FORWARD PROMISE
PROMOTING THE HEALTH AND YOUNG MEN OF COLOR
HEAL • GROW • THRIVE

FORWARD PROMISE:
DISRUPTING DEHUMANIZATION
AND AFFIRMING THE HUMANITY OF BYMOC AND THEIR VILLAGES

INTRODUCTION

Forward Promise is a national program established to improve health outcomes for boys and young men of color (BYMOC). Our support of the relationships and communities (villages) that raise BYMOC is central to our call to disrupt dehumanization. Decades of research has taught us that we must take the responsibility off young people to teach themselves to heal, grow, and thrive. We know that young people can achieve health and wholeness when supported and empowered by thriving villages. We need to pay special attention to community infrastructure if BYMOC are to grow into the people they have always dreamed they could be. This is our highest hope.

BYMOC navigate a world where they are presumed dangerous and guilty. Their innocence, potential, and humanity are routinely questioned simply because of who they are. These daily indignities create traumatizing experiences where BYMOC live, learn, work, and play. The result is racialized trauma which stunts the ability of BYMOC to heal, grow, and thrive in healthy villages.

How can we address persistent societal health inequities, discrimination, toxic stress, and trauma? First, we ask all who support BYMOC to acknowledge and affirm their full humanity. Then, we will uplift evidence-based practices designed to thwart ongoing narratives, policies, and practices that dehumanize BYMOC. We will teach boys and young men to be masters of their own narratives so that they see value in their stories, each other, their culture and communities. This should occur in safe and supportive spaces with culturally responsive programming. To make real progress, we must also strive for equity in education, health, justice, child welfare, and housing systems. BYMOC and their villages experience dehumanization within these systems when there is little regard for their unique challenges.

A CLOSER LOOK AT DEHUMANIZATION

What is dehumanization? It is the persistent invalidation of humanity through perceptions or actual treatment. At the center of dehumanization is the pervasive idea that people of color do not need, and are not worthy of, basic human dignities. Dehumanization threatens the healthy development of BYMOC and their villages and manifests in the narratives, policies, and practices that impact them.

THE VICIOUS CYCLE OF DEHUMANIZATION

Dehumanization is the cause of generations of historical trauma. The cycle begins with **negative narratives** that label people of color—particularly boys and young men—violent, criminal, and animalistic. To combat the perceived threat, **dangerous actions** are taken by the majority culture and systems which further dehumanize BYMOC. As a result, BYMOC and their villages often hold **harmful internal feelings** of unworthiness taught by their oppressors. It is not uncommon for them to engage in various forms of self-harm or to harm others. These **destructive external reactions** are not explained as normal responses to trauma. Stories of their negative reactions become justification for more negative narratives and **the cycle begins again** [Figure 1]. Let's look at each of these aspects in depth.

Figure 1
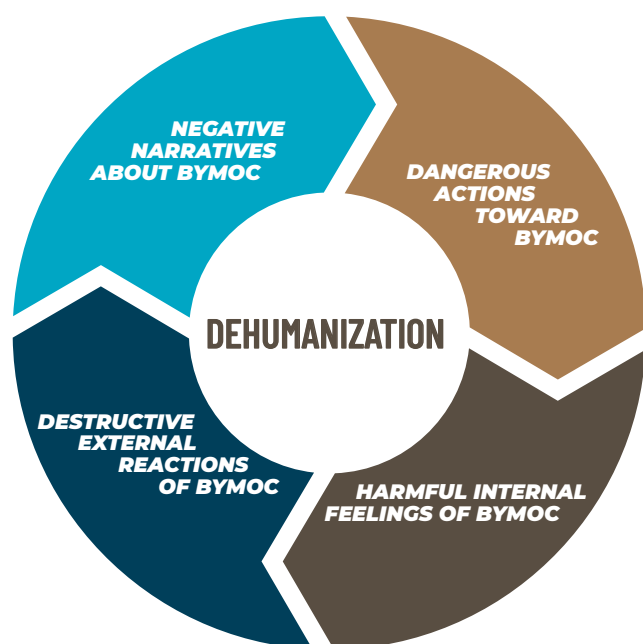
NEGATIVE NARRATIVES ABOUT BYMOC

Implicit and explicit bias begin the cycle of dehumanization. It manifests as negative narratives that place limits on:

- the respectful, humanity-affirming treatment society believes BYMOC and their villages deserve;
- what BYMOC can achieve; and
- the resources BYMOC and their villages can access.

