

**YWCA IS ON
A MISSION**

eliminating racism
empowering women
ywca

July 19, 2021

Dear Senator:

On behalf of YWCA USA, a network of over 200 local associations in 45 states and the District of Columbia, **I write today to express our support for the confirmation of Catherine Lhamon to serve as the next Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights at the Department of Education and to urge you to vote yes when this nomination comes to the Senate floor.**

As one of the oldest and largest women's organizations in the nation, YWCA USA is on a mission to eliminate racism, empower women, and promote peace, justice, freedom, and dignity for all. We have been at the forefront of the most pressing social movements for more than 160 years—from voting rights to civil rights, from affordable housing to pay equity, from violence prevention to health care reform. Today, YWCA serves over 2 million women, girls and family members of all ages and backgrounds each year in more than 1,200 communities across the U.S.

The Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights has direct responsibilities on a broad range of civil rights, racial justice, and gender equity laws and policies that are central to YWCA's programmatic and policy efforts. Across our network, YWCAs provide extensive programming in areas that fall within the Department of Education's mission, funding, programs, and oversight responsibilities, including: early learning and kindergarten instruction, STEM/STEAM/tech programming, academic advancement programs, 21st Century Community Learning Centers, restorative justice initiatives, and before and after school programming. In the federal policy arena, YWCA has long advocated for policy change to create safe, supportive, discrimination-free learning environments for all students, particularly women and girls of color, transgender students, and other historically marginalized students. We have focused in particular on full and equitable implementation of Title IX, reducing the use of exclusionary discipline practices, and addressing school discipline disparities, over-policing, racial profiling, and criminalization of youth of color in our nation's schools.

Informed by our long history of advancing educational equity and the educational success of women, girls, people of color, and marginalized communities in our nation's schools, we believe that Ms. Lhamon has the practical experience, commitment to educational equity, and understanding of civil rights and education policy to effectively lead the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) within the Department of Education.

We note in particular Ms. Lhamon's extensive professional background and legal expertise in preparing her to undertake this role. Following her unanimous and bipartisan confirmation to serve as Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights in 2013, Ms. Lhamon's four year tenure resulted in significant and positive advancements in OCR's policy and enforcement efforts, including enhancement of data collection and transparency regarding educational equity indicators, and the issuance of critical policy guidance documents in the areas of sexual violence, unequal school discipline, equitable access to resources, diversity in admissions, and protections for transgender students and students with disabilities. During her tenure as Chair of the U.S.

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Commission on Civil Rights (USCCR), and more recently as Deputy Director of the Domestic Policy Council for Racial Justice and Equity, Ms. Lhamon has continued to protect and advance the civil rights of marginalized communities, leading the exploration of and development of policy recommendations regarding.

At each step in her public service, Ms. Lhamon has advanced policies that serve to protect the civil rights of marginalized communities and expand educational opportunities for students who are at the heart of YWCA's intersectional racial justice and gender equity mission. We note as well that prior to entering public service, Ms. Lhamon honed exceptional legal and policy skills through her work with the ACLU of Southern California, the National Center for Youth Law, and Policy Justice. Combined with her outstanding academic record, Ms. Lhamon's early legal career provided the deep subject matter expertise and leadership qualifications for her later roles in public service.

Ms. Lhamon's commitment to ensuring that our nation's schools are welcoming, safe, and fully inclusive of girls, women, students of color, transgender students, students with disabilities, and other historically marginalized communities was also clear from her testimony before the U.S. Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee on July 13, 2021. YWCA was particularly pleased to hear that Ms. Lhamon will prioritize enforcement of race, sex, and disability discrimination laws; ensure robust, comprehensive civil rights data collection; and rebuilding OCR staff capacity.

In fulfilling its duty to provide advice and consent on presidential nominations, YWCA encourages the Senate to ensure that nominees have professional expertise in the areas for which they are nominated, a deep familiarity with the breadth of programs overseen by the agency they are nominated to lead, and a strong commitment to the agency's mission. **As the largest network of domestic and sexual violence service providers and our extensive programs to address the educational needs of girls and young women, YWCA believes that Ms. Lhamon more than meets this standard and is exceptionally well qualified to lead OCR.** Moreover, ensuring that all facets of government leadership reflect the rich diversity of our nation is a fundamental tenet of YWCA's advocacy to advance our mission to eliminate racism and empower women, and Ms. Lhamon's confirmation would advance this key goal.

YWCA welcomes the opportunity to work with Ms. Lhamon in all facets of OCR's work, particularly on efforts to ensure that the unique needs of students who have experienced trauma during the COVID-19 crisis are addressed in a way that expands educational opportunity and does not further exacerbate school discipline disparities. As we documented in [Girls of Color and Trauma](#) (2016), [We Deserve Safety: Ending the Criminalization of Women & Girls of Color](#) (2018), and [We Still Deserve Safety: Renewing the Call to End the Criminalization of Women & Girls of Color](#) (2020), the criminalization of behavioral responses to trauma is a driving factor in the school to prison pipeline for girls of color. The onset and prolonged duration of the COVID-19 pandemic, interruptions in schooling, the significant financial stress that many families face, and the increased risks of students experiencing neglect and abuse and witnessing domestic violence during the pandemic are all factors that have exacerbated mental, behavioral, and emotional health struggles for many students. As our schools continue to reopen, equity must play a central role in our nation's recovery, particularly as it relates to addressing the mental, behavioral, and emotional health needs of students. We look to OCR to both proactively mitigate the risks of criminalizing trauma responses to the COVID-19 crisis and to enforce civil rights protections for marginalized students so that school discipline disparities are not exacerbated during this pivotal time.

Accordingly, we urge you to confirm Ms. Lhamon's nomination to serve as Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights at the Department of Education. Thank you in advance for your support and consideration. Please do not hesitate to contact Pam Yuen, YWCA USA Director of Government Relations, at pyuen@ywca.org or 202-559-7022 if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Elisha Rhodes", written in a cursive style.

Elisha Rhodes
Interim CEO & Chief Operating Officer