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February 4, 2016

Kevin Washington,  
President and CEO  
YMCA of the USA  
101 N. Wacker Drive  
Chicago, IL 60606

Re: Slavery Activity at Storer Camps, Jackson, Michigan

Dear Mr. Washington:

The Storer Camps in Jackson, Michigan are on the YMCA of the USA website's list of affiliated camps. You may or may not know that the Storer Camps conduct an activity for elementary school children called "Underground Railroad." The activity, which apparently has been a featured camp activity for years, is included in the itinerary of school groups that visit the camp. The purported purpose of the activity is to educate students about slavery. It is conducted at night, and children of all races are instructed to role-play as slaves. They stand on an auction block while adults playing the roles of slave traders and slave owners inspect and purchase them. At other points during the activity the children become runaways and they are chased through the woods by adults on horseback. Although denied by camp personnel, a parent reported that the children were shouted at and insulted by the adult participants. The ACLU of Michigan has also been told that certain children were very disturbed by the experience.

It is important to teach children about the tragedy of the slave era. However, it is equally important to ensure that in the process, children descended from enslaved Africans are not publicly humiliated and traumatized. It is likewise important that the history of slavery is not trivialized or distorted in a way that disserves children of all races. There are experts and scholars who share the concerns of those who have complained about the Underground Railroad activity. Dr. Sharon Draper, a Milken National Teacher of the Year award winner, characterized slave reenactments as "inappropriate" and ineffective.<sup>1</sup> Dr. Alicia Moore, an associate professor of education at Southwestern University, and co-editor of *Black History Bulletin*, explained: "Children and adults may find the topic of slavery uncomfortable and teachers should take care to be sensitive to the children's emotional needs, as well as their own. This means not intentionally engaging in activities that will either shame or demean African American children, or evoke feelings of shame or guilt for white children. Feelings should be talked about and the teacher should acknowledge that this is an important and intense topic that is sometimes difficult to discuss."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Hard Lesson: Educators learn how not to teach children about slavery," by Tarice L.S. Gray, *The Louisiana Weekly*, June 29, 2011 [www.louisianaweekly.com/hard-lesson-educators-learn-how-not-to-teach-children-about-slavery/](http://www.louisianaweekly.com/hard-lesson-educators-learn-how-not-to-teach-children-about-slavery/)

<sup>2</sup> "How Parents and Teachers Should Teach Children About Slavery," by Kim Pearson, *BlogHer.com*, February 26, 2013 [www.blogher.com/how-parents-and-teachers-should-teach-children-about-slavery](http://www.blogher.com/how-parents-and-teachers-should-teach-children-about-slavery)

Dr. Moore further stated: “To prepare for teaching about slavery, teachers should make sure they have laid the foundation for teaching about this intense topic, they possess adequate background knowledge about slavery, and they have an adequate understanding of what is ethically right and wrong when planning activities to explore slavery. As well, school districts should provide professional development that focuses on providing teachers the knowledge and skills they need to teach about difficult topics while [creating] a learning environment that is respectful and conducive to learning for all.”<sup>3</sup>

The Understanding Slavery Initiative (USI) is a British learning project dedicated to educating the public about slavery. It encourages teachers to place lessons about slavery within a proper historical context, explaining: “In particular, it is important that younger children learn about the sophisticated civilizations that existed across the African continent prior to transatlantic slavery. Studying ancient civilizations such as Mali and Benin, and reminding children that Ancient Egypt was an African civilization, challenges the stereotypical image of Africa as an unsophisticated continent. It will also allow them when older to better appreciate the devastating effects the system of transatlantic slavery had on the continent, and how its legacy is felt today.”<sup>4</sup>

USI suggests dramatization can have some limited usefulness. For example, having children “take on roles within a debate on fair trade” may help them understand perspectives that existed during the era. But the organization also cautions: “Some dramatization is unsuitable, however, and can cause children to feel traumatized and confused – for example role-playing an enslaved person interacting with their ‘owner,’ re-enacting the middle passage or a slave auction, or separation of a mother and child. Few teachers would consider re-enacting scenes from the death camps of World War Two whilst teaching the holocaust. Taking this approach to the history of transatlantic slavery is inappropriate for many of the same reasons.”<sup>5</sup>

Not only is the Underground Railroad activity emotionally and intellectually harmful, it also creates a racially hostile environment that has legal implications both for the camp in its role as an educational institution or agent of an educational institution, and for the schools that send their students to the camp facility. The camp may be violating Section 402 of the Michigan Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act which prohibits any educational institution from “[d]iscriminat[ing] against an individual in the full utilization of or benefit from the institution, or the services, activities, or programs provided by the institution because of religion, race, color, national origin, or sex.” Mich. Comp. Laws §37.2402.

In addition, school districts that receive federal funds and send children to the camps may be violating Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. It prohibits discrimination by any program (including a school district) that receives federal funding. 42 U.S.C. § 2000d. This law provides in part: “no person ... shall, on the ground of race, color or national origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.” *Id.*

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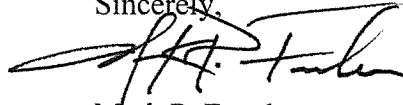
<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> [www.understandingslavery.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=801&Itemid=282](http://www.understandingslavery.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=801&Itemid=282)

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

For the reasons outlined above, we ask that you terminate the Underground Railroad activity immediately, not only at the Jackson, Michigan camps, but also at any other YMCA camps or facilities that feature a program of this kind. If consideration is given to development of an alternative program to educate children about slavery, we strongly urge consultation with experts and the avoidance of any further role-play activities. If you are not the appropriate recipient of this letter, kindly direct it to the appropriate person. If you have questions or comments, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M.P. Fancher', written in a cursive style.

Mark P. Fancher  
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Cc: Nancy Burger, Storer Camps Director of Outdoor Environmental Education  
John Fazer, Superintendent, Dearborn Heights School District No. 7