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COLUMN: We Cannot Delay Taking Action to Fight Systemic Racism

Americans are faced with a crisis of conscience. While this crisis has taken on renewed sense of urgency in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, it has been with us all along. From slavery, to Jim Crow, to systemic racism, true equality of opportunity has been denied to people of color since long before the signing of the Declaration of Independence. More than a century and a half after the Civil War, and more than 50 years after the Civil Rights Movement, racism and discrimination persist in America.

We cannot delay for another time—or another legislative session—engaging in open, constructive dialogue and taking action. And as we work to make progress, voices from communities that too often have been unrepresented or ignored by those in power must be included. We must listen, and we must act.

We also must stand vigilant against those who attempt to exploit the uncertainty of the moment to sow division, subvert the rule of law, and promote violence—including a president who last week oversaw the unconstitutional use of force against Americans exercising their right to protest peacefully.

There is much we can do to make our justice system more equitable and simultaneously enhance public safety. We can and we should:

- prevent disciplinary records from being sealed when an officer leaves one law enforcement agency and seeks employment at another law enforcement agency;
- fund a hate crime hotline;

- invest in an expansion of training on de-escalation, implicit bias, cultural competency, and critical incident response;
- reform our bail system so pretrial detention is based on danger and risk of flight, not ability to pay; and
- expand community policing to improve relationships between law enforcement officers and the residents of the communities in which they serve.

In addition, the effectiveness of our civil rights laws can be strengthened by expanding the Wisconsin Department of Justice's currently limited civil rights enforcement authority.

These proposals are only a start. Addressing the legacy of injustice will require significant effort and frank discussions. And changes are needed beyond the justice system. Disparities in health care, education, access to transportation, and other areas perpetuate inequality and need to be addressed.

We must come together to respond to this crisis. And we must succeed in making real, lasting progress.