New Canaan, CT – On Tuesday, October 30th, Opening Doors Fairfield County (ODFC) hosted “Advancing Equity” an event to catalyze system-wide dialogue on racial equity as a collective response to homelessness and housing solutions. Held on the scenic grounds of Grace Farms, the event featured two national experts on the topic of racial equity - Jeff Olivet, Principal at jo consulting and Regina Cannon, Chief Equity and Impact Officer with the Center for Social Innovation (C4).

Speaking from the stage of the Sanctuary to an audience of over 200 participants, Olivet and Cannon painted a journey to racial equity by first reminding guests that Grace Farms is built on land stolen from Native Americans. From the Indian Removal Act, slave trade, Chinese immigration, and Japanese internment, to intentional efforts to prevent wealth generation for people of color, Olivet and Cannon emphasized the need to dismantle and disrupt systems that historically created race inequities. To this end, a quote from W.E.B. Du Bois was flashed on double screens, on a stage, that read “A system cannot fail those it was never meant to protect.”

Line charts highlighted the stark inequities, in Connecticut, where people of color, who make up just 12% of the general population, comprise 50% of the homeless population, a ratio of over 4:1. Discussion from the audience on combating these ratios included action on the very systems that create racial inequities including legal, criminal justice, education, employment, housing, and health. Cannon commented to the audience that we should use “Racial Equity as a North Star, understanding the fierce urgency of now, for every day we wait, another inequity occurs.”

Olivet and Cannon led the audience through an exercise to reimagine racial equity in Connecticut: “Where race no longer determines one’s economic outcome, that’s the kind of Connecticut we would like to live in. Where those most impacted by structural racial inequity are meaningfully involved in the creation and implementation of the institutional policies and practices that impact their lives,” said Cannon.

The talk was followed by a panel discussion of local experts on racial equity including Juanita James, President and CEO of Fairfield County’s Community Foundation, Mia Bryant of the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness, Finn Darby-Hudgens from the Connecticut Fair Housing Center, Jacqueline Rabe Thomas of the Connecticut Mirror, and Cesar Aleman of Re•Center. Discussions included efforts to diversify staff and boards of directors, using data as driver of change, zoning regulations that perpetuate segregation, and ways of using spheres of influence to make an impact.

The event received high marks from attending participants for addressing racial equity. As Carla Miklos, Co-Chair of ODFC explained, “Jeff and Regina led us through this sensitive and important topic with great skill, allowing all who participated an opportunity to better understand the systemic causes and effects of racial inequity. They encouraged us to let this knowledge inform our work as we continue to reverse the damage done while we create a more just environment for those we serve. They, and the panel, shared experience and information generously and I believe everyone who attend was inspired to act.”
Pamela Ralston, Director of ODFC, is focused on next steps. “This event is serving as a platform for ODFC to implement strategies for recruitment, hiring and promotion to positions of leadership using a lens of inclusivity, and equity and diversity throughout our agencies. ODFC will also use this information to design a more equitable delivery system and continue to identify, analyze, and address racial disparities in housing and homelessness.”

Opening Doors Fairfield County works to prevent and end homelessness in Fairfield County by coordinating 150 stakeholders in strategies of advocacy, prevention, housing, employment, and social services to ensure that all citizens in the region have access to safe, affordable housing.