

PRESIDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

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What Can We Do Together to Effect Change?

Education is Important in the Pursuit of Progress



The murder of George Floyd and other unarmed Black people, paired with the disparate impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on communities of color, has left me—and all of us at the New Jersey State

Bar Association—in search of ways to combat persistent systemic racism in our society and make lasting changes in our profession.

The NJSBA knows that there are no easy solutions, but we believe the path forward must include concrete action that ensures attorneys are able to reinforce public confidence in the justice system.

This is an inflection point after centuries of oppression and inequality. To meet the urgent needs of this moment, the NJSBA knows it must champion specific strategies that break down the barriers of systemic bias and discrimination. We have begun that work.

That's why earlier this summer I created the NJSBA Commission on Racial Equity in the Law, a panel of leaders in the profession that will take an incisive study of the legal system to identify methods of addressing root causes of inequities in the profession and in the law. The commission will identify those strategies and look specifically at ongoing anti-Black racism in the legal system and in the practice of law.

The commission brings together dozens of leaders of the legal profession to have important, and sometimes difficult, conversations meant to result in lasting change and transform the thoughts and behaviors of many of us. That work has already commenced, and I look forward to what happens next.

As the commission begins its work, I'm also excited to note that the Association and New Jersey Institute for Continuing Legal Education will convene a Symposium on Race and the Law on Aug. 20.

Central to that daylong event is asking: What can we do together to effect change?

The symposium will feature a wide-ranging exchange of ideas in which we examine these questions and propose some concrete solutions that each of us can work on.

The conversation will include a thought-provoking interview of Kevin Richardson of the "Exonerated Five." At the age of 14, he was among a group of Black and Latino boys falsely charged with attacking a woman in Central Park. He was wrongfully incarcerated for seven years. His personal story and positive message bring new light to the power of criminal justice reform.

The day will continue with topic-specific panels that delve into subjects like police conduct and jury selection. A critical piece of the day's discussion is that it will be interactive and include an effort to raise all of our awareness about the places where bias lurks undetected.

It is my sincere intention to listen closely to the day's conversations to educate myself about how to pave the road ahead.

One thing I do know, is that the NJSBA understands how important education is in the pursuit of progress.

Last month I was proud to ask the New Jersey Supreme Court to amend the mandatory continuing legal education requirements to require that all licensed attorneys earn credits on diversity, inclusion and the elimination of bias. Not only is this in step with what many other states have begun to require, including our neighbors in New York, it is the right thing to do.

I'm happy to say that a number of county bar and affinity bar associations have joined us in supporting this change to the continuing legal education requirements by sending their own letters to the Court. These are all small steps in our journey that will undoubtedly be long. We hope to build on each one to keep the passion for change and justice for all on a forward trajectory. I am here to listen, learn and invite you to reach out to me at president@njsba.com.

We have much work to do. Let's do it together. 🙏