

April 2, 2012

Greater Burlington Multicultural Resource Center & VT Multicultural Alliance for Democracy

We are pleased to be here today with representatives from the police depts. of Burlington, S. Burlington, Winooski, and UVM, who have demonstrated a solid commitment to creating bias-free policing within their departments. The release of the 2nd Race Data Collection for traffic stop data is a picture of a point in time examining where we are today. We have inherited racial bias in our mainstream culture that is exhibited through the disparities found in many sectors of our society such as education, employment, housing, health, and the criminal justice system. And thus we have inherited the obligation to deconstruct and disassemble bias, otherwise we are complicit in maintaining the systems that create disparities.

Examining racial bias is not just a Vermont concern; it is a national one. The tragedy of Trayvon Martin has elevated this discussion to a national level. Racial bias exists; to deny it is akin to saying that the earth is flat. CNN is airing this week a program called "Kids on Race," where Anderson Cooper examines children's attitudes about race and how young they are when they develop bias. What they discovered is that white children showed an overwhelming bias towards white, as well as children of color showing a bias towards white, but not as much. We are inundated with messages in our mainstream media that portrays people of color, particularly Black males, as undesirable or dangerous to society. We all need to work on recognizing that we are influenced by these messages, and to deconstruct and reverse the damage caused by these negative stereotypes. While those of us with white privilege who are immune to daily, debilitating blows of subconscious bias, we need to acknowledge the pain and suffering that it causes residents of color; it is dehumanizing. They are our friends, our coworkers, our neighbors; they are our family.

We are fortunate that the chiefs of these departments have not stalled in this work by denying that disparities exist. They acknowledge that disparities exist and recognize that work needs to be done on examining bias and how it plays out on the field. Their commitment has not faltered and they should be recognized for it. However, there is still much work to be done. The chiefs have partnered with impacted communities so that we can move forward on reducing the harmful impact in those communities. This is the type of courageous leadership that institutions need to disarm the negative bias that creates disparities. We are grateful for the women and men who have dedicated their lives to keeping our communities safe through a career in law enforcement; we know what a difficult task it is. We look forward to working with these police chiefs and their departments in creating more bias-free law enforcement in our communities so that everyone can feel safe and protected.