

## **Recommendations to the Board of Directors for the American Association of Suicidology Regarding Grievances Against Board Members and Addressing Inclusivity/Equity of its Members**

**Submitted Wednesday, June 12, 2019; revised July 8, 2019; revised July 19, 2019**

### **Summary:**

The communications committee was tasked with reviewing current events, namely the submission of a petition from an anonymous group of members and non-members who called themselves “Concerned Suicidologists.” The committee was asked to provide the AAS Board with recommendations on how to reply and move forward regarding the organization’s inclusivity, representation, and equity of its members.

After the petition was released, a substantial number of AAS members and non-members responded on the listserv to the ideas that inclusivity and diversity are not priorities for AAS’s leadership. The perception is that marginalized communities within the membership are not respected, are not listened to, and often have their voices erased.

In the midst of these discussions, and as has been previously reported to AAS representatives before, several people reported feeling like they could not reply without fear of retaliation or for being “called out.” This is largely due to the potentially intimidating nature of the platform, the fact that many frequent posters come from positions of privilege (in terms of race/ethnicity, gender identity/sexual orientation, education/position), and a perceived possibility that challenging the status quo will result in detrimental actions against the original poster, professionally or personally. We have no evidence that there have been direct or indirect consequences for anyone posting on the listserv. The perception of risk, however, is harmful for the suicide prevention community in general and members from marginalized communities specifically.

### **Analysis:**

The following are the questions/statements posed to the communications committee to help develop our recommendations:

1. Recommendations on if the board should address this specific listserv post
2. What should AAS’s response look like if the board were to address this group?
3. Recommendations on how the board should address future concerns posed to the board
4. How do we ensure members can feel safe in communicating their concerns or challenging the status quo, either on the listserv or the upcoming website community?

We have an opportunity to listen to our membership and move forward in aligned inclusivity and mission rather than argue or insist the organization doesn’t need to change. This not only benefits our entire membership, it benefits the organization in allowing it to grow and progress

into a stronger home for all of our members. Our leadership and membership can work together and hold each other accountable for creating lasting, sustainable, meaningful change.

#### **Recommendations:**

1. AAS issues a formal apology acknowledging our errors, including the use of language that was detrimental to our members, overall messaging, and mission.
2. Develop a formal, non-punitive policy and process for addressing complaints
3. Implement Board and staff development/training on organizational diversity and inclusivity. We should also explore making this available for all members or finding specific resources for that purpose.
4. AAS adopts language in its bylaws (and makes it available on the association's website) regarding social justice, human rights, and the support of marginalized communities

#### **Action Steps**

1. **Real action must be made apparent** (Ushering people into committees is not sufficient) by announcing our goals along with timelines/deadlines for implementation
2. **Inclusion should happen immediately** by identifying leaders from marginalized communities within the Association to work with AAS leadership to implement changes
3. **Convene a national Diversity Summit** with AAS stakeholders and partners to discuss ways the field of suicide prevention can address critical issues affecting marginalized cultures
4. **Implement formal AAS procedures** of airing and addressing grievances against board members
5. **Address the safety of our members** in posting comments in the community by circulating a code of etiquette for association communications
6. **This report and subsequent actions should be made available to the full membership**, the listserv, and posted to our social media channels

Sincerely,

AAS Communications Committee