

*A Message from the Joint Board of Directors of
the Sixteenth Judicial District Bar and Durham County Bar Association*

June 6, 2020

Dear Members of the Durham Bar,

The events that have transpired these past few weeks have profoundly defined the challenges that we as legal professionals face daily in navigating through the intersections of constitutional and unconstitutional realities --of justice and injustices--in a desired America of inalienable rights. The Durham Community, in unity with our nation, has made it clear through its remarkable demonstrations of courage that we as a community and nation will no longer live in a society that is intolerable to all members of our free nation.

We are angry about the deaths of unarmed African American men at the hands of the police and the suppression of other ongoing systemic injustices.

Our anger reminds us that the law must serve everyone because its very legitimacy comes from the will of the people. When a member of our community cannot find justice inside our courthouse walls, the power of the law erodes, and we all lose. No justice, no peace indeed.

In our own back yard, 75% of the people in the Durham County jail are African American while only 37% of Durham's population is comprised of African Americans. (See Population by Race, 2010-2016 slide on durhamnc.gov). This alarming statistic sheds light on the much-needed reforms to ensure that African Americans are not disproportionately punished in our Criminal Justice System. Additionally, the issues of poverty that burden our African American community further widen the gap.

Durham County, through the collaboration of many organizations, has already committed efforts and resources to bring about change. Durham Beyond Policing was formed in 2016 and is a coalition of many organizations and community members invested in re-envisioning public safety. This spring the committee worked to respond to the request of the Durham Police Department to secure more funding to hire 72 new police officers. Additionally, Durham provides anti-racism workshops for the public to develop awareness around how racism lives in each of us and in our institutions. If any of your law firms or families would like to be a part of these workshops, we encourage you to contact "Organizing Against Racism" (OAR) at email <mailto:oardurham@gmail.com>. Our local bar's annual 5K race fundraiser will support the DEAR initiative which helps eligible residents, many of whom have been African American, expunge criminal records, thus paving the way for better employment opportunities.

As lawyers, we are aware of the importance of legal institutions to protect lives, to impose order and to create a framework for economic and familial predictability. We play a unique role in supporting our community by way of legal representation and education of our local and state policymakers to help our residents affect the change that they desire to see in their community. However, please remember that we must take care of ourselves and take a step back to assess our own personal feelings towards the issues that were highlighted this week. Now more than ever we need to stand in solidarity yet be aware that not all are similarly situated in the systematic oppression that has plagued our nation long before COVID-19.

As more details of upcoming initiatives are determined, we will inform you and give you an opportunity to voice your concerns and suggestions.

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For board contact information click <http://durhambar.net/home-2/leadership/>.