

# RACIAL JUSTICE RETREAT

April 14-15, 2023



**Facilitation and Consulting Services Provided by:**

Mizari Suárez | Co-Facilitator | She/Her/Ella

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*On April 14-15, 2023, Kentucky Equal Justice Center (KEJC) staff and board gathered for a two-day retreat to collaboratively work on a racial justice action plan. The staff and board came together to discuss racial justice principles that would serve as the basis for creating an action plan to align the organization toward racial justice and equity. The following report captures the conversations of the group. The comments are slightly edited for spelling or grammatical issues or to expand the idea or intent.*

## Participants

Ben Carter	Lisa Gabbard
Bonifacio Aleman	Michelle Haubner
Bruce Simpson	Miranda Brown
Chloe Atwater	Natalie Chambers
Ebony Lee	Paola Schwartz
Gaby Dawson	Raaziq El-Amin
Jefferson Coulter	Rich Seckel
John Rosenburg	Yoko Dionisio

## Facilitators

Mizari Suárez Co-facilitator	Tiffany Pyette Co-facilitator
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## Facilitator Observations

### Tiffany

There was good engagement from all participants. There was an emphasis on the transitional place that KEJC is in and its growth. One group began to create a conflict resolution framework within their agreements as they wrote them down, imagining how they would hold these agreements going forward. Suggestions around trusting the staff team to make hires were made to the Executive Director to empower staff and increase capacity for someone in the role. The group mentioned a desire for a

structure that will carry our values and work forward and to put aside structures that no longer serve KEJC at its current size and scope several times in the discussion. Ethical space was held in real-time during the discussion and in the discussion about future pay scales for different types of experience. The group moved with care for their communities and the work.

Team building work during the retreat was very needed and began, though more is needed. A board member asked for what they needed during physical activity (a stop), and we were able to honor that. This illustrated the group following through with asking for what we needed, which was part of group agreement topics.

Class is a topic the group discussed, and I may want to dig more into it. We challenged the fear of open conflict, a way we know white supremacy culture shows up in nonprofit work. We are working on a sense of urgency and making progress. We have a long way to go on paternalism. I observed some potentially harmful discussions around gender and sexuality.

## **Mizari**

During the retreat, my fellow facilitator and I decided to pivot the agenda to help the group better understand each other. While this was a difficult decision, as our contract was focused on racial justice work, we both agreed that it was essential for the organization to have a strong foundation to address racial justice and equity effectively. Without this foundation, any work that follows would be performative. The pivot involved introducing racial justice concepts, team building, and courageous conversations to create a plan for racial justice. As a result, the group was able to have conversations about specific equity and racial issues that needed to be addressed. Additionally, the group benefited from being in a safe place where they could share their ideas and feelings in community with one another. The courageous conversations presented in this report are examples of situations that must be dealt with before moving forward. It is my recommendation that these conversations happen in conjunction with educational learning sessions. These conversations and the knowledge provided in the sessions will be a catapult for the organization to develop a racial justice action plan. It is then the obligation of KEJC to support the racial justice committee to help them carry out this work internally. This relies on more than just the individuals on the committee but everyone in the organization, including board members.

Regarding group dynamics within the organization, there needs to be more cohesion among board members and staff. As the facilitator, I noticed individuals hesitant to address certain topics or comments, leading to a lack of openness and honesty. During the retreat, board members were not fully engaged in the conversations and activities, often withdrawing from participation. Additionally, apparent power dynamics between board members and staff created an unwelcoming environment for staff members to engage in conversation or interaction. I recommend implementing team-building activities between the board and staff to address these issues, such as annual retreats or having more staff attend board meetings.

The organization should consider incorporating team-building activities into the existing racial justice plan contract to enhance staff unity. A targeted workshop or half-day communication and team-building training could also be valuable. This could involve a behavioral assessment like DISC to identify the most effective communication methods for staff and leadership and develop an interpersonal communication plan for the organization.

Overall, I hope the group does not see this pivot as a step back but rather as a necessary step toward achieving their goals.

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## Group Agreements

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*Participants were divided into small groups to discuss and choose which group agreement would help us answer the two questions in bold. The results of those questions expressed by the participants can be seen below under each group. Additionally, the participants decided on five crucial agreements through a dotting process to help the group move forward in our time together and for future conversations.*

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### **What would help us both create an environment of inclusion, innovation, creativity, and honest conversation today?**

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- Remedy Impact (Trust Intent)
  - There was a discussion from the group surrounding the meaning and impact of “trust intent,” and adding to this agreement one of these four words: focus, remedy, examine, or acknowledge. The group selected “remedy impact.”
- Ethical space
- Reframe the conversation

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### **Which of these are crucial to helping us move forward?**

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*During the conversation about identifying crucial agreements, a point was brought up about the chain of command—the questions of where is leadership and who is over what was brought up. The group added “identifying the chain of command” as a crucial agreement to help the group move forward.*

1. Clarify our base
  - How do we care for our base, build capacity, and hold ourselves accountable? (e.g., board structure.)
2. Ethical space
3. Common goals
4. Be willing to sit with conflict
5. Identifying the chain of command

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## Group 1

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- Common goals (e.g., ask clarifying questions, clearly state decisions being made, acknowledge and address bias)
- Operate in an ethical space (e.g., together we know a lot, Inclusion requires power-shifting agreements, relationships first, notice power dynamics and honest and transparent terminology)
- Trust intent (e.g., speak our truths, it's okay when you have a hard time finding the right words, mutual accountability, ask for what you need.)

