

Advocate

Racial Justice Working Group Update, by Hannah Gabelnick

In late August, the Buffalo JCRC created a Racial Justice Working Group (RJWG), a three-month volunteer-led group to self-educate, evaluate, discuss, and submit recommendations to the JCRC Executive Committee and Buffalo Jewish Federation Board of Governors. Led by Deborah Goldman, with the staff support of Mara Koven-Gelman, the RJWG is rooted in key Jewish values such as Tzedek, Tzedek Tirdof (Justice, Justice You Shall Pursue), Lo Ta'amod Al Dam Rey'echa (Do not stand idly by), Tikkun Olam (Repair the world), and Hineini (We are present).

So far, the RJWG has met over Zoom seven times and plans to meet several more times. At the first meeting, members reviewed the original concept paper and chose several topics they wanted to discuss and learn about during the course of the group. Some topics included were racial housing segregation, racial health disparities, criminal justice reform, racial education disparities, equitable voting, and experience of being a Jew of Color. Members are also sharing their own research about [racial justice resources](#).

For the second meeting, Amy Vossen Vukelic from the Erie County Restorative Justice Center joined the RJWG to conduct a Restorative Circle on earned and unearned privilege. The third session featured Scott Gehl, former executive director of HOMES (Housing Opportunity Made Equal). He discussed the history of housing disparities in WNY. In preparation for the next meeting, members watched Central Synagogue's Rabbi Angela Warnick Buchdahl Yom Kippur Sermon: *"We Are Family: Rethinking Race in the Jewish Community"* and Rabbi Marc Soloway of Congregation B'nai Shalom, in Boulder Colorado' Rosh Hashanah Sermon. At the meeting, members reflected on the sermons and shared their own personal and professional knowledge of racism.

In early November, Pastor George Nicholas of Lincoln Memorial United Methodist Church joined the RJWG to discuss racial health disparities. He is also the chair of the African American Health Equity Task Force. He left the group with a better understanding of data, the social determinants of health, the history of systemic racism, and the steps needed to make change.

Next, Tema Smith, the director of Professional Development at 18Doors, led a discussion on *"Seeing Jews of Color as Us."* Her presentation was very eye opening and explained why Jews of Color often feel excluded from Jewish spaces. Most recently, Rabbi Isaiah Rothstein, JFNA Rabbinic and Public Affairs Scholar joined the group to discuss how Jewish Federation of North America is assisting Jewish communities address racial justice. Understanding this is a process and messy, Rabbi Rothstein shared his story as a Jew of Color. He helped define common language, using the metaphor "diversity is being invited to the party, but inclusion is being asked to dance." Other topics discussed were equality versus equity, personal identity, the importance of leadership roles in achieving racial justice including the Jewish community's role in first educating oneself and keeping an open dialogue. At the end of the meeting, the

RJWG was treated to a Chanukah musical gift as Rabbi Rothstein, also a musician played guitar and sang a song for of power and motivation – “Believe in miracles.”

Mike Stekloff and Kristie Henry (from the Center for Jewish Engagement and Learning’s Belonging Committee) will join the RJWG next week to reflect with the group and discuss next steps and how to connect what the group learned to the Buffalo Jewish Federation.

Deborah Goldman remarked, “I feel deeply honored to be a part of the RJWG. The wise, caring, and dedicated members have formed a true learning community, exploring challenging issues together. Our next stage of reflection will help us all support community members who are Jews of Color, support stronger relationships across racial lines, and contribute to the JCRC vision of sustaining a more civil and caring community.”

Members:

Deborah Goldman, Chair
Mara Koven-Gelman, Staff
Corey Auerbach
Rabbi Ori Bergman
Molly Carr
Ann Marie Carosella
Adam Fogel
Hannah Gabelnick
Amy Heumann
Risé Kulick
Leslie Shuman Kramer
Hallie Keren
Sharon Nosenchuck
Rabbi Sara Rich
Harvey Sanders

Read More about the RJWG [Here](#)