

August 25, 2021

Report of Chilmark Town Affairs Council

To Chilmark Select Board

On the Events of July 29, 2021

## I. INTRODUCTION

This report reflects the Chilmark Town Affairs Council's current understanding of events that took place at the Community Center on July 29, 2021. More specifically, there was a disturbing incident involving three young boys, two white and one Black, that has raised questions of whether racism (overt, implicit and/or systemic) was involved. The scope of this report is limited primarily to the incident that took place on July 29, although it includes certain salient events leading up to that incident and some important background information about the Community Center. Because the incident that led to the creation of this report involved minor children who were, in turn, being supervised in the first instance by staff members who were also minors, the report does not identify the people involved in the incident by name, and other steps have been taken in an effort to shield their identities and protect their privacy.

We feel that it is important to state emphatically that the incident itself – a strap around the neck of a Black child – was incredibly disturbing to the Town Affairs Council and to the entire Center community in view of the terrible history and horrifying images that it evoked. That this episode involved a Black child who was one of the few children of color in the program makes the incident that much more troubling to all of us. We are all parents, mothers and fathers, and, mindful of our aspiration for the Center to be a place where all children can feel welcome and safe, we have approached our review of this incident with heavy hearts and hope for a resolution that will bring healing and positive change to the community and beyond. We are well aware that the children participating in the Community Center's summer programs, as well as the staff, and the Town Affairs Council itself, are not particularly diverse, certainly not as diverse as the population of the Vineyard overall. That may be a reflection of the population of the Town of Chilmark itself, from which the campers and the staff are largely drawn, but that lack of diversity, like other manifestations of systemic racism, is nevertheless a problem that we must address.

The Community Center does not and will not tolerate any form of hate, bullying, or racism. This policy is fundamental to our mission, values, and practices. This core value will drive our work and approach as we navigate this challenging situation. We are committed to defining a clear path forward and a collaborative action plan that fully integrates our commitment to ensuring that the Center lives up to this mission. Gaining a clearer understanding of how to mitigate the effects of systemic racism and implicit bias will be a key element in building partnerships with important stakeholders and will inform the development and implementation of this collaborative plan of action. We welcome input from the diverse constituencies that have a stake in the outcome and will create accessible avenues for ongoing communication with interested parties.

## II. BACKGROUND

To place the incident in context, we are including some background regarding the Community Center, its morning program for the summer of 2021, and its staffing.

### A. History of the Community Center

The Chilmark Town Affairs Council, Inc., a 501(c)(3) corporation, has run summer programming for adults and children for more than 60 years. The Chilmark Community Center first began as a handful of informal traditions which took place in private places around Chilmark. Through the efforts of the Town Affairs Council, an association of summer and year-round residents, and a gift of land, a building was erected to house all those activities and more. The Chilmark Community Center opened its doors July 1957 with volunteers hosting organized activities in July and August for adults and children. The Community Center's mission is to provide recreational, athletic, cultural, and creative activities for children and adults, including year-round residents and summer visitors from near and far.

### B. The Community Center and its Program Structure for 2021

The boys involved in the incident were all participants in the Community Center's morning program, which runs from 9:00 to noon, Monday through Friday. The program ran from Monday, June 28, through Friday, August 13. The program and, indeed, the Center itself, is not selective. The Center welcomes all who wish to participate – it is not restricted to Chilmark residents. It provides substantial discounts to children attending island schools, as well as scholarships

for those otherwise unable to afford to attend. Children can sign up for the entire seven-week program, or for as little as a week at a time.

Working in conjunction with the Chilmark Board of Health, the Center made a number of changes this year as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. To reduce the risk of widespread exposure if someone were to be infected, the program was structured to be entirely outdoors. In addition, children in the morning program were not allowed to move freely through the campus as in years past. Rather, they were assigned to “family groups” consisting of roughly a dozen children of similar ages with at least two designated counselors who guide them through the day’s activities. Each family group had a designated tent (the tents were also new this year) that acted as the group’s home base. Children started and ended their days at their tents, playing games within their groups. They also returned to the tents for snack time, for special activities, or if it rained. Otherwise, they spent the morning rotating through organized activities including athletics, drama, tennis, STEAM, and arts and crafts (among other things). Each of those activities was led by one or more additional counselors.

