



NAACP

PORTLAND BRANCH 1120

February 24, 2021

Ms. Jo Ann Jenkins
Chief Executive Officer of AARP
AARP
601 E Street, NW
Washington DC 20049

Dear Ms. Jenkins:

I am the president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Portland branch, known more widely as the NAACP. For more than 100 years, the NAACP has been a leader, catalyst and movement builder pushing to realize freedom, justice and fair opportunities are available to “colored people.” The NAACP continues to work to realize its mission of freedom and equality for all. In more recent times, the NAACP has focused on building a more racially and socially just America that eliminates the vestiges of racial preference, dismantles white supremacy and its barriers to progress toward equity in organizations, institutions, and government entities, and joins the Movement 4 Black Lives to ensure that “when Black lives really matter, all lives will matter more.”

Here in Oregon, with its long history of racial indifference, racial enmity and intolerance, we take seriously that mandate as we continue to pursue justice and remedies to the continuing reliance on racial preference. We are committed to work with others to eliminate historical silencing and marginalizing of the voices of ‘colored people,’ and denial of the leadership skills and experiences of Black and other people of color.

So, I was surprised and angered to recently learn that those issues we work on may be present in the abrupt departure/dismissal of Ruby Haughton-Pitts from her position as the Oregon State Director of AARP, a departure that was sudden, without answers, and continues to be shrouded in secrecy.

I am among so many here in Oregon and across the country who have had the pleasure of working with Ruby, a well-known, respected and highly esteemed Black woman leader in our community and beyond. I have watched her repeatedly display her ability to negotiate, elevate and amplify issues of critical importance for various constituencies, whether in her rise in the banking ranks, in community service, or her previous stints working with AARP outside Oregon. I know she has built her reputation on honesty and fairness, decisive decision-making, and creating impressive strong networks and connections that span business, corporate, government, philanthropy, and community grassroots leadership; that she is among the cadre of Black women leaders who have repeatedly brought us boldly into the 21st century using all of her abilities, her training,

education and focused intensity to carve out spaces previously unknown or unavailable to many she serves.

As a card-carrying AARP member, I was personally surprised—and then insulted—to receive a “new year greeting” from AARP West Region Vice President Kim Adler that casually slipped in, amongst news and updates, one line indicating Ruby was no longer the Oregon State Director of AARP.

The fact that this happened late on a Friday afternoon in January, just days before the annual national celebration of the late Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was not lost on me. Anyone who is familiar with news cycles knows that organizations hide difficult news and controversies in the slow Friday afternoon cycle, often missed over the weekend.

What the one line in the email led me to question, though, is whether the problem might be that under Ruby Haughton-Pitts, the old and familiar Oregon AARP was turning from a moribund, primarily white-serving organization into one with increased presence and participation of seniors of color? Whether the fact that the AARP’s largest operating chapter in Oregon is based in Portland, has a predominately African American membership, and increased more than 100% due to the attention and support it received from Ruby?

Since more seniors of color joined, were active, and contributed to Oregon AARP, I wondered whether white discomfort that the old ways were changing under Ruby Haughton-Pitts was her downfall, though never publicly expressed? Whether Ruby’s questioning of the status quo, her push against historic and current white supremacy had caused her to be subjected to challenges and questioning – of her style, her management, her intentional focus? These are all too familiar risks to Black leaders who serve in white organizations.

What Ruby’s leadership provided was an opportunity to advocate for those who, the data clearly shows, experience the worst ‘golden years’ outcomes — whether negative health indicators, lowest workforce/social security benefits, or fewer opportunities to enjoy leisure activities due to poorer health, all the result of racism they experienced during their working/labor years. It may have been premature of me to assume that Oregon AARP appeared to recognize the rare opportunity to lift the organization firmly into the 21st century.

It’s an open secret that both the Oregon AARP and the national AARP have not been immune to racial preference, white backlash, and denial of equal opportunities for higher leadership. However, the call is loud and clear: that America and its institutions must prepare and be actively engaged in examining and removing the roots of racism, sexism, ageism, and ableism that have influenced practices and decision-making for centuries and, as a result have been complicit in maintaining white supremacy.

I know it is not enough to merely select a Black leader who brings substantial requisite skills to the table. There must be a thorough and intentional organizational commitment to internal change and transformation, to reviewing its practices and decision-making to ensure new Black and other leaders of color are surrounded by strong informed

supporters, those who will call out instances of injustice, those who speak up and educate themselves and their colleagues.

Ms. Jenkins, I and the NAACP Portland 1120-B Branch expect more than what has been the response of your national office and the Oregon AARP. I do expect that in this time of racial reckoning, you will not only authorize a thorough investigation into the 'alleged behaviors or misrepresentations' that would lead to such a determination and departure of an important leader. I do expect that you will recognize and not co-sign silence and secrecy, that only serves those who want to maintain power, never those who deserve representation.

I am aware of the necessity for protecting and not invalidating a person's right to privacy, to ensuring that publicly released information suits the questions asked and doesn't compromise an investigation. I also know that organizations can invoke silence to try to obfuscate facts, or cover up incidents and decisions that may not stand the heat of public disclosure.

I am a Black woman leader with considerable years building and elevating justice causes in Oregon and nationally, including as Vice President of the Austin Area Urban League, national self-help director of the National Black Women's Health Project, executive director of Oregon's leading social justice funder, MRG Foundation, and now as the president of the Portland NAACP. I know the importance of combining HR sensitivities and the necessity for accountability to our communities. I also believe in the expectation to deliver more than formulaic responses to a serious departure and loss, such as Ruby Haughton-Pitts, to our greater Oregon AARP community. Hollow assurances from those who 'interpret, translate and obfuscate' have never served me or mine. At this significant historical moment of reckoning in America, the AARP should be working hard to be in the movement, not giving the appearance it is again lagging behind, offering only glossy promotions that feature your face, but not enough attention to the issues of race among the larger voices of your more diverse constituency.

Sincerely,

Sharon Gary-Smith, President
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