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## Group 2

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- Clarify our base (e.g., who do we serve?)
- Ethical storytelling
- Power shifting (e.g., discussion about short deadlines, being more of a listener than a talker)
- What do we have in common vs. how we are different? (e.g., topics of discussion were recruiting out of state, attorneys always speaking first, funding, grants, what are we doing for the mighty dollar?)
- What is the unifying principle? (e.g., clarify race and class)

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## Group 3

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- Acknowledging what we need to take with us on this new shore
- Ask powerful questions
- Process (e.g., how are we going to do it?)
- Reframe the conversation (e.g., transition: bless & honor what will no longer serve us. What needs to be in our boat?)
- Trust intent & acknowledge impact

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## Group 4

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- After listening to someone's thoughts, it's good to acknowledge and thank them for sharing
- Ask how to turn the conversation into one that is productive
- Be willing to sit with conflict, with opportunity for growth group

- Create a safe space without judgment
- Name conflict and remind ourselves that conflict is ok
- Plan on a follow-up meeting to check on the progress
- Speak your truth and let others speak theirs

## Courageous Conversations

*The participants were asked what courageous conversation must happen before the group can move forward in implementing and centering racial justice and equity principles in the organization.*

### What courageous conversation must happen...

- Are legal services contributing money to the work of KEJC?
  - How to organize LDC efforts around Maxwell, KRM, etc.
- Board member commitment?
  - How are board members showing up for the organization?
- How are we being responsive to community needs? (e.g., what type of capacity do we need to build?)
- How do we apply racial justice and equity across the organization so it's not performative?
- How do we better service the community?
- How do we educate the community that we serve?
- How do we express racial justice goals to legal aid partners?
- How to have conversations with funders and supporters about the great work of KEJC
- How to incorporate committees into decision-making?
- What are the conversations around class? (e.g., housing stabilization program)
- What is our base? Who do we care for?
- What is the board composition for the future? (e.g., incorporate our base into decision-making)
- What is the future of KEJC?
- What is the succession plan? (e.g., what leadership models are available?)
- Who are the critical partners moving forward?
- Why are the people we serve low-income?
- Worker-led nonprofit?

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## Conflict

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*During the discussion of identifying courageous conversations, the facilitator asked the group which courageous conversation surprised the group and which conversation could be tackled during our time together. The group went silent. The facilitator shared with the group that they sensed unsaid tensions. The facilitator asked the group to share what is holding them back or what conflict/tension is holding them back from taking initiative in the courageous conversations. Participants identified the following challenges.*

- Taking the lead and being told its not within our role (e.g., strategic plan)
- Taking ownership of projects and, in general, being met with opposition

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## The New Shore

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*Participants were asked to see themselves in a raft in the middle of the ocean. They are tasked to get to the new shore, but to get there, they need to think about how the organization has grown and what has propelled it to where it is now. As they thought about how to get to the new shore, participants were asked to answer the following questions **1. What do we need to bless and honor now because it has allowed the organization to grow? 2. What needs to be left behind because it no longer serves the organization? 3. What needs to be taken to the new shore?** The number in parentheses represents the number of individuals who openly agreed with the statement. The comments were slightly edited to expand on the idea or intent of the comment.*

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### What do we need to bless and honor now?

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- Accountability among worker directive
- Legal aid pay scale (e.g., reproduces inequities)
  - This prevents a diverse group of individuals from being able to take jobs within the legal clinic world.
- Maxwell Street volunteers and funders
  - There needs to be an acknowledgment that MSLC has been separated from KEJC, and the awkward divide needs to end.
- The numerous supporters who have supported the organization (e.g., donors, foundations, etc.)
- The projects that have existed and continue to exist
- Rich, the time and sacrifice he has put into the organization, and the multiple hats he wears (2)
- Small but scrappy mentality (e.g., reframe what can be done)
- Staff and board
- Staff who have left due to the workload, difficulty of the work, assumption of abilities, or reimbursement pay policies

- The clients who have been served
- The process/procedures that have gotten KEJC this far
  - The policies and procedures have served KEJC well in the past, but not now. For example, the reimbursement policy. Staff may have to pay for work-related expenses out of pocket, causing a personal financial burden. These policies need to be more equitable and fairer for staff.
- The serve mentality
- The way we interpersonally communicate (e.g., the old way of communication is not serving the staff or the organization)
- Time (2)

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### **What needs to be left behind because it no longer serves us?**

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- Leave behind the idea that attorneys hold all the knowledge and prioritize all kinds of experience (e.g., paralegals, etc.)
- Leave behind the serve mentality
- Legal aid pay scale
- Process and procedures
- The awkward divide between KEJC and MSL
- The small but scrappy mentality
- The way we communicate internally

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### **What do we need to take with us to this new shore?**

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- A clear understanding of board membership and the change that can be made within that role
- A dynamic and flow structure to guide us to new things
- Celebrating our success!
- Holding each other accountable for the work that we are doing with each other and those we are working with
- Joy
- Staff engagement in crafting the budget (e.g., establishing metrics that are both qualitative and quantitative)



## Next Steps

*Based on the facilitator's observations, we recommend the group move forward with the following steps. These are just recommendations for the organization, the KEJC racial justice committee, and facilitators can collaborate on the next steps.*

- Educational sessions (e.g., disability justice, racial justice)
- Team building between KEJC, MSLC staff, and board
  - Based on each member's behavioral observations, this can look like a DISC assessment for all staff on the best communication methods.
- Courageous conversations
  - Identify which conversations from the list above will help the group move forward in the structural process and racial justice and equity work.
- Racial Justice Action Plan