This distorted framing positions their very existence as a problem to be monitored, and negatively influences their health, well-being, potential, and agency. Studies have explored how dehumanization fosters disconnection between social groups (Way and Rogers, 2017). For example, BYMOC are routinely viewed as older and less innocent than their white counterparts (Goff et al., 2014). These biases form the basis for the expectations placed on them. An older child should behave with maturity and greater self-regulation. It is no wonder that boys of color are disproportionately expelled from school settings as early as preschool (Gilliam et al., 2016).

DANGEROUS ACTIONS TOWARD BYMOC

Whether through practice or policy, implicit bias and overt stereotypes can lead others to take dangerous actions toward BYMOC. In fact, negative narratives become the *rationale* for dangerous actions. Anderson & Stevenson (2019) point to discriminatory racial encounters such as school suspension/expulsion, racial profiling, and violence at the hands of authority figures. Following the example of school suspension/expulsion, there are often many dangerous actions at play. The negative narratives defining boys and young men of color influence educators toward more punitive punishments for subjective infractions of school rules. As a result, Black and Native American boys are three times more likely than white boys to be suspended from school and Latino boys are two times more likely (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015). The practice of suspension/expulsion is an obvious dangerous action. Arbitrary zero tolerance policies are an example of systemic dangerous actions that allow the expulsion to occur. School discipline is only one example of dangerous actions toward BYMOC. We see similar examples in the justice system where BYMOC encounter disproportionate minority contact, and in health systems where BYMOC are stigmatized and have less access to quality care.

HARMFUL INTERNAL FEELINGS OF BYMOC

BYMOC bear the weight of several dangerous actions in a single setting. Practitioners often overlook substantive dialogue about how these dangerous actions make boys and young men feel. Our hurting youth are often navigating the cycle of dehumanization alone. Because of the dangerous actions taken against them, BYMOC can internalize feelings of low self-worth or esteem. Extending the example of suspensions and expulsions, imagine their thoughts as they experience harsh school discipline:

> "School isn't for me."
> "My teachers don't like paying attention to me."
> "I don't know how to act."
> "I'm bad. I'm always in trouble."
> "I'm not smart. I always got bad grades, anyway."
> "Why try?"

It is crucial that we disrupt the harmful internalized feelings with counter-narratives that affirm their value.

DESTRUCTIVE EXTERNAL REACTIONS OF BYMOC

Unfortunately, the harmful internal feelings BYMOC harbor can be expressed in destructive ways. They are more likely to engage in behaviors that are damaging to themselves, their peers, and their communities. Even poor behavior in school can be an expression of internalized harmful feelings stemming from other aspects of their lives.

Both psychology and youth development research show that feelings of helplessness or hopelessness lead to destructive external reactions regardless of race. Based on existing research, Stoddard (2011) posits that hope is a "psychological strength that moderates the relationship between stressful life events and risk behaviors." He states that hopeless adolescents "appear less likely to avoid circumstances that lead to violence." The cycle begins again when members of society are unwilling or unable to acknowledge the impacts of stress, trauma, and dehumanization on BYMOC. Instead, they use the stereotypes they have constructed to explain the destructive external or internal reactions of some BYMOC.

LIFESPAN TRAUMA AND TOXIC STRESS FROM COPING WITH DEHUMANIZATION

Dehumanization is a traumatizing experience. Since dehumanization is ongoing, it is an ongoing trauma in the lives of

BYMOC with both historical and contemporary implications. This racialized trauma overlaps with toxic stress stemming from experiences such as extreme poverty, housing instability, or substance abuse in the home. The most resilient among us thrive *despite* the stress and trauma—but that should not be our goal. Instead, we aspire to eliminate racialized trauma and toxic stress by transforming society to truly welcome people of color. In the sub-sections that follow, we will dig a bit deeper into racialized trauma and toxic stress.

WHAT IS RACIALIZED TRAUMA?

