

June 10th, 2020

Dear CUIMC Colleagues,

Like many Americans, I was horrified to watch the brutal murder of an unarmed black man in Minneapolis, killed by a white police officer who kneeled on his neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds. I shared the same horror as the onlookers who captured this moment on camera and pleaded with the officers to spare George Floyd's life. I was alerted of the video by my thirteen-year-old daughter when she interrupted my busy workday to show what has been trending on social media. As I viewed this tragic loss of a life, I knew this particular moment would leave an indelible scar on the hearts of Americans forever. Unfortunately, George Floyd's death is only one of countless black lives lost senselessly to a brutal police culture and a history of systemic racism. Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Maurice Gordon, Dion Johnson, Tony McDade, Manuel Ellis, and countless others, were black lives cherished by their loved ones, but snatched away with no true justice realized for the victims and their families.

The tragic death of George Floyd sparked a movement within communities across the nation. These communities formed a national solidarity of black families and people of color who had become too familiar with the brutal force of the police directed their way, and white allies who could no longer stand aside and watch fellow citizens denied their constitutional right under the law of "equal justice for all." Police brutality is representative of a long history of systemic and institutional racism in our nation. The resulting protests that have arisen in every one of our fifty states, has propelled our nation to a new moral consciousness and a pivotal point in our history, where justice must be received for the countless black lives lost and real changes to the system must be achieved. We at CUIMC stand in bold solidarity with the peaceful protesters who are demanding justice for all the black lives lost to a system of police brutality and racism.

As a dark-skinned black woman, mother of black children and wife of a black man, I am especially feeling the pain and coping with the despair of this moment. I have personally experienced the fear and anger of being racially profiled. I have had my intelligence, credentials and experience questioned and challenged countless times, simply because of my race. I am further saddened by the disproportionate effects of COVID-19 on blacks and people of color in our community. These groups have seen a higher rate of infection, unemployment, and are more often on the frontline as essential workers.

Throughout my career, I have been a champion for diversity, equity and inclusion, and a passionate advocate for underrepresented identities. Soon after joining CUIMC HR in fall 2016 as a Client Manager, I became very interested in the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) efforts on campus. This led me to research the resources available and commit to enhancing the DEI efforts for staff at CUIMC. In fall 2017, the CUIMC Staff Diversity Council was established with a mission to develop, implement, and evaluate initiatives that lead to greater diversity, equity, belongingness and inclusion in our community. As the inaugural Chief Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Officer for Staff, I am tasked with the planning of DEI initiatives that will add value to our community. It is my commitment to you that we will continue to partner with respective groups and campus allies to improve the staff experience at CUIMC.

CUIMC HR understands that many community members outside of the Diversity Council, committees and employee resource groups (ERGs) may be unaware of our efforts, so we will continue to provide updates on our progress on the CUIMC Staff DEI Strategic Plan. We are proud of the accomplishments made over the last few years, yet understand how much more work we must do and time it will take to realize a true shift in culture at CUIMC. As Chief Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Officer, I will continue to partner with leadership to host additional dialogues and town halls on CUIMC community concerns; we will listen and use these conversations to develop new action plans for the immediate future.

At this point in our nation's history, our university must answer the call to dismantle systemic oppression, institutional racism, and white supremacy that has been the status quo for too long in our society. We will accomplish this when we work together to find real solutions and hold each other accountable for their results. In the meantime, CUIMC HR is compiling a list of resources that will be available on the diversity website. These resources will provide opportunities for all staff to get involved at the level that best suits them. Many in our community are seeking ways to become more involved, gain a deeper understanding of the issues and support black lives. Let's seize this moment in history together to fight injustice, renew our commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion, and make the investments and policy changes necessary to become a better Columbia for all our community members.

Yours truly

Tonya Richards, PHR, SHRM-CP, CHHR, CDP
Chief Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Officer- Staff
Senior Human Resources Business Partner
Columbia University Irving Medical Center