

STAR COMMUNITY ADVISORY COMMITTEE STATEMENT REGARDING JULY MEETING

August 3, 2022 - The Support Team Assisted Response (STAR) program was launched in 2020 as an alternative to police response in Denver. The original vision for a program like STAR came from community groups and individuals who have continued to work to expand and influence the program. Critical to its success is the STAR Community Advisory Committee (SCAC) which was launched one year ago to codify community input and collaboration and ensure fidelity to STAR's core values.

On Wednesday, July 27, 2022 during the monthly SCAC meeting, committee members had intended a full two-hour agenda that included updates and an opportunity for committee members to reflect on patterns of problematic and harmful behavior by STAR program leadership. Instead, after multiple attempts to disrupt committee members from sharing experiences of racism and disrespect, an employee of Denver Department of Public Health and Environment (DDPHE) abruptly and unilaterally shut down the meeting in front of 85 attendees. The DDPHE staff member was also a partial focus of the issues raised, given a racist email sent prior that excluded committee members from input in a process to hire a new STAR Program Specialist.

The move was a shocking, unprofessional, and unacceptable demonstration of an inability to take feedback and be accountable for harm caused. The behavior demonstrated by multiple DDPHE and STAR staff in this incident and others in the past clearly illustrates that safety in this program means comfort for white folks and silence for BIPOC folks, especially as the entire administrative team that oversees STAR is white, while the SCAC is almost entirely comprised of BIPOC folks.

This latest fiasco is representative of a culture of white supremacy and co-optation that has prevailed since the launch of STAR in 2020. Committee members have regularly felt unsafe, unheard, and disrespected since the first SCAC meetings. DDPHE administrative personnel and STAR staff have repeatedly committed to values of equity, diversity, inclusion, community leadership, and collaboration and yet they've consistently proven those sentiments to be little more than words to them. Two of the most significant sources of tension in the STAR program are decisions made without communication to or input from the SCAC and a disregard for our perspectives and solutions when they've been offered.

In 2020, DDPHE made a statement that declared racism as a public health crisis. Yet, we often see that crisis represented in the STAR program through the behavior of DDPHE staff and STAR personnel. The latest example of silencing our committee and abruptly ending a meeting, which happens to be the only avenue for community and public oversight of the STAR program, is not just problematic, it is contrary to the values and vision that undergird the STAR program. As committee members, we are not just accountable to our council districts, our communities, and our organizations; we are also accountable to a larger movement that created the demand for the STAR program and continues to demand programs influenced by its design across the country. At the very least, DDPHE needs to be accountable to authentic and equitable partnership with our committee and the community that has spent social, political, and economic capital to create a program that has so far demonstrated incredible success.

On Tuesday August 2nd, committee members met with DDPHE leadership to address concerns from the July 27th meeting. Although leadership took accountability for the harm that was caused, and some concessions and apologies were offered, the underlying problems remain. Our committee, in transparency and public trust, are issuing this statement as a reflection of what happened and why, but to also condemn the actions that stripped our committee and the public of our voices. As always, we remain hopeful for accountability, repair, and true collaboration. But it's clear we have a long way to go to make STAR the program it was envisioned to be.

STAR Community Advisory Committee Members

Nita Gonzales, Council District 1
Sean Brundrett, Council District 1
Annie Martinez, Council District 2
Thomas Allen, Council District 3
Stephanie Pekala, Council District 4
Rana (Amy) Razzaque, Council District 7

Alexander Landau, Council District 8
Dr. Carrol Watkins Ali, Council District 9
Ana Cornelius, Council District 10
Vinnie Cervantes, Council District 10
Miguel Ceballos-Ruiz, Council District 11