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‘IT’S BROKEN’
Fears grow about patchwork US election system

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Advocate: State abandoned quick-strike nursing home coronavirus response



“That quick strike plan would have gone a very long way to preventing infections, and they just gave up,” attorney Theresa Blanco said. “They knew it had to be done and then gave up.” [ARCHIVE]

By Jo Ciavaglia
Bucks County Courier Times

The Pennsylvania coronavirus pandemic was in its infancy when Zach Shamberg was sent a three-page emergency plan for preventing the fast-spreading virus in nearly 2,000 licensed long-term care homes.

The Pennsylvania Department of Health and the Pennsylvania Hospitals and Healthcare System (HAP), which represents 240 hospitals and health care systems, had developed the blueprint dubbed the Quick Response Team process.

The three-tier plan called for boots-on-the ground, comprehensive response within hours after positive COVID-19 cases were confirmed or exposures suspected in long-term care residents, considered at the highest risk for the virus and its complications, according to a copy obtained by this news organization.

Most significantly to senior care advocates, who have criticized the state’s COVID-19 response in long-term care as insufficient, secretive and slow, is the plan shows that early in the pandemic, health officials anticipated the serious obstacles those facilities would face in protecting staff and residents and mitigating the virus spread.

But 10 days after it was implemented, the state suddenly pulled back the plan, according to Shamberg, president and CEO of the Pennsylvania Health Care Association, which represents long-term care providers.

The multifaceted, on-site response was replaced with a hands-off virtual one focused solely on infection control practices and prevention.

What prompted the dramatic change in the state’s

See RESPONSE, A11

TAKING A STAND



Gwendolyn Ware of Yardley raises her fist during a faith-based vigil for racial justice Friday at United Christian Church in Levittown. [WILLIAM THOMAS CAIN / PHOTOJOURNALIST]

Sixty years ago, members of the United Christian Church in Levittown stood outside the home of William and Daisy Myers, protecting them as crowds gathered in protest against the first Black couple to reside in Levittown.

On Friday, members gathered on church property to continue their fight against racial injustice.



Participants take a knee for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, the amount of time a white police officer knelt on the neck of George Floyd, leading to his death. [WILLIAM THOMAS CAIN / PHOTOJOURNALIST]

Students, schools confront racism

By Marion Callahan
Bucks County Courier Times

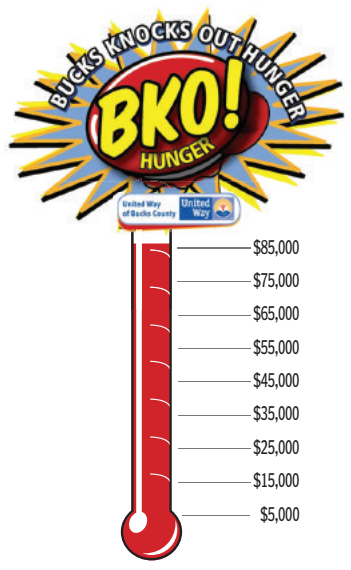
Selma Ahmed was in middle school when she flipped through the pages of her yearbook, seeking a record of cherished memories.

Instead, she saw racial slurs, including mentions of “the “n” word, drawings of the confederate flag and even a death threat masked in a rap lyric.

Only 15, she kept silent.

Cleaning out her closet a few weeks ago while home from college, Ahmed stumbled upon

See RACISM, A13



How to donate
Donations are accepted online at www.uwbucks.org/bkohunger and through coin canisters in organizations throughout the county (a list of locations is available at the website). Contributions also may be made at branches of Penn Community Bank or by mailing a check (note BKO Hunger on the memo line) to United Way, 413 Hood Blvd., Fairless Hills, PA 19030.

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Levittown church continues call for racial justice



Robin Stelly of Lower Makefield holds a Black Lives Matter sign during a faith-based vigil for racial justice Friday at United Christian Church in Levittown. Members gathered to sing, pray and call for action. United Christian Church has been involved with the fight for racial justice since the first black family moved into Levittown. Members of this church stood outside the home of William and Daisy Myers to keep them safe as protesters gathered on their front lawn after they moved to the area in 1957. [PHOTOS BY WILLIAM THOMAS CAIN / PHOTOJOURNALIST]

RIGHT: Patricia Sims, right, of Morrisville kneels during a faith based vigil for racial justice. Participants knelt for 8 minutes and 46, the amount of time a white police officer knelt on the back of George Floyd before Floyd's death.





ABOVE: The crowd listens as a musician performs during a faith-based vigil for racial justice Friday at United Christian Church in Levittown.



Angela Vann of Power Interfaith in Philadelphia speaks during the vigil.



Anne Roberds shouts Black Lives Matter during a faith-based vigil for racial justice.

