



# Inside NHR



Enabling people with developmental disabilities to achieve fulfilling lives within their local communities.

June 2020

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## Rise Up and Speak!

Contributed by Ryene Fenner

As we enter into the month of June, hearts are heavy. COVID-19 is affecting people at alarming rates. People (myself included) can't live life as normal out of fear of contracting the virus. COVID-19 is no longer the driving force of the fear riddled through people's bodies. It is now riding passenger to an even more pressing issue, black lives being valued in our nation. In a month's timespan, we learned of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd amongst countless others being murdered. We watched as Christian Cooper was weaponized by Amy Cooper (no relation) for asking her to leash her dog in accordance with park rules. While the world is ever-changing and evolving, racism continues to be prevalent and consistent.



NHR DSP Ryene Fenner.

If black people can't be safe going for a jog, sleeping in their own homes, or using a twenty-dollar bill to purchase an item; then where are they safe? To some, these tasks may be customary, but it has been proven that for others, they are life-threatening. I worry about my son, my partner, my brothers, my friends, etc. every waking moment. I worry about myself. Will we make it home tonight? Will our concentrated melanin make them a walking, driving, or even sleeping target? Did we get to work safely? I know everyone doesn't have the same fears for the same reasons. This past week has been emotionally taxing and overflowing with fear. I am challenging those who are not people of color to think about the activities you complete on a daily basis that are risk-free for you but endangering for others.

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*"When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard nor welcomed, but when we are silent we are still afraid, so it is better to speak...your silence will not protect you."*

Audre Lorde, poet

## Rise Up and Speak!

Continued from Page 1

The ties that bind us can be greater than what destroys us. NHR's Unifying Principles are integrity, respect, positive relationships, innovation, and learning. These principles apply to our coworkers, the individuals we serve, and let's face it human beings in general. These principles are not race-specific, yet somehow in this world, all principles don't get distributed amongst people of color equally. Learning is such an important aspect of change. It is okay to admit you don't know something or to admit that you were unaware of the impact injustices have on people. Now that you are aware, what can you do to implement change? The reality is, everyone's life experiences are often affected by how our skin is completed. **Learn how to be an ally and how to engage with people of color in any capacity whether it be in your community, coworkers, or the individuals you support.**

I am tired. It's exhausting to explain why skin tone doesn't justify the mistreatment of people. We can no longer hear of these events and noiselessly root for change. It is time to be vocal about what you believe in and support those that are a part of your community. Look around you while you work, how many people of color are your coworkers? How many people of color are the individuals you serve? You may notice that some people of color are working silently Their silence is lined with trepidation and uncertainty. How can they be sure that they are viewed as an asset rather than a liability?

Change is not comfortable. It will not envelop you like a plush blanket. In order for change to be implemented people have to use their voices and know that it won't be trouble-free. It will pierce through you like a gust of wind and make you shift in your seat. I encourage you to ask yourself what's worse, using your voice even when it makes you uneasy or being a bystander and secretly rooting for a difference to make? People of color make up a large number of both individuals and staff in this agency. This number is just a small portion compared to the number of people of color that serve us in the community. We deserve to be treated as equals, valued, supported. We matter.

I sit here thinking if it is the job of our workplace to be vocal in implementing change and it is. I invite all of you to let your coworkers that are people of color know their worth. Let them know the fight for justice is no longer their burden to carry alone. Silence is equivalent to complicity. Some people may say they don't agree with the climate of our nation and the treatment of people of color, but words with actions are idle plans. If you honor the people of color you come in contact with it is your duty to advocate for change. The first step is to acknowledge the injustices people of color receive. The second step is ensuring they know they are a cherished part of their community in every facet of life. What if it was your child, brother, sibling, that was crying for their life to be spared? What if it was you or someone you loved that lost their lives for no reason other than their skin tone? Wouldn't you want justice to be served? For people to speak up and speak out in your fight for injustice to end? Martin Luther King once said, "In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends". Don't let the need for change fall on deaf ears.

