

HONORING JUNETEENTH

By Barbara Perez, President & CEO, YWCA Greater Cincinnati

For the YWCA Greater Cincinnati, fighting racism is not just a hashtag or a tagline – it is absolutely core to our mission of eliminating racism, empowering women, and promoting peace, justice, freedom, and dignity for all. And we have been working on this for 152 years.

In the wake of the anniversaries of the tragic deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, David McAtee, Tony McDade, George Floyd, Rayshard Brooks, and others, it is time to remind us of our country's dark history. And we offer our condolences to these families and others who have lost loved ones to this struggle. It is especially important to continue celebrating Juneteenth far beyond the day itself.

June 19th is the 155th anniversary of when black people gathered to celebrate the end of slavery, Juneteenth. It is also known as Freedom Day or Jubilee Day. According to Bryan Stevenson, "They believed they would receive the vote, and the protection of the law, land, and opportunity, and have a chance to be full Americans. However, they were denied all of these things because the ideology of white supremacy would not allow Southern whites to accept them, to value them, and to protect them."

The day commemorates when a Union General read federal orders in Galveston, Texas that all previously enslaved people in Texas were free, although the Emancipation Proclamation had formally freed them almost 2 ½ years earlier. Texas was the most remote of the slave states with a low presence of Union troops, so enforcement of the proclamation had been slow and inconsistent.

Honoring Juneteenth is more important now than ever as it is time for our country to truly grapple with its legacy of slavery. Witnessing numerous reports of excessive use of force by police across the nation in the last month, it is important that we remind ourselves that long before the Civil War, law enforcement has been complicit in sustaining enslavement.

It was the police who were tasked with tracking down fugitive slaves from 1850 onwards in the north throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

It was law enforcement, police, and our justice system that allowed people to be lynched by white mobs. For many black and brown people, the police have been the face of oppression for hundreds of years.

Our country has an abhorrent and continued tradition of using violence to silence Black Americans and promote white supremacy. Black communities have endured endless campaigns of exploitation, terroristic violence, mass incarceration, and economic disinvestment. As we approach Juneteenth, we are reminded of the ongoing reality of present-day lynching and anti-black vigilantism. All of this has evolved so that many employed by our police departments see themselves as agents of control - and that has to change. We have created a culture where some police officers are acting as warriors, not guardians and protectors. So the protests fueled by rage, frustration, and hopelessness that we are experiencing now are the result of 400 years of racial injustice.

The YWCA has been working on issues of race and racism since its inception. In the early 1900s, the YWCA launched an anti-lynching campaign as well as an anti-poll tax campaign as the taxes disproportionately discriminated against people of color. By 1949, we pledged to work toward integration and inclusion in all aspects of U.S. life. And in 1970, we adopted the One Imperative, to “thrust our collective power toward the elimination of racism, wherever it exists, by any means necessary.”

Historically, YWCAs have never stood idly, nor backed away when things were difficult. On the contrary, we have been engaged at every historical-critical point of dismantling systemic racism, and we know this moment is crucial.

With deep sadness but strong conviction, we state that there is so much work still to do. Though we have locally done so, we must universally declare racism a public health crisis. And, it is time to commit to dismantling structural and systemic racism wherever it exists. We need to overhaul our oppressive institutions. We need to examine and change the policies and practices of our education, law enforcement, criminal justice, housing, workforce development, and healthcare systems so they are not doing harm to people of color and continuing the legacy of slavery and trauma. And we need our partners and allies to dig into this work with us and build a community of allies to fight against racism.