RACISM

From Page A1

the Tohickon Middle School yearbook. In the emotional aftermath of George Floyd's death, "something snapped," she said.

"On a whim, I made this public," said Ahmed, who shared snapshots of the slurs as a reminder of just how rooted racism is in her home community, and who hosted, along with a friend, a live chat on social media on the topic. "It's not just me; it's systemic. Racism and its effect can be overt and covert, but still impacts me tremendously."

The nationwide outrage following the death of Floyd at the hands of a white police officer in Minneapolis has led students, educators and others to confront racism in their own communities.

NAACP leaders and peace advocates across the county are pushing for concrete action — and some school leaders are listening.

Across the region, many school districts issued statements expressing sorrow and calling for racial justice. Some also were forced to directly address racist videos and comments from students and staff members that have surfaced on social media in recent weeks.

Districts also are standing up for students who want to organize protests.

Just last week, Quakertown Community School District Superintendent William Harner called on communities to support students' rights to protest peacefully, and he condemned online threats to silence them.

"As educators, parents, and Americans we could not be more proud and applaud these students for their initiative in exercising their First Amendment right to assembly and peaceful protest," Harner wrote in a June 2 blog. "... Unfortunately, some voices of ignorance, hatred, and racism responded to our students' message with death threats, and a call to line our downtown street with people holding firearms."

Harner brought attention to Quakertown's own struggles with racism, following a widely publicized event three years ago when students yelled slurs at cheerleaders from an opposing team from Cheltenham High School.

"While we no doubt have made progress, there is also no doubt that racism still exists in our schools," said Harner. "Our children and their families tell us so. There is still much work to do."

What can be done

Danny Thomas, director at the Langhorne-based Peace Center, said he's working with area school districts to help them make their curriculum more inclusive. Quakertown incorporated the center's programs following the 2017 incident.

Through working with schools across the county, Thomas has learned that what is taught at school "isn't a lived reality when students get home."

"Sometimes we may be teaching things that don't match the family's values," he said. "We then have to help them navigate that dynamic ... We teach diversity and inclusion so we can improve the quality of life for everyone."

Earlier this week, the NAACP, in partnership with the Peace Center, called on communities to take the "Call to Action Pledge." By doing so, community members are agreeing to advocate for a K-12 curriculum to combat racism in their school districts, by attending school board meetings, and writing to, or speaking with superintendents or individual school board members.

The pledge also prompts people to advocate for increased training on community policing; encourages locals to attend local government meetings and talk with local law enforcement; calls on people to start conversations with friends and neighbors about combating racism; and asks them to be a part of organizations such as the NAACP and the Peace Center.

Schools promise to do more

Statements that leaders make against racism send a critical message, advocates say.

Following an inflammatory and racist video of a Stroudsburg High School student surfaced, Stroudsburg Area School District Superintendent Cosmas Curry announced plans to ramp up its cultural awareness and sensitivity training.

Condemning the video, Curry called on students to take action: He challenged them to post positive statements on social media that illustrate they do not condone racism, hate or bigotry.

At Hatboro-Horsham High School, Principal Dennis Williams brought attention to two, 2-year-old racist videos created by students there that were circulating on social media last week.

"Many students, parents and community members stepped up to alert our district of the two videos of a racist nature. This behavior is not tolerated," he said in a June 3 tweet.

"The fact that so many of our parents and students shared this information with us and demonized the behavior demonstrates a desire to change our current circumstance, a commitment to address inequality and more importantly, fortitude to call out racism, prejudice and bigotry. This generation has the ability to change our current circumstances."

In a separate statement, Superintendent Curtis Griffin said the district was working with police, and would pursue disciplinary actions through its "established Code of Conduct."

In Bristol Township School District, district leaders plan to "redouble" efforts to promote "true inclusion" after racists and insensitive comments were posted on social media by staff members. A racist remark, district officials said, "must be confronted every time it appears."

Superintendent Melanie Gehrens said current events and the recent social media exchange prompted the district to make changes and revisit how black history is delivered in the curriculum.

It includes plans to "conduct a comprehensive review of best practices involving training on racial awareness and broadening our outreach to diverse candidates."

Bucks County NAACP president Karen Downer said she welcomes the opportunity to talk to schools about changes to curriculum that go beyond lessons that typically cover slavery, Martin Luther King Jr. and Harriet Tubman. Most schools, she said, fail to include history on the 1921 race massacre in Tulsa and other pivotal events in black history.

"Our history is more interesting," said Downer. "Many schools think they are fine ... They say, 'We're good.' Too many of our schools discriminate against our kids all the time. You'll see two kids — one black and one white — get in trouble, but the punishment will be different. That happens too often."