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## An Important Message to the NHR Community

Contributed by Sam Laganaro, Executive Director

In the last several months, we all have been dealing with the fear and anxiety that the SARS-CoV-2 virus has introduced into our lives. It has detrimentally shaped our comfort in being in the community – a trip to the grocery store is something that we have to plan ahead and steel ourselves for. With the use of PPE and plenty of hand sanitizer and handwashing, we can lower risk, but we really are waiting for an effective treatment and/or vaccine that will free us to return to “normal” lives. We are relying on science to help get us to that time – and we can all agree that we can’t get there soon enough.

As you know, on May 25, 2020, an unarmed black man, George Floyd, was killed in Minneapolis, Minnesota by police after being arrested on suspicion of passing a counterfeit \$20 bill at a nearby market. His death was the latest instance of institutionalized violence in our country against people of color perpetrated by those who are entrusted with keeping us all safe and a deeper failure in our broader society – in ourselves. While the broader society has only recently been dealing with fear for our safety on going out to a store because of SARS-CoV-2, black Americans have had to endure anxiety and fear for far longer because of this violence – this assault on blackness. This, of course, includes people who work at and are supported by NHR. I recall in person-centered planning a few years ago; a family of a person we support ultimately decided not to pursue an opportunity for their son to transition from a group home to a supportive apartment and greater independence. It was not because they didn’t think he could succeed, but rather, because they were fearful that as a black man with autism, the community would fail him and his safety could be compromised. Their concern - as recent events demonstrate – was justified.

Unlike SARS-CoV-2, science will not save us from police brutality or address the ongoing struggle of people of color for the basic human need for equal treatment and respect. The solution rests *within us and our commitment to each other*. I was recently contacted by a DSP, Ryene Fenner, who wanted to know what NHR would be doing to respond to this dreadful situation. She stated she did not know “what the plan could be or should be moving forward, but I do think there should be acknowledgement to the black community that contributes to our agency.” **I completely agree with Ryene and am grateful for her leadership.** People of color work throughout NHR keeping our mission strong and true. The foundation for the success of NHR’s mission is built on respect, the positive relationships that we develop with each other and with people we support and our ability and willingness to learn so tomorrow can be better than today.

In several meetings (virtual, of course) with teams at NHR, NHR’s management has expressed our solidarity with and appreciation for people of color everywhere – and especially within NHR – that we reject violence and demand that everyone is afforded the simple dignity of being valued as a human being. Ryene’s powerful article that leads this month’s newsletter underscores the need for and the opportunity to change. This newsletter also reports on a committee that has been formed to help us as we seek to do so and explore steps that we can take together to more effectively stand with and support our colleagues and people we support as they claim what is theirs – what is and what can be ours together – a valued place in the community – a place where we care about each other and believe we belong together. If we open our minds (to the knowledge that much work remains for equality to be achieved and that silence isn’t an option); open our hearts (to love that which is essentially human in all of us) and open our wills (to be accountable to each other to help bring change to the world), together we can help bend the arc of the moral universe toward justice. I think we can agree that we can’t get there soon enough.

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## Supporting Black Lives Matter

Contributed by Marema Diallo, Shaunie Hylton and David McGorry

Ryene Fenner, a Direct Support Professional at Thornwood, was deeply hurt and traumatized by the recent murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. She sent a note to NHR's Executive Director Sam Laganaro asking NHR to either make a statement and take actions that acknowledge and support the needs of black employees during this time. Ryene noted that as a black woman with a black partner, son and father, she was deeply saddened and afraid, and asked in her note how anyone like herself could give 100 percent at work when they are afraid to walk out their front door. Sam shared Ryene's note with the agency directors, who unanimously agreed we needed to respond and address her concerns. During this time, other employees also said they were interested in identifying ways NHR and NHR employees could support initiatives supporting Black Lives Matter.

