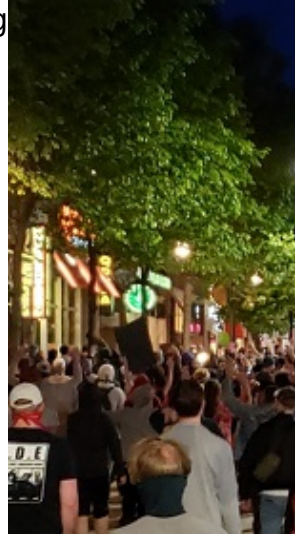


Senator Jeff Smith: Be the Change We Need

Written by Jeff Smith, State Senator District 31

Wednesday, 03 June 2020 09:12 - Last Updated Wednesday, 03 June 2020 09:45

<http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/george-floyd-protest-mdsn-wpr-s5.jpg>



Communities across the country are coming together to raise awareness of the racial inequities that exist in America. We all have a responsibility to make a difference moving forward.

MADISON, WI - In the months since Wisconsin has been impacted by COVID-19, we've all thought about the day that our lives will begin to return to normal. It's an understandable thought to have. After all, the pandemic has forced us to make changes in nearly every aspect of our lives.

But this calls into question, what does "normal" really mean?

Our country is reeling in the tragic death of George Floyd, another Black man whose life was taken too soon. Communities across the country have come together to mourn, listen, and raise awareness of the systemic inequities causing traumatic suffering for people of color in our country.

This is a wake-up call for all of us. Even after we recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, we must not be comfortable with a society that normalizes racial prejudice and injustice. We must find the resolve to do what is needed in pursuit of a more equitable environment. Together, we must challenge the normalcy of racism in our country.

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There are many Americans who have a difficult time believing racism still exists in our country. From stereotypes broadcast in the media, horrific acts of violence or the disparities impacting communities of color, it's clear our country still has a racial divide.

In fact, the ongoing public health crisis provides a striking example of the ways racism still impacts communities of color. According to the Wisconsin Department of Health Services, as of May 31st, 25% of Wisconsin residents who died due to COVID-19 were Black, even though this group makes up less than 7% of the state's population. Public health experts have attributed the disproportionate number of deaths in the Black community to health and economic disparities.

We need to ask ourselves how many more times must we talk about this with little or no action to show?

For decades, politicians have been aware of racial disparities in America; yet, it seems our country's leaders either deny it completely or only talk about how terrible it is without taking meaningful action. After seeing the upsetting video of the murder of George Floyd, I knew that my words would be inadequate. Once again, politicians' thoughts, prayers and empty promises aren't enough. This time, we must make our words matter. We need systemic change now.

Like so many other deaths of Black men and women that should have never happened, words didn't save George Floyd. For as long as our country has existed, we've ignored brutal injustices that occurred in America. Possibly because it's often easier for those of us with white privilege

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to look away. This time we can't look away. We can only move on with heavy hearts and determination to make change.

We all have a responsibility to make a difference. On Sunday, I participated in a moving vigil held for Mr. Floyd with more than 300 other concerned citizens from the Eau Claire area. We heard from a woman who used to live in Minneapolis who remembered George Floyd as someone who looked out for her and others. Eau Claire Police Chief Matt Rokus answered questions people had regarding police training and equipment. Local officials spoke of how horrified they were when they saw the video. Together, we talked about what we can do as a community to change the status quo.



I can assure you, as a leader and as an ally, I am committed to working toward an equitable future. As an ally, I will listen, take a step back and let others speak and always make myself available to learn. I will allow myself to feel uncomfortable while confronting racism engrained in our country.

In my role as a state senator, I'll continue this mission, working with my legislative colleagues to advance policies to prioritize equity and ensure there are not unintended consequences that would negatively affect communities of color.

It's time we speak up and act. Returning to normal leaves people, and entire communities, behind. Remember, all lives don't matter until black lives matter. It's our responsibility to make the world a better place and it starts with each and every one of us. Do your part to move Wisconsin forward.