

Juneteenth: A time for celebration, but also re-commitment

A statement from Community Legal Aid's executive director, Steven McGarrity

This year, as we recognize Juneteenth, Community Legal Aid celebrates the heritage, culture, and contributions of our black colleagues, clients, partners, and community members. At the same time, we call on all of us to confront the bias that still exists in our laws, our society, and within ourselves.

As a point of reflection today, we'd like to highlight some of the ways discriminatory policies have perpetuated the racial divide in our country. It's important to recognize that these policies were created intentionally, and therefore must be dismantled intentionally.

Our hope is that by shedding light on these issues, we can bring about an open atmosphere where dialogue and, ultimately, change can happen.

Brief history of racial injustice in law:

- Post-Civil War vagrancy laws that "leased out" black men to work on the very plantations they had just been freed from for little to no pay
- Jim Crow laws, which legally segregated schools, workplaces, restaurants, restrooms, hotels, hospitals, funeral homes, cemeteries, and more, upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court as constitutional until Brown vs. Board of Education
- The Southern Manifesto, signed after Brown vs. Board of Education, pledging to maintain Jim Crow laws throughout many states
- The Federal Housing Administration's "risk rating system," more commonly known as redlining, used throughout the 1930's-1960's to discourage black homeownership and therefore, generational wealth building
- The Post-WWII GI Bill, which excluded black veterans from homeownership, while white veterans were given subsidies to build and buy homes and start building wealth for their families

- The War on Drugs, which has resulted in the vastly disproportionate imprisonment of black men and has had the trickle down impact of making it far more difficult for them to obtain housing, jobs, food stamps and other public benefits, student loans for higher education, and more

America has always been an ideal -- an experiment that we continue to work on with each passing decade. And our justice system is no exception to that. We certainly have come a long way from June 19, 1865, and we certainly have a long way to go.

As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." We at Legal Aid are committed to doing our part to continuing to bend the arc. And we invite all in our community to join us.

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