

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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NAACP
Santa Rosa - Sonoma County Branch

THE APPROPRIATION OF RACISM

Sonoma County has a long complex history, especially when we examine the generational experiences of Black, Indigenous and People of Color. Over the last few weeks, we have seen the bravery demonstrated by Black county officials through the disclosure of the racism and microaggressions they endured over their tenure. We also observed the retraction of another Black candidate citing concerns over the county's climate.

In order to effectively address the recent series of events in Sonoma County, we must first establish clear definitions of words that continue to be thrown around out of context.

- **Racism:** a belief or doctrine that inherent differences among the various human racial groups determine cultural or individual achievement, usually involving the idea that one's own race is superior and has the right to dominate others or that a particular racial group is inferior to the others.
- **Equity:** the quality of being fair or impartial; something that is fair and just
- **Microaggression:** a subtle but offensive comment or action directed at a member of a marginalized group, especially a racial minority, that is often unintentionally offensive or unconsciously reinforces a stereotype.
- **Racial Slur:** Racial slurs, often called racial epithets, are words or phrases that refer to members of racial and ethnic groups in a derogatory manner.

As the largest employer, the County of Sonoma once had five Black Department heads. Now in just three years there are two. Based on what has been publicly shared, one can assume, the unveiling of this truth is a first for many but an unfortunate set of dynamics and conditions that many people of color face working throughout the county. Unfortunately, their stories may not ever be heard.

Instead of addressing racism and the departure of Black county leaders, the Sonoma County Sheriff's Office is more concerned with ostracizing a former community leader. Mr. Threet, the former Director of IOLERO, used a phrase "All skinfolk ain't kinfolk," popularized by Zora Neal Hurston (1942 autobiography "Dust Tracks on a Road."), is not a racial slur but rather a cultural colloquialism. As a white man, his use of this phrase was a matter of cultural appropriation, but by no means a racist statement. Mr. Threet has demonstrated a commitment to anti-racism and living as an ally. He modeled this professionally and personally, sought out opportunities to deeply engage, uplift, and listen to some of the most marginalized people in the county. And for this work, he is now a target of defamation.

In contrast, the Sheriff's Department has paid out millions in lawsuits over the unlawful treatment of Black and Brown community members, a situation that Assistant Sheriff Engram has described as normal and not evidence of any systemic issues with the agency. While there is no doubt that Black and other deputies of color have endured racism and microaggression, it is disrespectful to try to thread these instances alike in the spirit of "transparency." This visibility and dialogue is calculated to elevate and recognize Assistant Sheriff Engram. But, if he is not leading his campaign with a stamp to improve the conditions and experiences for those in the Black community, why is the department leading this "transparency campaign?"

One must ask, what's the real goal here? How is the Sonoma County Sheriff's Office going to examine its own systems, practices and policies? How will the Sheriff's Office continue to take a stand against racism when one of their own commits a racist act? How will the agency involve the Black community in its decisions around how it polices community members? This newfound drive for transparency is a unique path to take and we look forward to the continued reflective examination to support this public act.

Even in doing so, violating the privacy of a citizen, additional community members and the misuse of a government social media profile and taxpayer dollars is erroneous. The attack on social media and in the Press Democrat are a frank violation of privacy, attack of free speech and attack of Human Rights.

Should the Sheriff's Office, the Press Democrat's Editorial Board and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) writers seek clarification on their response to this experience, we welcome productive dialogue in partnership with the Office of Equity. True change is only possible when people in power and influence are willing to engage in difficult and uncomfortable conversations. To date, the Sheriff's Office has avoided such conversations and fought against measures that would strengthen community participation in agency decisions, such as Measure P. All three candidates for the upcoming Sheriff's Election are encouraged to continue to educate themselves and their teams.

Public Officials are often subject to criticism and even when that criticism comes from someone white or a person of color, that is not automatically racism. Redefining racism as a weapon to attack members of the community to fit particular narratives is dangerous. Folks utilizing that route are well aware and know the influence their actions have.