Trauma occurs when people encounter stressors or events that exceed their capacity or resources for coping. Racialized trauma is the cumulative effect of racism on an individual's mental and physical health. The health consequences of dealing with sustained trauma are meaningful. Consider findings from the CDC (2014) that reveal trauma as a risk factor for negative health outcomes like substance use and abuse and depression. Other studies on Black youth and racism link higher levels of discrimination during the teen years to higher blood pressure, body mass index, and stress-related hormones at age 20 (Brody et al., 2014).

Moreover, trauma often is not an isolated event. Rich et al. (2018) describe the chronic nature of BYMOC's experiences with racism, poverty, and incarceration as a "sustained traumatic stress reaction." This chronic, racialized trauma is intergenerational. We are raising young people whose parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents have all experienced similar traumas. Is there any wonder why BYMOC and their villages are failing to thrive?

TOXIC STRESS

Research by the National Scientific Council on the Developing child (2007) confirmed that formative experiences during early childhood and adolescence have lasting impacts on health and well-being. Healthy development during these stages are building blocks for achievement in school, work, and life. Conversely, exposure to toxic stress interrupts normal brain development and has long-term consequences for learning, behavior, physical health, and mental health.

Toxic stress is "stress that is so emotionally costly that it can affect brain development and other aspects of a child's health" (Walkley & Cox, 2013). It arises when there is ongoing exposure to adverse conditions such as those assessed through adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). These stressors, such as physical or emotional abuse in the home, relate to several negative health and well-being outcomes. Understanding how ACEs impact health and development is helpful to those who serve BYMOC; but its usefulness is somewhat limited. It does not account for specific experiences like classism and racism which are relevant to economically disadvantaged or racially diverse communities. The Philadelphia Expanded ACE Study attempted to address this limitation by assessing community-level stressors such as community violence (Institute for Safe Families, 2013).

Similarly, the Prevention Institute (2017) offered Adverse Community Experiences as a concept that explored chronic community-level stressors. Addressing Adverse Community Experiences alongside Adverse Childhood Experiences adds another dimension to our understanding of the types of stress and trauma that BYMOC face throughout their growth and development.

Dehumanization relies on perpetuating historical and current traumas and stressors. To disrupt dehumanization, we need to acknowledge these factors as blockades to thriving. It is important to view the actions (or inactions) of BYMOC and their villages as direct results of their ability to cope with the racialized trauma and toxic stressors thrust upon them. In so doing, we resist the urge to blame BYMOC and their villages for their destructive reactions while helping them to build capacity to heal, grow, and thrive.

DEHUMANIZATION MANIFESTS IN FIVE DIMENSIONS

Forward Promise identified five dimensions where dehumanization manifests: historical, cultural/spiritual, social, emotional, and physical dimensions [Figure 2].

Figure 2

SOCIAL DEHUMANIZATION

CULTURAL/SPIRITUAL DEHUMANIZATION

EMOTIONAL DEHUMANIZATION

HISTORICAL DEHUMANIZATION

PHYSICAL DEHUMANIZATION

RACIALIZED **TRAUMA**

HISTORICAL DEHUMANIZATION

Historical dehumanization is evidenced in thoughts, feelings, and actions by the dominant culture throughout United States history. The impacts of racism and colonization expressed through historical dehumanization have led to the mass destruction, punishment, or control of land and people. Even the earliest chapters of American history are filled with examples of this type of oppression. While Africans were enslaved in America, indigenous people were forced from their native land via the Trail of Tears. Dangerous actions were also seen in the 1940s with the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II and continue today with BYMOC as the recipients of extreme and, sometimes, extra-legal punishment. As a result, many BYMOC experience harmful internal feelings like shame and lack of pride in their community or culture. Whether of African, Hispanic, or Native/Indigenous descent, BYMOC are not taught about their proud history prior to the dangerous actions inflicted upon their ancestral people and communities.

