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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
Thursday, March 18, 2021

Commission on Racial and Structural Equity Releases Inaugural Report

(Rochester, N.Y.) — The Commission on Racial and Structural Equity (RASE) today released its inaugural report, providing recommendations to dismantle institutional racism and structural inequities and create a fairer and more level playing field for all residents in the City of Rochester and Monroe County. The report, entitled “No Time for Excuses; It’s Time for Action,” is a culmination of six months of data collection, analysis and community input and contains nearly 40 recommendations and five overarching systemic solutions.

“I am pleased with the work of the RASE Commission so far and grateful for the leadership and guidance of its co-chairs,” said Mayor Lovely A. Warren. “Their hard work and dedication in examining local policies, practices, and procedures, has resulted in a set of tangible recommendations that our community can begin reversing the debilitating effects of centuries of systemic racism. I am truly thankful for the time and leadership of all of the members of the Commission. The City is committed to working with the Commission and our community our community partners to implement these recommendations, which build upon our successful efforts through the ERA agenda and REAL initiative.”

“I am grateful to RASE Commission co-chairs Johnson, Shafiq and Santiago and to all of the Commissioners and working group members for the extensive effort they have put into this comprehensive report,” said Monroe County Executive Adam J. Bello. “Their work is of the utmost importance to our community. As I have said before, I am committed to making effective and lasting changes to our policies, procedures and practices and to leading the way for equity for all. This work is long overdue, and it is time to eliminate barriers that unfairly hold people back and create disproportionate outcomes for our Black and Brown citizens. Using the RASE Commission’s report as a blueprint, we will ensure Monroe County is a community of diversity, respect and inclusion. I agree, it is No Time for Excuses: It’s Time for Action.”

“We have arrived at a moment of reckoning on the issue of race and the manifestation of racism, in the greater Rochester community and across this nation. The evidence of disparity, inequity and exclusion, based on race, gender and income, are too blatant for anyone to ignore any longer,” said former Rochester Mayor and Commission Co-Chair William A. Johnson Jr. “This report carefully documents the roots and results of these problems, lays out a coherent set of recommendations and strategies to override them, and calls leaders and citizens from every sector to action, to ensure that these strategies are more than mere words. It will take a community committed to action to transform the ways that all people of color are incorporated into every aspect of community life. The work of the RASE Commission is a critical first step. The concrete actions proposed in this report, as well as solutions proposed by others working on these same issues, will define whether we are wedded to rhetoric or action – relevant actions that will stand the test of time.”

“The Report is a labor of love,” said Commissioner Co-Chair Dr. Muhammad Shafiq, professor and Executive Director of the Hickey Center for Interfaith Studies and Dialogue. “Blessings to all those who worked tirelessly to make it happen. I pray and hope it bears fruit.”

“We are extremely proud of the work that the Commission has done in absorbing the input from our community engagement work, seeing the connectivity and intersections in the issues raised, and transforming those into a compelling report with actionable recommendations,” said Co-Chair Arline Santiago, Esq., Senior Vice President and General Counsel at ESL Federal Credit Union. “The journey of identifying governmental policies, procedures and activities that have allowed or created structural racism and the process of identifying potential recommendations has been a complex task. However, with the objective of creating an equitable system for all those who live within our community, the more than 160 volunteers and the 24 members of this Commission

rolled up their sleeves, dedicated their time and energy to create a set of recommendations, that when implemented by the City and County governments, with the engagement and collaboration of other stakeholders in our community, will create a positive pathway to equity for people of color, to the benefit of our entire community. We owe a great deal of thanks to the Commissioners, the working group members and the community members for all of their input that made these recommendations possible.”

The Commission’s report outlines the following themes:

- People of color have inequitable and inadequate access to resources and networks of opportunity such as capital, government civil service jobs and housing options.
- Systems disproportionately impact people of color, especially Black people. African Americans have higher rates of arrests, school suspensions and are more likely to be brought into child protective services, foster care and juvenile justice systems that often do not serve their needs.
- Institutions and personnel deeply lack cultural and linguistic competency to interact with diverse populations effectively.
- Structures and systems create and perpetuate disadvantages.
- City and County structures lack reliable transparency and accountability operations, which negatively impacts the trust among people of color.
- Current City, County and State systems don’t spend enough money in various sectors to attain equity for people of color.

