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Town halls to discuss race, inequity, solidarity and empathy

ANDREW HARP The News-Enterprise

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For seven weeks, members of the community will have the opportunity to attend town halls that discuss subjects on race, inequity, solidarity and empathy.

Sponsored by Elizabethtown Community and Technical College, Western Kentucky University and Limestone Bank, RISE will discuss a new topic each week.

The first conversation will be 7 to 8 p.m. Thursday, July 9 on Zoom.

Each conversation will be monitored by Jerisia Lamons, director of cultural diversity at ECTC, Donielle Lovell, sociologist at Western Kentucky University and Tanya Seabrooks, banking center manager at Limestone Bank.

The events are free and open to everyone. Lamons said they have asked high-level panelists to join the conversations. There also will be a moderated question-and-answer session at the end.

Lamons said the idea was brought to her by Megan Stith, ECTC's chief officer of institutional advancement. Because of recent events, they decided to put together a program to help create a conversation within the community.

Lamons said they wanted to make sure the conversation was professional, moderated and they weren't just hearing from people they would normally hear from.

"We're going to really be sure we hit them with some facts that may surprise them about their local community," she said.

Lamons said she wants the community to rise for the better out of these conversations, which is one of the reasons why the name was chosen.

“I want people to be aware that although we live in a great community that is very diversified and does a great job of being inclusive ... there are still some inequities in our systems in our local community,” Lamons said.

She said Lovell has been vocal regarding equity and education, and Seabrooks has had a long career talking about diversity, equity and inclusion.

Seabrooks said cities have made adjustments because of awareness of certain issues in the community, and wants to see the same in hers.

“Let’s start to execute some changes and implement them in our communities so that this is not something that is swept under the rug,” she said.

Seabrooks said in order to achieve these goals, everyone needs to be involved in the conversation, and said she hopes people attend the town halls with an open mind.

“I’m very excited and it was wonderful to be able to collaborate with, again, some of the most awesome leaders in our community,” she said.

Lamons said they wanted to make sure the audience is given actionable items they can take away, and begin moving forward progress once the conversation ends.

She said these could take the form of books, reading materials but also actionable methods such as applying for a local school board or a site-based development council.

Lovell came to the county in 2009 to join the board of the Hardin County Bridges Council, and then five years later was asked to do research in Hardin and Christian counties to look at racial disparities in the juvenile justice system.

Since then, she has written a series of grants close to \$150,000 for the county specifically to work on issues of racial disparity and juvenile justice reform.

Lovell said when it comes to talking about racial reconciliation, empathy is an important part of the process, to put oneself in someone else's shoes.

“It really is an effect on the overall community, no matter ... where you sit and where you're structured in the community,” Lovell said.

The first conversation will focus on education including equity in education.

Lamons said they'll ask questions such as, “How do we mitigate these faculty and staff minority disparities that we have in our local community right now? How do we instill equity in every educational experience?”

She said she recommends those who plan on attending the conversation to first watch “Teach Us All,” which is on Netflix, she said.

Confirmed guests for the conversation include Neil Gibbs, assistant principal at College View Alternative School, and Dr. Ashley Johnson, site coordinator at Communities in Schools of Tennessee and school social worker.

“The only way we're going to deal with some of the racial issues in our community is if people start to believe the experiences of people of color and what they're seeing here and what they're experiencing here,” Lovell said.

Lovell said while this is just the beginning for the community, she would like to see more people engaged on the topics they discuss.

“It is time to get up and it's time to get busy,” Seabrooks said.

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Topics to be discussed

- Education
- Workforce development and employment

- Criminal justice reform
- Health and wellness
- Black businesses in Hardin County
- Act now: women of color and running for office
- How to be a better ally

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