NEGATIVE NARRATIVES ABOUT BYMOC	*"Your people were dangerous and needed to be tamed."*
DANGEROUS ACTIONS TOWARD BYMOC	*"Taming could only happen through extreme punishment or destruction."*
HARMFUL INTERNAL FEELINGS OF BYMOC	*"My history is shameful. I'm afraid of my own people."*
DESTRUCTIVE EXTERNAL REACTIONS OF BYMOC	*"As I've been taught, I tear down what others build."*

CULTURAL/SPIRITUAL DEHUMANIZATION

Cultural/spiritual dehumanization is when the practices of communities of color are demonized, disregarded, devalued, or marginalized. We see cultural/spiritual dehumanization when a community's traditional rites and practices are deemed indecent or animalistic because they vary from European religious traditions. It is also evident by the whitewashing of cultural hallmarks such as music, hairstyles, clothing, and speech patterns. Notably, these cultural and spiritual practices are prime targets for cultural appropriation when it is profitable for the majority culture.

NEGATIVE NARRATIVES ABOUT BYMOC
"Your culture and spiritual practices are primitive and inferior."

DANGEROUS ACTIONS TOWARD BYMOC
"We are superior to you. We can erase or diminish the value of your culture and spiritual practices."

HARMFUL INTERNAL FEELINGS OF BYMOC
"My culture is invisible, irrelevant and bad. I am ashamed of my cultural identity."

DESTRUCTIVE EXTERNAL REACTIONS OF BYMOC
"I assimilate at all costs. I hide my true beliefs or dissociate from them completely."

NEGATIVE NARRATIVES ABOUT BYMOC
"Your community is broken because it is inferior. It will never thrive."

DANGEROUS ACTIONS TOWARD BYMOC
"It is acceptable to withhold and underfund development in your community."

HARMFUL INTERNAL FEELINGS OF BYMOC
"My community lacks value and strength. We are helpless and beyond hope."

DESTRUCTIVE EXTERNAL REACTIONS OF BYMOC
"I see no point in caring for my community or environment. I will never be good enough."

SOCIAL DEHUMANIZATION

Social dehumanization is displayed through thoughts, feelings, and actions that divert or fail to invest resources in communities of color. We see social dehumanization in redlining practices in housing and political gerrymandering which leads to inter-generational, concentrated disadvantage for communities of color. Five years later, Flint, Michigan still does not have clean water. Social dehumanization also manifests in the dispro-portionate minority contact with the juvenile justice system for BYMOC. More resources are spent incarcerating youth of color than invested in evidence-based programs that enable them to thrive (Justice Policy Institute, 2014).

EMOTIONAL DEHUMANIZATION

Emotional dehumanization is shown in thoughts, feelings, and actions that limit expressions of empathy toward communities of color. People of color live with their emotions being trampled on and their liberties disregarded. Emotional dehumanization is particularly scary for people of color because it often triggers police involvement. It is unfortunate that examples of emotional dehumanization are found in every space people of color inhabit. Often without provoca-tion or acknowledgement of its harmful impacts.

- Is there emotional safety in a park bonding with family at a cookout? No. Someone will harass you to leave until they ultimately call the police to make you leave.
- Is there emotional safety in a classroom? No. If a six-year old without the words to communicate their feelings has a tantrum, they no longer deserve an education. They will be arrested and removed from school.
- Is there emotional safety on a college campus? No. Although you saved and were excited to investigate the college experience, your skin tone and/or your headdress

is menacing. You're unwelcome here. Campus security will escort you out like a criminal.

- Is there emotional safety while seeking asylum in the United States with your family? No. Immigration policy dictates that parents and children be forcibly separated. You will each be jailed in squalor until deported (or adopted). It is likely you will never see each other again.

There is no emotional safety *anywhere*.

As you can see, emotional dehumanization inflicts emotional harm while restricting the rights of BYMOC and their villages in civic, educational, and legal arenas. Then communities are demonized for their outcry in the face of negative experiences.

NEGATIVE NARRATIVES ABOUT BYMOC	*"You generate, and are responsible for, your own pain and loss."*
DANGEROUS ACTIONS TOWARD BYMOC	*"It is acceptable to suspend empathy and withhold your civil rights."*
HARMFUL INTERNAL FEELINGS OF BYMOC	*"We are an inferior people. Suffering emotional abuse, pain, and loss is a normal part of my culture."*
DESTRUCTIVE EXTERNAL REACTIONS OF BYMOC	*"I ease my emotional burdens with drugs or alcohol."*