The Commission created nine working groups comprising hundreds of community members. Members of the community were then engaged through a series of virtual town hall meetings, surveys and bus tours to hear from residents and business owners in affected communities. These listening sessions also included interviews with incarcerated youth, formerly incarcerated men and high school students to better understand how structural racism operates in various sectors and systems and how to undo it.

Proposed Solutions and Recommendations:

Create and invest in sustainable economic opportunities in Black and Latinx communities to promote and maintain self-sufficiency, entrepreneurship and career advancement

Inadequate investment into Black and Brown communities is detrimental for families and the local economy. Lengthy and cumbersome application processes for Minority and Women-Owned Business Enterprise (MWBE) certifications pose a barrier to building wealth for people of color. The Commission recommends that Monroe County and the City of Rochester create a localized process for businesses to become MWBE-certified, so that local businesses have a more accessible and streamlined process. Redesigning civil service functions to create equitable access for applicants, as well as pushing for a \$15/hour minimum wage increase, are also critically important steps to pursue. The minimum wage should also be added as a requirement to any municipal contracts.

Implement and incentivize practices and programs that increase the racial/ethnic diversity and cultural competence of employees, vendors and contractors

Organizations lack cultural and linguistic competencies, which leads to lack of efficiency and cultural responsiveness in service delivery to Black and Brown communities. The Commission recommends increasing and sustaining the cultural competencies of the entire County and City workforces; use of government contracting and procurement practices to require all contractors to have diversity, equity and inclusion policies in place; and for all Monroe County school districts to provide the full range of curriculum offerings for English Language Learners, as well as offering programs to students and their families in their native language.

End practices that disproportionately drain resources from Black and Latinx communities

Protocols in the criminal justice, education and social service systems disadvantage communities of color throughout Monroe County. Recommendations include the end of pre-textual stops (stops for a minor offense to investigate something else); decriminalizing and de-prioritizing violation-level offenses; making incarceration a last resort by embracing a philosophy of diversion and restorative justice; ending Monroe County's high use of financial assistance sanctions in human services to ensure individuals who need help can get it; and increasing access to mental health and social-emotional support services for all Rochester City School District Black, Indigenous and students of color.

Decentralize and reassign City and County services to community agencies

The relationship between police and the Black community has a long history rooted in injustice and distrust – from the treatment of Native Americans to the enslavement of African Americans. The Commission recommends creating and funding alternatives to

police, including trained community responders, crisis intervention specialists and community mediators. Additionally, the report recommends the creation of a community-based program for youth facing criminal charges, which would include counseling and restorative justice circles, case managers who create a comprehensive plan with parents and youth, respite services and a forensic psychiatric specialist trained to handle youth with complex mental health issues. The foster care and child protective care services should be redesigned by using blind removal meetings, hiring culture brokers and developing kinship navigators. The Monroe County Department of Public Health should be decentralized, with service locations in Black and Brown neighborhoods.

Embed accountability measures in all policies to ensure equity and fairness across all services, programs and delivery models

The lack of reliable transparency and accountability has negatively impacted trust between Black and Brown communities and government systems. The County and City should bring together the major stakeholders in the criminal justice system and community members to review local criminal justice data and identify ways to: eliminate racial disparities, adopt tenant protection strategies such as right to counsel and a local fair housing law and develop incentives to expand affordable housing options throughout Monroe County. Furthermore, we must invest in, and support the “Livable Communities for Older Adults” initiative, which would address racial discrimination impacting the elderly, under the oversight of representative and diverse advisory boards.

To enact the proposed recommendations, Mayor Warren and County Executive Bello will select the new policies that they, or City Council and/or the County Legislature, can put into practice. A successor to the Commission will be identified to govern the implementation process and plan to ensure that any new policies requiring additional funds, or state or federal action are met.

The Commission on Racial and Structural Equity (RASE) is an intergovernmental collaboration between the City of Rochester and the County of Monroe. In acknowledgment of national and local calls for systemic and institutional change, RASE was established to review, identify and recommend changes to local laws, policies and practices that will eliminate inequity across our city and county. RASE has nine working groups focused on encouraging community input to inform the recommendations for systemic change that will support equity in our community.

To read the complete report and for more information on RASE, visit www.rocrase.com.

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Media Contact:

Dr. Candice Lucas

Candice.Lucas@dfa.state.ny.us

585-233-5576

The City of Rochester is sending this press release on behalf of the RASE Commission.