



## ENGAGE Newsletter December 2020

**ENGAGE is a strategic effort connecting the school to community issues, partners and movements for greater equity and social change.**

### The ENGAGE Team



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On November 7, 2020, our country named former Vice President Joseph Biden Jr. as the President-elect of the United State of America and Kamala Harris, the first Black and first woman vice president of the United States.

The 2020 presidential election was a historic election, not just due to the identities of the candidates but also for generating the greatest voter turnout in the history of our nation. Nearly 160 million Americans casted votes in this

presidential election via mail-in ballot, in-person voting and voting on election day. As a social work community, this election was important to us in various ways. This transition of power will continue to uplift diversity, community reinvestment and equity opportunities for underrepresented populations within our nation.

#### **ENGAGE asked two MSW students their thoughts on:**

1. The importance of voting.
2. Their hopes for our future as a nation.

#### **Hannah Lefton**

“To quote John Lewis, ‘[Voting] is the most powerful non-violent tool we have in a democracy.’ Voting is important



because it gives individuals an opportunity to voice our opinions on the people who represent us, the policies that will affect our lives and the values we want to see in our society.”

“In the long term, I'd love to see the abolishment of the electoral college, required voting, and a Supreme Court case or constitutional amendment that rules that taking away someone's right to vote for any reason is cruel and unusual punishment. In the shorter term, and in making progress towards those long term goals, I'd like it if more states used split electoral votes (as opposed to the winner take all system), if we made election day a national holiday, and if all states allowed people who were incarcerated to vote after they are released without any paperwork or parole requirements.”



### Amy Belfer

“Voting is important because it’s a vital way to work towards systemic change. During this election, I canvassed to get out the vote. I ensured people had a plan to vote and shared resources with them, including voter hotlines and important websites for finding polling locations. I knocked on doors in both Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti, working to combat voter suppression.”

“My hope for the United States is that we become a more equitable, anti-racist country. I will work towards the implementation of policies that promote social justice. I hope the electoral college is abolished, because it’s rooted in white supremacy and can minimize the power of the popular vote.”

## SSW Engagement Highlights



### Clinical Assistant Professor Justin Hodge

Justin Hodge is a Clinical Assistant Professor of Social Work at the University of Michigan. He works to promote socially just policies through his engagement in governmental and political organizations. He was appointed by the Washtenaw County Board of Commissioners to serve on the Community Action Board and Board of Health. He also serves as chair of the Washtenaw County Sheriff’s Community Advisory Board for Law Enforcement where he brings a social justice perspective to advising on policing.

Hodge was elected to serve the Washtenaw County community on the executive board of the Washtenaw County Democratic Party where he provides leadership on state level advocacy issues. Nationally, Hodge serves on the board of directors of the Congressional Research Institute for Social Work and Policy, which works to expand the participation of social workers in federal legislative and policy processes.

After Professor Hodge’s election to Washtenaw County Commissioner-elect, ENGAGE asked the following two questions:

#### As a social worker, in what ways will you bring these values into your role as Washtenaw Commissioner?

As a social worker, promoting social justice and equity will guide my decision making and shape my strategic priorities. My focus will be on addressing the extreme health, wealth and safety disparities that exist in our county and that will be reflected in the policies and programs that I support.

**Many individuals are starting to hold space to address how to hold elected officials accountable for upholding political stances that were promised throughout the campaign. As an elected official, what does accountability mean to you and for those who also have been appointed to political offices?**

I campaigned on fighting to make Washtenaw County a place where your race, ethnicity or socioeconomic status don't determine your destiny, a place where everyone has the opportunity to thrive and be successful. I will hold myself accountable to that vision by critically evaluating my own actions to ensure that they align with my values as a social worker, which is something that I think all elected officials should do. Residents can and should hold their elected officials accountable by staying engaged all year round, not just during the election. I hope to see many residents attending county commission meetings to deliver public comments on the issues important to them and to voice their opinions on matters discussed by the commission.



**Ryan "Rei" Fielder**

Rei Fielder is a radical, Black queer organizer, facilitator, healer and artist who hails from the Motor City. Rei has been organizing around issues that impact Black Detroiters since they were 15 years old. Their dedication to movement work is fueled by their desire to see Black liberation come to fruition. For the last three years, Rei has worked extensively with Detroit-based LGBTQ+ youth organization, Ruth Ellis Center. Rei's work focuses on addressing the immediate and long-term needs of runaway and homeless LGBTQ+ youth of color in Detroit.