#### C. The Community Center’s Discipline Policy

The Community Center has a policy regarding camper discipline that provides as follows:

Staff [are] encouraged to redirect behavior before it becomes problematic. If that fails, the appropriate Age Program Director for the child/children in question will address the problem by asking all parties to explain their understanding of what happened, guide them towards recognizing where the situation went wrong, and then asking them how to correct and proceed. If the Age Group Director needs assistance, or the discipline issue is serious, the Executive Director will participate in the questions, mediation, and resolution process.

The Center reserves the right to cancel the membership of any person who does not abide by Center rules.

#### D. This Summer’s Staff

The Community Center’s senior staff included a number of counselors at the Director level who work as teachers during the academic year. The senior staff members who interacted directly with the three campers involved in the incident included two teachers with over 35 years of combined elementary and/or preschool experience, an elementary school teacher whose work includes

responsibilities as an inclusion specialist, and a teaching assistant in special education whose previous experience includes nine years of work as a psychotherapist with a practice devoted to emotional stability in children. There is also an EMT on the staff, as well as an EMT in training (who has completed the coursework but has not taken the exam). The two counselors who were directly responsible for Family Group 1 were high school students who each had prior experience working as camp counselors.[\[1\]](#)

### III. GROUP DYNAMICS PRIOR TO THE INCIDENT

During the 14 days in July that the three campers involved in the incident overlapped in Family Group 1, they did not always play well together. The dynamics among the three boys (identified in this report as Camper A (the Black child), Camper Y and Camper Z), as well as a fourth boy, Camper X, who was not involved in the incident but who often played with the other three campers. According to multiple staff members, Camper Z was sometimes unkind to others in his family group, and he occasionally acted out. For example, in the process of our investigation an older camper told us that earlier during the summer program he had seen Camper Z hit another child (who was white) and call the child a “little rat.”

The day before the incident involving the tent strap, Camper A and Camper Z had an altercation. One of the Directors immediately addressed the situation by separating the four boys (Campers A, X, Y and Z) from the rest of the group. She told them that being unkind to each other was unacceptable and asked them how they thought they could make things work better for the group. Camper A suggested that maybe the boys should not play together, and the other children agreed. She told them that they did not have to play with each other, but that they always did have to be kind to each other. They left it that they would stop playing together.

Later that day, after the morning program was over, another Director met with the two counselors immediately responsible for Family Group 1 to discuss the situation involving Camper Z and the other boys. The two counselors had on a number of occasions asked for help in dealing with Camper Z and had even asked that he be removed from Family Group 1. In response to their requests, one of the Directors had devoted extra time and attention to Family Group 1 and had given the counselors suggestions and strategies for dealing with Camper Z. Two other Directors also provided support and gave advice. During the meeting with the two counselors for Family Group 1, one Director told the counselors that they needed to keep a closer eye on Camper Z and gave them a plan that she asked

them to implement the next day. In addition, she asked them to check in with Camper Z regularly to make sure he was engaged in whatever he was doing.

It is also noteworthy that, according to several sources, including staff members and campers, the group of boys had from time to time played games with the straps. Some have described them as imaginary games (“monsters” and/or “cops and robbers”) in which they would try to capture the monster or the robber and tie him up. According to Camper X, the game involved tying people up. The counselors for Family Group 1 and other staff members had instructed the campers not to play games involving tying each other up with the straps.

#### IV. THE INCIDENT

The description below is based on information obtained directly from the three campers involved in the incident. They were asked on July 29 to describe what had happened by several Community Center staff members. In addition, we were able to speak directly with Camper X, another boy in Family Group 1 who, as noted above, often played with the other three boys and who, it turns out, was a witness to the incident. His recollections corroborated many of the details obtained during the initial conversations with Campers A, Y and Z. No staff members witnessed the incident.

The incident took place at about 10:30 in the morning on Thursday, July 29, after snack. The two counselors responsible for Family Group 1 were seated at a table under their tent. Our understanding is that Camper A, the Black child, was by himself playing with a tent strap at one of the posts of the adjacent tent. Campers X, Y and Z were walking and talking together, but Camper X stopped at one of the tables and the other two continued on without him. Camper Y and Camper Z approached Camper A and joined him in playing with the strap. At some point, Camper Y took the strap and used it to tie up Camper A, wrapping it around his neck and around the tent pole. Camper A resisted, saying “no” and/or “stop,” but Camper Y continued. Camper Y was holding one end of the strap, Camper Z was standing there watching, but Camper A was able to break free. The entire incident happened quickly.