Here at NHR we are in support of the black community. We stand against racism and hate, and we are committed to making meaningful change. A committee has been formed to bring an awareness of and to further educate everyone here at NHR about the social injustice, inequality and police brutality experienced by the black community. We are inviting NHR employees to write stories about their feelings and how they are coping with the crisis. Employees may also express their feelings through posters and other forms of artistic expression. We plan to publish the stories in Inside NHR and also on Facebook.

Another project we are working on is reaching out to our sister agencies to see if we could create art projects expressing feelings about Black Lives Matter and then work with a local facility to display the art at their venue.

**We are inviting everyone at NHR to join the dialogue, listen to the stories of their colleagues and to reach out to those colleagues who are frightened as we face the challenges in the days ahead. If you have any questions about how you can get involved, contact David McGorry at [dmcgorry@nhrny.org](mailto:dmcgorry@nhrny.org).**

To start the conversation in regards to inequality, social injustice and police brutality, two NHR employees would like to share their stories:

"I just parked my car and was sitting in front of my local Family Dollar when I found myself surrounded by three cop cars. I was a little shaken and confused because I had no idea why they surrounded my car. My mind was focused on going into the store to purchase laundry detergent, go home and wash my clothes. An officer approached my car, asked me to roll down my window and said my car fit the description of a robbery that took place earlier that day. Still shaken up and confused, tears immediately ran down my face because I was afraid of what was going to happen next. I started to think about the recent deaths that occurred due to police brutality and at that moment I became fearful that I would become another "say my name". He asked me for my license and registration. My hands at this point were trembling. I was breathing heavy; my heart was racing, and I was uncontrollably sobbing. I searched for the items that the officer requested and I gave them to him. I couldn't speak nor look at him. Inside I was screaming, but outside I was frozen. He walked back to his car, came back to my vehicle and he handed back my license and registration. He then told me that the suspect they were looking for was a white female and two black men. He apologized for the inconvenience and left. I sat in my car, crying for about 10 minutes after the incident. I didn't know what to do or how to feel so I just drove home." I have never shared this experience, until now. And as I was writing my story, I became emotional as if I were reliving the experience all over again. "

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## Supporting Black Lives Matter

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Another employee wrote:

“In late 2014, when first finding out I was pregnant, I was filled with joy and excitement as a new mother. The process of carrying a baby is magical and going through the different stages from not feeling the baby to actually feeling the baby kick in your belly is an amazing feeling! A few months down the line, when having a gender reveal and finding out I was having a baby boy, it was overwhelmingly joyful. Like every mother, you wonder what your child will look like, be like, etc., but I started to have other thoughts and worries. These thoughts were a lot scarier and worrisome than just thinking about what he would look like. I started to think about raising an African-American boy that would one day be a teenager and go through normal teenage experiences, such as getting a speeding ticket. But my worries were that getting a simple speeding ticket would result in something more terrifying because of the color of his skin. This is the fear that has been with me from finding out I was having a baby boy and a feeling that worries me daily.”

### We Can't Breathe Protest March Held in Poughkeepsie



Listen to Peter Leonard and The Poet Gold as they interview Robert Pemberton (a founder of the Stop The Violence Movement) a main organizer of the peaceful, racially integrated 2,000-person We Can't Breathe protest march on June 2nd in Poughkeepsie. Several local officials attended the protest and marched across the bridge, including City Mayor Rob Rolison and Dutchess County Executive Marc Molinaro. Pemberton, born and raised in Poughkeepsie, talks of the imperative for individuals and communities to seek justice.

[https://www.iheart.com/podcast/481-peter-and-the-poet-gold-30383287?cmp=ios\\_share&pr=false&autoplay=true](https://www.iheart.com/podcast/481-peter-and-the-poet-gold-30383287?cmp=ios_share&pr=false&autoplay=true)



**Learn and Reflect on How You Can Support Change**

**Learn About Talking About Race and Why it Matters**

**You can do so by visiting the website of the National Museum of African American History & Culture.**

**This website is filled with resources and information that can help you understand yourself, your race, and the experience of others in a more nuanced, interactive way.**

<https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race>