

Our Anti-Racism Journey

Why anti-racism work is library work

By David J. Seleb, Executive Director,
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Our library is on an anti-racism journey. This includes working with a local consultant and implementing a new anti-racism strategic plan.

Why do this? Because as your library, we value all people. We value providing a welcoming space for everyone.

We know you value this too. Because as we continue to ask “What kind of community do you want to live in?” you continue to tell us.

A community that’s kind. Accepting. Inclusive. One where anti-racism practices are making a difference in people’s lives.

Here’s how our public library friends in the nearby western suburb of Downers Grove put it: “By openly condemning hate and violence, we demonstrate we are a safe place for people of color and people who look or think or act differently. By standing up for all people, we push our doors open a little wider to welcome all.”

“Some folks need a bestseller or a tax form,” continues Downers Grove Library Director Julie Milavec. “Some need help using a computer. Others want a book for their child with a main character that looks like them. None of those needs are more important than the others. All take a different approach to do well.”

Like Downers Grove, we are working with a consultant on anti-racism practices “to learn to use a different lens, a different way of seeing, to help us find where we are falling short,” as Milavec says.

In June 2020, with the support of Reesheda Graham Washington and RGW Consulting, we assembled a cross-section of stakeholders—administrators, staff, patrons, board members, and young adults. This team developed a draft strategic plan. In January, all library staff were asked to share feedback on it.

“We created a plan because the library is serious about being an anti-racist organization for the long-term,” said Tatiana Swancy, our library’s Restorative Practices Coordinator and a member of the team that developed the plan. “As important as it is to have a vision, it is just as important to have a plan with concrete steps on how we’re going to reach our vision, and how the library can be held accountable for it.”

On March 23, a final version went to the board of library trustees, who unanimously approved it.

Library Trustee Colleen Burns said she voted yes “because in order to live up to our mission to be a welcoming space for all, we must promote and advance anti-racism practices.”

As we continue to turn outward, we know we have work to do, both individually and with the partners we collaborate with to serve all of Oak Park.

As Oak Park Township Manager Gavin Morgan says: “Anti-racism work benefits us all. The more we connect and learn from each other, including our different experiences, perspectives, and understandings, the better off we are.”

Racism is real. We need to work together to be anti-racist. Join us.

Action & accountability

Our Anti-Racism Strategic Plan covers both internal and external practices. As we look both within ourselves and our organization, and outward to our patrons and community, the plan further addresses four dimensions of racism: internalized, interpersonal, institutional, and structural. More: oppl.org/arrc

Join us



Read, listen, watch. Explore our two comprehensive resource guides: Anti-Racism: A Starter's Guide, and Countering Anti-Black Sentiments.

Challenge yourself. For adults and high schoolers, our Anti-Racism Resource Challenge is self-guided, with opportunities to participate in conversations and take action.

Attend a virtual program. Events include an Anti-Racist Book Group, hosted in collaboration with the Austin Branch of the Chicago Public Library. More: oppl.org/anti-racism

Follow us



Equity and social justice are core values of the library profession. They are also Oak Park community aspirations and priorities, as embodied in the Oak Park Equity, Diversion, and Inclusion Statement.



At the library, we turn outward. That means community aspirations drive our work. It's why our vision is to empower every voice in our community, and our mission is to share the information, services, and opportunities that fulfill Oak Park's aspirations.

Aspiring to anti-racism

We recognize that to make a difference, to truly give space to and elevate the voices of historically, intentionally, and traditionally marginalized people groups, we need to go beyond equity, diversity, and inclusion.

We also recognize that, as an institution, we don't know what we don't know. That's why we began our anti-racism journey in early 2020 by contracting with an outside consultant.

Like all other agencies and organizations in the community, the library must identify and address how its policies, systems, programs, and services have been inequitable and have served to marginalize or oppress people. And then we must work to change them.

On the right, see a few milestones in our anti-racism journey.

View a more complete timeline at oppl.org/anti-racism.

All photos taken at the Main Library. From top left, clockwise: Community Kwanzaa Celebration in 2019 (photo by Paul Goyette). Community members in a peace circle at the Restorative Community Practices Conference in 2019 (photo by Tina Harle). Speaker at the Youth Social Justice Conference in 2019 (photo by Paul Goyette). Teens organizing the 2018 Restorative Justice Conference (photo by Tina Harle).

Journey milestones

For the first time in the library's history, we have an anti-racism strategic plan. **So how did we get here?**

March 23, 2021: Make It Official

The Board of Library Trustees votes unanimously to approve the library's first anti-racism strategic plan, dedicating resources and accountability.

July 2020: Assemble a Cross-Section of Stakeholders

An Anti-Racism Advisory Team forms, with local administrators, staff, patrons, board representation, and young adults to help shape direction and to develop an anti-racism strategic plan.

February 2020: Start by Listening

We begin study and assessment with Oak Park business owner and consultant Reesheda Graham Washington & RGW Consulting.

2017-Present: Engage Diverse Audiences

We collaborate with community partners on restorative justice, multicultural programming, and opportunities for teens in social justice, leadership, and college and career readiness.

June 2017: Eliminate Fines and Fees

We eliminate late fines and meeting room fees, removing barriers to library use.

February 2016: Connect With Marginalized Patrons

Social worker Robert Simmons joins the library and starts growing a Social Services and Public Safety team that connects people with resources for housing, employment, health care, immigration, domestic violence, and more.