Downer said she's been overwhelmed with calls from community members and educators asking, "What can we do?"

"We need to come up with ways that people can help that are worth something," she said. "Rather than saying, 'I feel your pain, what can I do for you?' I'd like the discussion to be about 'us.' We would like people to think about this as being in this together."

'Hey, we gotta talk'

For Central Bucks High School East graduates Ahmed and her friend Madeline Steuber, both 26, action meant taking the discussion to where most of their peers live — on social media.

On Wednesday, the pair hosted "Hey, we gotta talk" on Instagram Live. With more than 100 viewers, the two launched into a candid conversation, delving into incidents of racism throughout their school experience.

Ahmed, a post-graduate student at Johns Hopkins University, talked about what it was like to grow up as a black Muslim in Doylestown, where more than 90% of residents are white, where she had only one black teacher and where people thought it was a compliment to tell her, "You don't look black."

And though the comments in her old yearbook don't reflect the character of those individuals now as grown adults, she said the racial insults reflect a deeper issue.

"I've heard people say this was 10 years ago when they were young, and I do not judge the character they are today, but we can't move forward until things are addressed and where they came from," she said. "And the fact that they were so young is representative of an indoctrination or ideology that they learned from somewhere."

Steuber, a graduate of international studies from Catholic University, remembers seeing her friend in the hallway and not fully understanding as a teen what racism looked like.

"Looking back, I can't help but feel pain," she said. "I have distinct memories of raps being made when Selma walked by ... I feel a lot of sympathy and shame, which is what a lot of white community members are feeling now, but we have to take that shame and turn it into concrete actions."

Since Ahmed made the yearbook comments public, several Central Bucks students have reached out to her to ask how they can help reconcile the situation and even to admit that they were complicit when they knew students were acting violently toward her in school.

Ahmed said the open dialogue is healing for her and her peers.

"We are having a healing conversation where we don't bash or blame anyone, where we can talk to each other on an intimate level," said Ahmed.

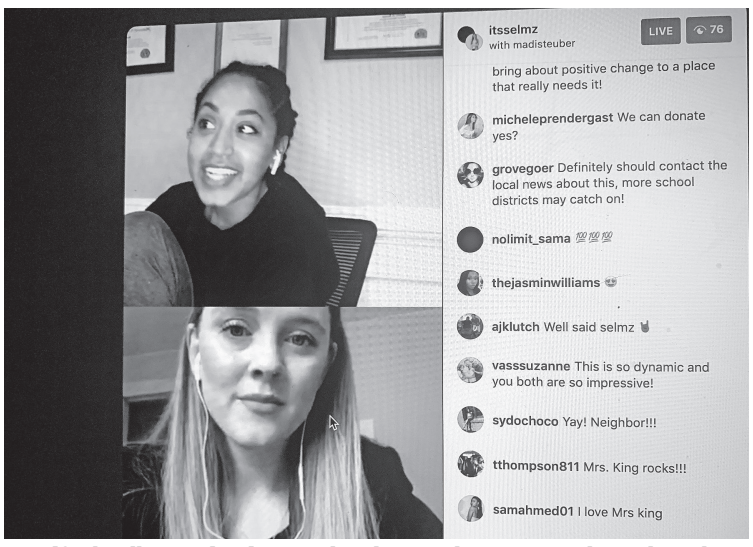
Ahmed and Steuber also are raising money to buy books from black bookstore owners to give to the Central Bucks School District. They want to provide students in their communities with both children and adult material that depict African Americans as main characters, that shed prejudices, that tackle racism and that raise new conversations.

"It's easy to say it's not happening here, but it is," Steuber said. "And we need to fix the problem where it is."

When she thinks about the last two weeks a sense of excitement fills Ahmed.

Ahmed believes their work — to advocate for more black teachers in the area and raise money for books — will improve the lives of all students in the community, including her younger sister.

"She's going to be 10 in November; she's about to go into middle school," she said. "The fact that we are able to do something so tangible, means she will have a different life."



A unified call to action is exactly what Doylestown's Selma Ahmed and Madeline Steuber, both 26, had in mind when they launched their Instagram Live event, called "Hey, We Gotta Talk," honing in on how race relations impact students in Central Bucks. Ahmed, a post-graduate student at Johns Hopkins University, talked about what it was like to grow up in Doylestown as a black Muslim. [CONTRIBUTED]



Since Selma Ahmed made racist remarks in her Tohickon Middle School yearbook comments public, several Central Bucks students have reached out to her to ask how they can help reconcile the situation. Now, Ahmed said, the open dialogue is healing for her and her peers."We are having a healing conversation where we don't bash or blame anyone, where we can talk to each other on an intimate level." [CONTRIBUTED]