Maine Voices: Want to help remedy racial inequity in Maine? Here are places to start

By Catherine Besteman and Joseph N. Jackson Special to the Press Herald June 13, 2020

While cities across the U.S. burn with rage about anti-black police brutality, and while tweets from the U.S. president seem designed to provoke even more violence, even amid our own protests here, Mainers may find themselves feeling somewhat insulated from such unrest. White Mainers, that is. But Maine is not immune from problems of racism, or a racist criminal justice system, or the American history of racial injustice.

Mainers should be paying close attention to racist injustice and racial disparities in our state. Maine’s criminal justice system disproportionately incarcerates people of color. Maine schools disproportionately discipline children of color, who face higher rates of detention, suspension and expulsion than their white peers for similar behaviors. Under pressure from the ACLU, the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention has belatedly begun to report COVID-19 infection rates by race, revealing the dramatic reality that the infection rate of people of color in Maine is six times that of white people. This is precisely the time when we should be scrutinizing those systems that produce racist outcomes and replacing them with anti-racist alternatives.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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What are anti-racist practices that Mainers should adopt in order to correct these inequalities? Here are some places to start:

• Maine should take more steps to protect the sovereignty of tribes in the state, such as through passing L.D. 2094, which would implement task force recommendations regarding the Maine Indian Claims Settlement Implementing Act.
• Maine should not incarcerate children. We should close Long Creek, which currently incarcerates about 30 children at an annual cost of $250,000 per child, and replace it with an empowered community center that provides safe housing, educational and job training opportunities, health care support and inclusive decision-making for youth who need such support. Disproportionate incarceration of children of color would end.

• Maine public schools should replace police officers (school resource officers) with professionals trained in trauma-informed care, de-escalation, reparative and restorative justice and community mediation. The school-to-prison pipeline, especially for children of color, would be severed.

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• Budgets for police departments should fall and funds should be redirected to support the construction of affordable housing, free health clinics, addiction recovery support, substantive job skills training and adult education. This move is anti-racist and pro-community.

• Maine’s antiquated bail system should be reformed. The majority of those in jail in Maine are charged with misdemeanors and are incarcerated because they cannot pay bail. An estimated 40,000 people each year – who are innocent until proven guilty and whose incarceration costs the state at least $100 per day per person – have lost their liberty and are behind bars instead of working and supporting their families. Bail reform would affect inequalities in pre-trial incarceration by race and class.

• The Department of Corrections should be required to publicize its plan for protecting those under its supervision from contracting COVID-19. While Maine disproportionately incarcerates people of color, many Mainers have loved ones behind bars, and everyone must be protected from COVID-19.

• Maine should direct funds to support farmers of color who are establishing cooperatives and creating land commons in order to grow food. Maine’s African immigrants and other black farmers have been especially creative in locating abandoned arable land and returning it to food production. Support and investment in their efforts would further enhance food security for all Mainers.

• Maine depends on the labor of brown and black migrant workers. All workers, regardless of citizenship status, should be allowed to unionize and advocate for laws that protect their safety and ability to earn a living wage.
Because the CARES Act discriminates against many categories of legal immigrants, Maine should step up to ensure immigrant Mainers receive equal supports and protections by extending Medicaid coverage to everyone, providing cash benefits to those excluded from the CARES Act because of their citizenship status and extending work permits during the pandemic. We should extend universal health care beyond the pandemic to everyone, despite immigration status or income level.

So many organizations and individuals are doing the hard work every day of promoting anti-racist alternatives to a system that continues to disempower and harm Mainers of color. Together with Abdul Ali of Maine Youth Justice, Muhidin Libah of Somali Bantu Community Association and Susan Roche of ILAP, we urge you to join them. Embrace anti-racism. Get to work.