In addition to their work with the Ruth Ellis Center, Rei is also an organizer with the Detroit chapter of Black Youth Project (BYP) 100. Green Light Black Futures is BYP100 Detroit's current campaign against the hyper-surveillance system Project Green Light and facial recognition technology. Concurrently, Rei also serves as the Detroit representative of BYP100's 501(c)4 Board of Directors. They serve as a 2020 Electoral Justice Fellow for Michigan Student Power Network. Rei also a MSW student studying Community Organizing and is scheduled to graduate December 2020.

As a lifelong community organizer REI has done work around several social justice campaigns and within electoral work, ENGAGE asked them the following questions about their activism and outlook on the presidential election:

**Why did you start engaging in electoral work?**

To be honest, of all my years doing community organizing and community engagement work, I did very little as it related to electoral organizing. I wanted to challenge myself to step out of my comfort zone and build a new skill set. When I think about it, in order to make structural change at the policy level, we need to elect people who will advocate for those changes. With that said, doing electoral work became a no-brainer for me.

**What made this election more impactful than previous elections?**

I believe every election is impactful in their own way. I think the most jarring thing about this election, and the Trump presidency as a whole, was how far back in time he was leading our country. The blatant racism, misogyny and disregard of science, especially during a pandemic, showed people that oppressive forces exist in more than just theory. They are our systems, they are our leaders.

**How does the result of the election(s) affect your journey as a social worker and community organizer?**

I am committed to continuing to help build strong communities that advocate for the things they need. I am committed to pushing our elected officials to listen to the people they serve and act upon the needs of our communities. And, I am committed to centering the voices of the most marginalized members of our communities in my work. So, if anything, the election results are pushing me to do even more to build strong communities!



### Finn Bell

[Finn Bell](#) is a PhD candidate in social work and sociology committed to advancing environmental justice through community-based participatory research. The big question that motivates Finn's work is how communities can build the emotional, spiritual and cultural sustenance needed to effectively confront the climate crisis. Finn is currently completing his dissertation which focuses on how growing food can be used as a collective survival strategy in a changing climate. He finds that even in an area that is relatively protected from natural disasters, Ypsilanti, MI, BIPOC communities face disproportionate barriers to adapting

to a changing climate due, in part, to being dispossessed of land on which to grow food. As a white person committed to disrupting colonial ideologies around whose voice gets heard, Finn's next project is extending his dissertation research by creating an oral history archive of food growers telling their own stories, and housing that archive at the local public library.

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## Volunteer Opportunities

### **Detroit Black Food Security Network**

Allows for up to 15 volunteers at a time. To learn more, contact Malik Yakini: [myakini@dbcfsn.org](mailto:myakini@dbcfsn.org)

### **Oakland Avenue Urban Farms**

Allows volunteers Monday-Saturday from 9 AM-2 PM. There are strict COVID-19 guidelines. For more information: <http://www.oaklandurbanfarm.org/volunteers.html>  
Contact Executive Director Jerry Hebron for more information: [jannhebron@gmail.com](mailto:jannhebron@gmail.com)

### **Sustainable Community Farms**

Allows volunteers every other Saturday. Reach out to get involved: <https://www.facebook.com/SustainableCommunityFarms>  
For more information, contact Executive Director, Michelle Jackson, [michelle.jackson@smallvillefarms.com](mailto:michelle.jackson@smallvillefarms.com)

## Resources Around Food Justice

**Learn about the Detroit Black Food Security Network:** <https://www.dbcfsn.org/>  
For more information please contact Malik Yakini, [malikyakini@gmail.com](mailto:malikyakini@gmail.com).

**Learn about Oakland Avenue Urban Farm:** <http://www.oaklandurbanfarm.org/>  
For more information please contact Jerry Hebron, [jannhebron@gmail.com](mailto:jannhebron@gmail.com).

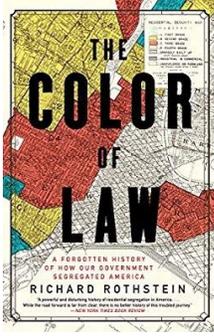
**Learn about Sustainable Community Farms:**  
<https://www.facebook.com/SustainableCommunityFarms>  
For more information please contact Michelle Jackson, [michelle.jackson@smallvillefarms.com](mailto:michelle.jackson@smallvillefarms.com).

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## Suggested Reading of the Month

### **The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America**

One of Publishers Weekly's 10 Best Books of 2017 and longlisted for



the National Book Award This “powerful and disturbing history” exposes how American governments deliberately imposed racial segregation on metropolitan areas nationwide.

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*To find out more about ENGAGE and our virtual discussions, please visit our [website](#).*

*You have any questions, please reach out to  
ENGAGE at [sswcommunityengagement@umich.edu](mailto:sswcommunityengagement@umich.edu)*

*The ENGAGE Team*