 6/20/2020 6:56 PM

To: EmployeeUpdate <employeeupdate@arlingtonva.us>



Everyone:

Towards the end of yesterday's Juneteenth celebration, I was told that there was an inquiry from the press about removal of chalk from a street near Ashlawn Elementary School. I was told that the chalk included writings supportive of Black Lives Matter. After several questions from me and upon returning to my office, I was told that, in response to a resident complaint about "graffiti", a crew had power washed material from a street. I then saw the pictures which have been circulated.

A series of flowers, hearts, and quotations focusing on understanding and the sanctity of Black lives had been removed by 3 county employees – all 3 are Black.

What was first described as graffiti removal became obviously something very different. My heart sank. How could this have happened? On Juneteenth of all days? I was sick.

I asked myself:

- How were the 3 employees involved, and the mother/daughter who did the chalk work doing?
- In the time of pandemic, why are our limited resources being used to remove chalk from the street?
- Did we just remove it from our right-of-way, or did we do it on private property?
- Finally, was this possibly the worst example of how we ignore equity in doing our work?

Our DES Director, Greg Emanuel, then immediately reached out to the crew and talked with them. We also had conversations with the DES supervisors involved. I was provided a chronology.

Given what I heard, I have also asked myself:

- if our complaint driven enforcement efforts lead us to address concerns (regardless of how serious they are) by some residents for any problem that frustrates them, while larger problems that affect our residents go unaddressed?
- if we are intentional about reaching impacted residents during public engagement processes, or only those who show up regularly, and
- if our policies and practices provide equity for everyone in our community.

My conclusions:

The employees involved are owed an apology. I have since spoken with each of them and expressed my apology on behalf of the organization. Regardless of statements from them that they were doing their job, regardless of the fact that one of them chose to come in on his day off because he wanted to do his job, regardless of their dedication to following through on the policy, it did not empower them to make a judgment better

than stipulated by the letter of the policy. The way we currently operate, it is too hard for employees to question what they are asked to do under a policy that is blind to feelings, nuance and the world we live in.

The mother and daughter who put together the chalk work are owed an apology. What kind of lesson does this teach a young girl and her family, and friends and neighbors, that something of beauty is obliterated? We have apologized to the daughter and her parents.

Calling the “authorities” is the wrong way to address our concerns as neighbors and community members. This should be reserved for cases where our safety is at risk.

I commend the Boulevard Manor Civic Association (BMCA) for starting this discussion on neighbor concerns. If someone is offended by something that is written, the first recourse should be a neighbor to neighbor dialogue.

Taxpayers are owed an apology. Use of County resources, regardless of how well-intentioned, should always consider a range of factors, but most importantly, the message our actions send.

Finally, apologies can only help so much. What is needed is dialogue and action. We will, of course, change our policy and our practices. And we commit to work hard with our staff to bind the wounds caused by this. None of this can happen without dialogue.

I welcome your participation in a “Day of Dialogue” for all County Employees. We will have facilitated conversations and workshops across the County. Stay tuned for a date and more details on this.

In the meantime, actions. As Samia Byrd eloquently asked yesterday at the Juneteenth celebration, how will we use the breath we have?

- We are working with the Government Alliance for Race and Equity (GARE) and have formed the [Realizing Arlington’s Commitment to Equity \(RACE\)](#). We will have countywide training on equity and diversity for all County employees.
- Senior Leadership in the County Manager’s Office will be reaching out across the enterprise to engage with you in different ways in the coming days and weeks. If you would like to schedule a specific time for a conversation, please reach out to any of the Assistant and Deputy County Managers directly.
- We will also be setting up a website and welcome volunteers to participate in difficult discussions. We would like to keep these conversations to 4 or 5 people at a time that will be facilitated by members of our leadership team, GARE Equity Cohort, and others.
- As we announced at the town hall this past week, we will be hiring a Chief Equity and Diversity Officer that will report to me and work in my office. This will take some time, but it is an overdue step.
- Libraries has created an excellent resource page on confronting racism. [Check it out here](#).
- I have signed and ask that you all consider [signing the petition](#) to make Juneteenth a national holiday. While, in hindsight, I should have declared this past Friday a holiday, I believe that the celebration held that day was one of the brightest spots in what has been a bleak and unrelenting torrent of bad news.
- The [Employee Assistance Program](#) is also a resource available for you and your family members.

This latest situation cannot be divorced from the greater dialogue on race prompted by the killing of innocent Black people. We simply cannot allow ourselves to be fixated on a lone example at the expense of something more systemic going on here. I hope all of us, leaders, employees, and community members will all begin to reflect on our own actions, our work and the impact that we each are having on our organization, our community and our country. We must be and can do better.

6/20/2020

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Sincerely,
Mark Schwartz