NEGATIVE NARRATIVES ABOUT BYMOC	*"Your lives and bodies are threats. You are expendable."*
DANGEROUS ACTIONS TOWARD BYMOC	*"We can inflict psychological and physical violence without consequence. It is both deserved and necessary for our safety."*
HARMFUL INTERNAL FEELINGS OF BYMOC	*"My brothers' and sisters' bodies are threats."*
DESTRUCTIVE EXTERNAL REACTIONS OF BYMOC	*"My brothers and sisters can be sacrificed for any real or imagined threat or infraction."*

PHYSICAL DEHUMANIZATION

Physical dehumanization plays out in thoughts, feelings, and actions that place the physical bodies of members of communities of color at risk. BYMOC are portrayed as hypermasculine, beast-like, and possessing super-human strength. Even children are perceived as older and less innocent than their white counterparts. As a result, expectations for their behavior, strength, and carriage are skewed (Goff et al., 2014).

These false negative narratives become the justification for disproportionate minority contact and extreme punishment—including death at the hands of law enforcement professionals and civilians alike. It is open season on BYMOC and always has been. Our boys and young men of color live in a world where they can be murdered for walking home from the store with Skittles and iced tea. They can be gunned down for playing music too loud.

The argument continues to be made that BYMOC also kill each other. They are blamed for street violence without regard for the fact that they learned to treat each other's bodies as threats from the dominant culture.

DEHUMANIZATION IMPACTS HEALTH

Society does not pay enough attention to the connection between racialized stress and trauma even though the research bears it out. To disrupt dehumanization, it is our duty to tell the complete story of its effects in the bodies of boys and young men of color. Teens of color reporting higher levels of discrimination face many health challenges such as:

- higher blood pressure
- higher body mass index
- higher levels of stress-related hormones
- poorer sleep
- more symptoms of depression
- lower self-esteem

The impact of dehumanization has been at play in their bodies for many years and places them at greater risk for chronic disease as they age (Brody, 2014).

Several studies document the clear connection between toxic stress/ trauma and significant physical and mental health challenges. The APA Working Group on Health Disparities in Boys and Men (2018) found disproportionately high instances of trauma, depression, violence, and substance use. According to the CDC (2014), the experience of trauma is a significant risk factor for:

- sexually transmitted diseases
- depression
- alcohol abuse
- intravenous drug use
- intimate partner violence
- attempted suicide

There are even studies that show us that racialized trauma increases the likelihood that BYMOC develop Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other mental health conditions. (Walters et al., 2011; Yehuda et al., 1998).

BYMOC are then blamed when they exhibit these behaviors while we discount the toxic messages that caused these reactions. It is important to note that both BYMOC *and their villages* are managing the same effects of dehumanization. Those who are counted on to model healthy behaviors and stress management skills are often ill-equipped to do so due to their own heavy load of toxic stress and trauma. Therefore, Forward Promise advocates for interventions that strengthen the villages that raise and empower BYMOC to heal, grow, and

thrive. We will dig deeper into this concept in the "Signature Frameworks" section.

HOPE AND HOPELESSNESS

Ask a young child what they want to be when they grow up and they will likely give you a list. Their dreams are boundless and they derive genuine excitement from planning their future. The believe they *have* a future of their own choosing. That is one way hope manifests. Hope is "anticipation of a future which is good, based on mutuality, a sense of personal competence, coping ability, psychological well-being, purpose and meaning in life, and a sense of the possible" (Miller & Powers, 1988). Hope is closely aligned to thriving. It fuels a strong sense of self and increases internal protective factors that guard the dream.

As BYMOC get older, many lose the sense of the possible. The dehumanization they and their villages face make hoping frivolous when survival becomes the goal. Without a concrete roadmap to success, BYMOC often lack the internal feelings of worth that enable them to create their own. If they have already been seeded with hopelessness, their dreams quickly disappear. Hopelessness is associated with negative outcomes including violence, depression, school problems, substance abuse, risky sexual behaviors, and accidental injury (Stoddard, 2011). In the section that follows, we will discuss strategies to help BYMOC and their villages disrupt dehumanization and reclaim hope.

DISRUPTING DEHUMANIZATION

As you have seen, the cycle of dehumanization, toxic stress, and racialized trauma limit the ability of BYMOC to thrive. Their internalized negative feelings and destructive actions then become rationale for the negative narratives that fuel more dehumanization. Can we do anything to stop this?

