

Statement by The Black Legal Action Centre on Emancipation Day

August 1, 2019

The Black Legal Action Centre (BLAC) was created to challenge and eradicate individual and systemic anti-Black racism. BLAC, and all those who we work with and learn from, have much work to do to make this vision a reality.

Today, on **Emancipation Day**, we are especially cognizant of the work that remains to be done.



Sculpture of slaves by Kwame Akoto-Bamfoⁱⁱⁱ

While strides have no doubt been made, BLAC recognizes that the seemingly unyielding legacy of slavery – that existed in Ontarioⁱ – is alive and well. What is clear to us at BLAC is that the stereotypes intricately linked to our dehumanization as Black people endure. How else does a person treat another human being as property, if not to negate their humanity?ⁱⁱ

We at BLAC see and hear from people every day who are precluded from full participation in society because of anti-Black racism.^{iv} We hear from people who are not given *any* opportunity to advance at work, who are assumed to be below average students, who are vilified by retailers when simply trying to shop for basic needs, who are deemed to be unfit parents, who are deemed to be criminals simply because of their skin colour. Recently – though this was not news to many in our community – we have heard through media reports that Black people are not even able to ride on public transit in peace.

So on this day, we urge you to think about how you see, acknowledge and treat Black people? Do you recognize our full humanity and dignity?

- If you are a principal, is it hard for you to believe that a Black student was bullied? If so, why is that? Do you think that the child could not possibly be vulnerable? And, when that child's parent or guardian is rightfully upset at having to make repeated attempts to remedy the treatment of their child, do you assume they are overreacting and aggressive?
- If you are a lawyer, do you plead your Black client out without really thinking about *why* they were charged in the first place? Do you assume guilt? Why?
- If you are an employer, is it challenging for you to think that the Black person who is longest in your employ would make a good manager? Why? Do you somewhere believe that they are not capable or competent?
- If you are a healthcare worker, have you made sure that all the tests that could be ordered, to ensure the health of your Black patient, have been ordered?
- If you work in social services, do you have trouble believing the Black person who is claiming a disability or do you think they are malingering? Why?
- If you are working in a store, do you assume that the Black customer either isn't worthy of attention so can be ignored, or may steal from you, and so must be watched closely?
- If you are a child protection worker, do you more frequently remove Black children from their parents' care? Is it harder to see the humanity in the family and recognize the impact removal will have?

We at BLAC recognize that while emancipation is a legal reality, true freedom is yet to be achieved. We encourage you to reach out to us as we work toward that freedom – the realization of our full humanity and dignity.

ⁱ Robyn Maynard, *Policing Black Lives: State Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present* (Black Point: N.S.: Fernwood Publishing, 2017), at p 4.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.* at p. 8.

ⁱⁱⁱ See <https://twitter.com/AncestorProject>

^{iv} The term 'Anti-Black Racism' was first expressed by Dr. Akua Benjamin, a Ryerson Social Work Professor. Anti-Black racism is policies and practices embedded in Canadian institutions that reflect and reinforce beliefs, attitudes, prejudice, stereotyping and/or discrimination that is directed at people of African descent and is rooted in their unique history and experience of enslavement and colonization here in Canada. The legacy of anti-Black racism lies in the current social, economic, and political marginalization of [people] of African descent. It is experienced as a lack of opportunity, poor health and mental health outcomes, poor education outcomes, higher rates of precarious employment and unemployment, significant poverty, and overrepresentation in the criminal justice, mental health, and child welfare systems. See, City of Toronto (2017). Action Plan to Confront Anti-Black Racism at <https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2017/ex/bgrd/backgroundfile-109126.pdf>. See also, <https://www.ryerson.ca/akua-benjamin-project/about-akua/>.