Testimony to the Minnesota State Board of Trustees
June 17, 2020

Chair Cowles, Chancellor Malhotra, Members of the Board of Trustees,

My name is Priscilla Mayowa and I am the Vice President of LeadMN. George Floyd, Jamar Clarke, Philando Castile. The last two weeks have been characterized by righteous unrest. Racism continues to plague our state and our country, impacting our already vulnerable communities. Earlier in the year we as a society had to confront and address ongoing anti-asian sentiments that were exacerbated by Covid-19, and now just a few short weeks ago, the world watched in horror the video of George Floyd being murdered by a Minneapolis police officer. This brutal act and the events that followed it, did not take place in some far off city or state, this was in OUR own community, in OUR backyard, and just three miles from one of OUR colleges.

His death and the way it was handled, hit me in multiple ways as it did for the many other black people who took to the street to protest. I could go into the many ways America continues to undermine black lives, but that would take more than the few minutes I have for this testimony. Instead I'll focus on the role Minnesota State has played, and can play going forward to make sure that another one of these horrific incidents never happens again, and that our state eliminates some of the worst racial disparities in the country.

According to the personnel files released, all four officers involved in the killing of George Floyd attended a Minnesota State college. Three of the four officers were enrolled in law enforcement programs at a Minnesota State college at some point. This should not come as a surprise. Our system trains a significant number of our states law enforcement members before they become licensed peace officers. But I raise the question to you, did Minnesota State do enough to prepare these officers to interact with and protect the communities they would be serving?

Minnesota State has its work cut out in addressing massive achievement gaps, systemic racism, and now responding to ensure our law enforcement programs are training officers who can handle the ever growing diversity of our communities and state. But just as Equity 2030 has been tasked with addressing systemic and structural racism in higher education, the system has to start thinking of how our law enforcement programs are educating our students and serving our communities. On June 5th, LeadMN’s Governing Council approved a resolution requesting that Minnesota State convene a statewide working group of students, faculty, and community members to review its law enforcement programs on things like training on systemic racism, cultural awareness, equity issues, and service to community in the curriculum, student recruitment and diversity, faculty recruitment and diversity, and post
graduation employment and policing outcomes. We believe that through engagement with all Minnesota State stakeholders and the community, we can build law enforcement programs that are a model for the rest of the nation.

I implore you all to take this issue seriously. In the past we haven’t had much success with conversations like this. Due to the fact that the system believes it’s doing all it can to address racial inequality when in fact we aren’t doing half as much as we can. We did not need to have national attention on our state before we started discussing ways to improve our law enforcement programs. Systematic racism did not start with the death of George Floyd within Minnesota state system. It should not have taken a murder for Minnesota State and the BOT to take racism seriously - especially incidents called out by students. Response and action could have and should have been taken when we first called out the microaggressions students have experienced. Our students have long noted the silence by Minnesota State and Board of Trustees. In fact just a couple of years ago our students wore tape across their mouths at a BOT meeting to symbolize how long students have been silenced in our attempts to speak out against the racism they experience within Minnesota State.

If Minnesota State is truly committed to creating an equitable and inclusive environment for ALL students to be educated then there needs to be an internal assessment to address and correct the racism that already exists inside the environment. This includes policies, procedures, expectations, and curriculum.

As the largest postsecondary education provider in the state of Minnesota, and the primary educator of our states law enforcement, Minnesota State has a responsibility to the people of this state to take a hard look at the education and training we are providing, and ensure that our law enforcement are properly prepared to serve the communities of color we are training them to protect. We cannot bring back George Floyd or the many others that have lost their lives to this senseless violence, but we can start to move forward by creating change within our education system. To be silent now and wait for others to take action on these issues, when you have the power to make real change, will only guarantee that more lives will be lost and that these issues will continue for generations to come.

Thank you.

Priscilla Mayowa
Vice President of LeadMN