

New Stark County coalition creates Unity Challenge

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A new coalition of Stark County nonprofits, education groups and service and community agencies is challenging residents to take action against racism and other forms of discrimination.

The Dismantling Racism Coalition of Stark County began with a phone call in June from Cathy Mick-Jennings, chief executive officer of the YWCA Canton, to Maria Heege, president and CEO of the United Way of Greater Stark County.

Mick-Jennings, reacting to the news of George Floyd's murder at the hands of Minnesota police officers in May and the ensuing calls for racial justice across the country, felt Stark County's service agencies couldn't be silent on the issue.

"Eliminating racism is part of (the YWCA's) core mission," Mick-Jennings said. "We've always done it through programming, through our housing and early childhood programs. With this series of events bringing racism to the surface again, I felt we had to make a bolder stand."

She called Heege because the YWCA has worked closely with the United Way and the agency supports a variety of organizations that serve a wide range of residents in the community. The two reached out to a handful of other organizations about creating a countywide dialogue on racial equity and social justice. The effort quickly mushroomed.

"As Stark County does, the agencies have really come together," Mick-Jennings said. "No one has said no."

The coalition, which meets via Zoom every month, now includes the United Way of Greater Stark County, YWCA Canton, Child & Adolescent Behavioral Health, Coming Together Stark County, Stark County Educational Service

Center, Kent State University at Stark, Stark County Collaborative on Race Relations, Stark County Health Department, Stark County Mental Health and Addiction Recovery, Stark Education Partnership and The Greater Stark County Urban League.

Challenge ahead

The coalition's first countywide effort is the 15-Day Unity Challenge to Dismantle Racism. The challenge, adapted from a racial equity challenge that has been used across the country, provides daily activities designed to help residents explore issues of race, power, privilege and leadership.

Each day of the challenge will be hosted by a different coalition member.

Participants who register at

www.dismantlingracismstarkcounty.org/unitychallenge will be emailed a list of suggested activities, such as reading an article, listening to a podcast and reflecting on personal experience. They can pick one activity to complete or do them all.

Among the topics: Reflecting on our biases, why talking about race can be challenging, the impact of racial trauma, how racism affects your health and building a race equity culture.

The daily challenge also will include an activity for parents to have a conversation with their children about that day's topic.

"It's important for our youth to be involved in this conversation as well," said LaFlovvia "Flo" Ginanni, who is overseeing seeing the challenge for the United Way. "... I know as an adult that a lot of this information drums up emotions, there's a lot of uncertainty, but we have tools to deal with it. Children don't have a lot of those tools in their toolbox and I think it's important for us adults to help them with that."

A launch date for the challenge has not yet been set, but is expected to be before the end of August. Those interested can pre-register at to be notified about when the challenge will begin.

Beyond the challenge

Heege said the coalition's work won't be over when the 15-day challenge ends. They hope to create a continuous meaningful dialogue.

"This gives us an opportunity as a community to continue having these conversations during and after the 15-day challenge," she said.

Among the ideas so far are hosting virtual discussion groups and town halls.

For more information, visit

www.dismantlingracismstarkcounty.org/unitychallenge.

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