After Camper A freed himself from the tent strap, he told one of the two counselors for his family group what had happened. She immediately brought him to the Center’s office area.<sup>[2]</sup> Camper A described the incident to two of the senior staff members. The Center’s Acting Director<sup>[3]</sup> also asked Camper A to tell her what had happened and then, after consulting with one of the senior officers of the Town Affairs Council, contacted the families of the three campers

to ask them to come to the Center to pick up their children. After about ten minutes, Camper A told the Acting Director that he wanted to go play soccer, so he was allowed to leave the office area. He played with one of the counselors for Family Group 1 until his grandmother arrived to pick him up. In the meantime, another director took Campers Y and Z away from their family group and spoke with them about what had happened. She then made the decision to separate them so that members of the senior staff could speak with them individually about what had happened. Campers Y and Z remained separated from their family group, each seated with one of the senior staff, until their parents arrived to pick them up. At that time, the Acting Director informed the families that Campers Y and Z would not be allowed to return to the Center this summer.

No one we spoke with heard these children or any children at the Community Center use any racial slurs or use racially charged language before, during or after the incident. No incidents of such behavior were reported to the Community Center during the course of the summer program. After this report was completed, a third party informed the Town Affairs Council that a different child told the third party that the child had witnessed the incident and, according to the third party, the child characterized what he or she saw as “racist.” We asked to speak with the unidentified child’s parents to ask them if they would permit us to speak with that child in a safe and appropriate setting, but the third party declined to provide access to the child or the parents. We are therefore unable to confirm or provide details of what the child heard or observed.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

The primary question that this report seeks to consider is whether race played a role in the incident that occurred at the Center on July 29. We have done our best to present the facts as to what happened the day of the incident as we have come to understand them. Based on the interviews we have conducted and information we have collected, we have not found any evidence of overt racial motivation for the behavior of the eight and nine-year-old boys that day. However, the act itself and the races of the three boys involved are significant. A strap around the neck of a Black child, one of the few children of color in the program, must raise the inevitable question of whether racism was involved in the incident. We cannot know what was in the minds of the children involved in this incident, and at this time it is not possible to determine conclusively whether underlying societal forces, including systemic racism and/or implicit bias, had an influence on this incident. In designing next steps, the Town Affairs Council is deeply committed to advancing diversity and

inclusion in our program and to taking appropriate action to implement those goals and to prevent an incident like this one from happening again.

## VI. NEXT STEPS

The Town Affairs Council and the Community Center are committed to running an inclusive program in which all members of our community can safely thrive. Our priority is to create an environment that welcomes children of diverse backgrounds, races, cultures, ethnicities, religious beliefs, and sexual orientation, and in which all children feel safe and supported while participating in our programs.

In response to this incident, the Town Affairs Council has appointed a subcommittee to examine all levels of the Community Center's operations, with a focus on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). The subcommittee will seek advice from people of color who are experts in building diverse and inclusive organizations, as well as from other stakeholders in Chilmark and on the island.

Among our priorities are identifying opportunities to enhance diversity among our campers, counselors and the Town Affairs Council itself. We also must work to ensure that the Town Affairs Council's values, as outlined above, are understood, followed and reinforced by counselors, campers and their parents. The subcommittee will review the Center's current policies, practices and procedures for addressing and remedying inappropriate behavior and evaluate whether more detailed policies and procedures are needed. Although the Center is now closed until next July, the Town Affairs Council recognizes that this matter requires immediate attention to ensure that the subcommittee's DEI recommendations can be reviewed by the Town Affairs Council and implemented before planning for next summer's program begins. We are committed to using this incident as a catalyst for positive change.

[1] To protect the privacy of the campers, their families and the Community Center's minor staff, this report does not reveal the name of the family group in the 8 to 10-year-old program to which the campers were assigned. Rather, it is referred to as "Family Group 1."

[2] Due to the pandemic, the Center operated with an outdoor office set up under a covered area outside the art shack this summer.

[3] The Center's Executive Director was taking a voluntary leave of absence at the time of the incident.