Paulo Freire wrote, "dehumanization, although a concrete historical fact, is not a given destiny but the result of an unjust order that engenders violence in the oppressors, which in turn dehumanizes the oppressed." Because dehumanization is not a "given destiny," we can help boys and young men of color to shift the narrative and disrupt the cycles of emotional and physical violence that oppress them. Forward Promise incorporates these viewpoints into a multi-faceted strategy to disrupt dehumanization and affirm the humanity of BYMOC.

SIGNATURE FRAMEWORKS: "VILLAGE-RAISING" AND "HEAL, GROW, THRIVE"

We spend a lot of time discussing the issues that young people face but not the communities they live in. The opportunities BYMOC have to be healthy and thriving directly relate to the health of the community. Two frameworks, "Village-raising" and "Heal, Grow, Thrive," provide the basis for all strategies Forward Promise puts forth to disrupt dehumanization. We need to take the responsibility off young people to heal themselves and put it on the community infrastructure. Where is the village lacking in healing, growth, and thriving that limits the BYMOC they raise?

VILLAGE-RAISING

If it takes a village to raise a child, what does it take to raise a healthy village? This question is central to our work. *Healthy villages* are those spaces where culture is the driving force for supporting the growth and well-being of the community. Community members are creative and adaptive, and youth—including BYMOC—achieve competency across physical, social, and academic domains as they develop. Forward Promise empowers and supports healthy villages through efforts we call *village-raising*.

"Village-raising involves the creation of climates and contexts that fertilize diverse and healthy relationships that expect, observe, and repeat acts of human affection, protection, correction and connection" (Stevenson 2017). Through village-raising, we seek both individual and structural solutions that address the issues that undermine healing, growing, and thriving by:

- encouraging BYMOC to tell their own stories;
- using knowledge of human development to understand the health of BYMOC and their communities;
- ensuring models, program, and practices are culturally responsive;
- increasing awareness about dehumanization; and
- acknowledging how historical and current narratives about BYMOC affect their health.

HEAL, GROW, THRIVE

Simmons (2017) noted that the systems charged with protecting the lives, dignity, and wellness of BYMOC have failed to help them in healthy, culturally relevant ways. The "Heal, Grow, Thrive" framework is grounded in the understanding that rooted communities serve a protective function for BYMOC and their villages from the negative effects of trauma over time. BYMOC **heal** when they recover from the stress and trauma of dehumanization. Healing enables them to **grow** despite these indignities at every level of society where they live, learn, work, and play. Then BYMOC **thrive** by exhibiting resilience, resistance, and wellness.

Healing, growing, and thriving for BYMOC is optimal when it occurs in community.

NEW NARRATIVES: STORYTELLING AS HEALING

What stories do we tell about young people? What words do we speak to describe them? Are they affirming or do they continue negative narratives? It is our responsibility to show up for our young people to *shape new narratives* about them that highlight their strengths while acknowledging their vulnerabilities. As we go about our work, we can humanize broken systems by thinking about BYMOC as individuals with stories.

Moreover, Ginwright (2018) makes a convincing argument that the language we use to describe our work should reflect healing-centered engagement (HCE) rather than trauma-informed strategies. This will shift the perspective from a deficit-based approach to an asset-driven approach. According to Ginwright, asset-driven, healing centered engagement with youth will address political and social concerns, and also support the healing of adult providers of care (Ginwright, 2018; Rich et al., 2009).

We also need to critically examine what we empower BYMOC to say about themselves. One of the first stages to healing racial trauma is encouraging youth to engage in racial storytelling. Sharing their personal stories will help them to excise negative emotions and counteract the devaluation they experience (Hardy, 2013). In group settings, storytelling from personal experience has a positive impact on all participants. BYMOC deserve the opportunity to hear from people who look like them and are overcoming similar challenges. According to East et al. (2010), amplifying the voices of BYMOC and their villages promotes personal resilience and fosters community connection. Programs that incorporate storytelling are compelling and effective ways to promote healing for communities of color (Comas-Díaz, 2016).

Besides developing personal coping mechanisms to combat dehumanization, storytelling has potential to influence practice and policy at the broader community and society level. A community-based participatory research approach will allow data to inform and reframe policy discussions about BYMOC. The narratives shift from those that rely on stereotypes about BYMOC to those that more accurately reflect their strengths, talents, and needs.

SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE SPACES THROUGH CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PROGRAMMING

Practitioners can partner with communities to create safe and supportive spaces for BYMOC. These spaces are culturally responsive in that they acknowledge, respect, and affirm the cultural identities and experiences of the individuals they serve. They also name and address the unique racial risks and protections of BYMOC and their villages. Culturally responsive programs offer four key elements (Stevenson, 2014):

- Connection – healthy relationships are modeled, built, and maintained.
- Protection – BYMOC are physically and emotionally safe to express their ideas and strive for their true potential.
- Affection – harmful internal messages are upended with affirming, healthy affection.
- Redirection – guidance is offered to those who get off track.

Programs that focus on rites of passage and manhood development are especially relevant for BYMOC (APA Working Group on Health Disparities in Boys and Men, 2018). These programs encourage BYMOC to learn about their true cultural history and strengthen intergenerational connections within the community. They are also taught to recognize the protective factors that exist within their communities and understand how historical and current marginalization impacts them (Gonzales et al., 2016).

As programs that serve BYMOC are developed, data-driven interventions should rise to the top. It is important that we apply youth development theory to ensure that we are asking BYMOC to engage at appropriate levels. And, we must also develop staff competency to ensure that these interventions are carried out without inflicting unintentional harm on the children and communities they wish to support. For example, training to appropriately engage with LGBTQIA youth will prepare staff to go beyond traditional definitions of masculinity and embrace the diverse ways in which BYMOC see themselves and fully live out their humanity.

Culturally responsive programs of all sorts are working to create safe and supportive spaces for BYMOC but there are not enough of them. As we develop these programs, we need to also pay close attention to the barriers BYMOC may face to participating such as transportation, work, and family responsibilities.

SYSTEMS REFORM

Safe spaces are but part of the equation. While we are asking where BYMOC can receive connection, protection, affection, and redirection, we have to interrogate the systems that deny those important elements. It will take policy reform to make sustainable changes to the communities in which BYMOC live, learn, work, and play. The least amount of work has been done here. Child welfare, education, housing, and juvenile justice systems need an overhaul if they are to be stripped of dehumanization. Making space for the voices of BYMOC and their communities to be heard during program and policy development is critical. Community-based organizations and systems can partner in the following ways:

- Share community knowledge about culturally responsive programming and the impact it can have on BYMOC's health and their communities.
- Listen to community feedback on how systems currently function as a dehumanizing force against BYMOC.
- Interrogate assumptions about BYMOC by collecting and analyzing data using a community-based participatory approach.
- Assess the effectiveness of systems by evaluating the extent to which BYMOC are served in accordance with desired outcomes.
- Make significant, long-term investments of financial and human capital to change practices and policies that adversely impact BYMOC.
- Build on new knowledge to enhance services, test innovative approaches, and refine or develop new policies and practices.

OUR HIGHEST HOPE FOR BOYS AND YOUNG MEN OF COLOR

BYMOC thriving—that is our highest hope. BYMOC and their villages have historically been excluded from that dream. They have navigated toxic stress, racialized trauma, and dehumanization in the spaces that are supposed to nurture and protect them—even their own homes. It is past time that this changes.

BYMOC and their villages are not to blame for their traumas and their responses to them. The United States, and the people in it, have treated them as sub-human and undeserving of peace since its establishment. We believe that by working with BYMOC and their villages we can successfully:

- create safe and supportive spaces in which they can heal, grow, and thrive;
- strengthen, stimulate, and create healthy villages through a combination of strengths and needs based initiatives (village-raising);
- partner with systems to bring about sustainable societal change; and
- shape new narratives about BYMOC that reflect their full humanity.

Following the evidence, Forward Promise has enacted a grantmaking approach, field building strategy, and research agenda designed to show BYMOC that they matter. We affirm their full humanity and vow to rally against narratives, policies, and practices that dehumanize them. We call upon all allies and practitioners to uplift the voices of BYMOC so that they are thoughtfully considered in every arena. This is how we will create a culture of health for BYMOC and their villages. What does it take to raise a healthy village? *It takes all of us.*

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