

Senator Shelli Yoder
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Committees:
Environmental Affairs, RMM
Health and Provider Services
Education
Commerce and Technology
Ethics

March 5, 2021

Rod Bray, President Pro Tempore
Indiana State Senate
200 West Washington Street
Indianapolis, IN 46204

Todd Huston, Speaker of the House
Indiana House of Representatives
200 West Washington Street
Indianapolis, IN 46204

Dear President Bray and Speaker Huston:

I write to you today to stand firmly against the utterly unacceptable, dehumanizing verbal harassment endured by our Black colleagues in the House of Representatives on February 18, 2021 while they so bravely spoke to their lived experiences as Black Hoosiers. I feel a strong obligation to use my privilege as a white person in a position of power and as a member of this General Assembly to speak against any discrimination or harassment faced by people of color in our state, most certainly including our fellow elected representatives.

For centuries and for far too long, our Black siblings have been subjected to ugly, cruel, deadly iterations of unchecked power and white privilege – whether in the form of legal segregation, housing and employment discrimination, scientifically-proven health and environmental disparities, police brutality, micro aggressions or the silencing of Black voices (such as being booed). The behaviors experienced by our Black colleagues in the House should not surprise us as white people given our history, but must infuriate us, as we white folks must carry the responsibility of dismantling racist systems and creating a more equitable society. We must speak out against injustice any time and every place we see it, including in the People’s House.

This unacceptable harassment must be thoroughly rebuked, not only by our Black colleagues and not only by Democrats, but by every member of the General Assembly who takes seriously the responsibility of representing the people of our state - all of the people. In our representative government, what we do in these halls and how we behave as the voice of our fellow Hoosiers is indeed representative of our state as a whole. Would we accept this behavior from our children? Would we accept this behavior from a constituent at a town hall meeting? I don’t believe so, and I question why we should accept it from each other.

As members of this body, we are rightfully held to a higher moral and ethical standard, and should therefore be held accountable when our words and deeds fail to meet this standard. As stated in Senate Standing Rule 90, and echoed in a similar House protocol:

"It is declared that high moral and ethical standards among State Senators are essential to the conduct of free government."

Further, as stated in the House of Representatives Anti-Harassment Policy, Chapter 3, Section 1 of the House Code of Ethics:

"The House is committed to providing a work environment in which all employees are treated with respect and are free from harassment based on sex, race, color, religion, national origin, veteran status, age or disability. In keeping with this commitment, the House strictly prohibits harassment in any form."

Given these policies and standards, I do not believe any member of our body can in good faith justify the behavior witnessed on February 18th or allow it to go unchecked. I urge you and all of our colleagues to take a strong, unequivocal stand against this harassment as unacceptable and unbecoming of any member of the General Assembly. Additionally, IC 2-2.2-3 empowers the House Statutory Committee on Ethics to receive and hear any complaint that alleges a violation of the House Code of Ethics, which I believe is a reasonable response to these events and would be indicative of the seriousness with which this body upholds its ethical and moral responsibilities on behalf of Hoosiers.

I strongly encourage my white colleagues to join me in standing against the harassment and discrimination we have witnessed, and to honor our solemn obligation as elected leaders to seek justice for Black Hoosiers and to create a more equitable state for all. As such, I request that leadership in the Indiana Senate and Indiana House of Representatives take real steps toward dismantling racism.

- Support the request made by members of the Indiana Black Legislative Caucus by scheduling, and mandating, racial equity and implicit bias training for all legislators. After all, we don't know what we don't know. I think every legislator can benefit from understanding ways we unintentionally perpetuate racist policies or beliefs, and learning how to respectfully listen to the stories being told by people with different experiences and perspectives.
- This interim, support Senator Randolph's request to study Jim Crow era laws and criminal penalties still in the Indiana Code that were passed specifically to target racial minorities, and to make recommendations on amending or repealing those laws. Understanding how our history shaped the racism and discrimination Hoosiers face today is a very tangible step we can take to make our laws more equitable.
- Form a partnership between the General Assembly and the state's Chief Equity, Inclusion and Opportunity Officer, Karrah Herring. Part of her role as defined by Governor Holcomb is to "drive cultural change across government workplaces and improve government operations for all Hoosiers." Conversations around race can be difficult, and I am certain Chief Officer Herring can offer plans and advice for the legislature to improve our workplace culture. With her experience, Chief Officer Herring can work

with legislators to foster better understanding, respect and trust in areas of diversity and inclusion.

I look forward to speaking with you further about how we can best implement these recommendations. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Shelli Yoder', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Shelli Yoder
Indiana State Senator
Senate District 40

CC: Governor Eric Holcomb
State Senator Greg Taylor
State Representative Phil GiaQuinta