What happened to Rep. Kiah Morris is a crisis for Vermont.

The Bennington state representative, and the only black woman in the Vermont Legislature, recently announced that she would not seek a third term, in part because of repeated racist threats made against her and her family.

Rep. Morris has been a champion of racial and social justice during her time in the Legislature. She has been an outspoken critic of the status quo and has brought a voice to those who are often marginalized and mistreated by our system.

Yet the threats to Rep. Morris were not motivated by the policies she fought for or the politics she pursued, but because of the color of her skin. They were made by Vermonters who are angry and upset to see a black woman in a position of leadership and power. The harassment of Rep. Morris and her family show once again that white supremacy is alive and well in Vermont and we are not doing enough to stop it.

It is deeply troubling that the only black woman in the Vermont Legislature has been compelled to withdraw from politics – Vermont needs more representatives who reflect the experiences of its increasingly diverse communities, not just in the Statehouse, but in all levels our government, state agencies and leadership in our communities.

This is a huge loss for the state, but deeper down it is indicative of broader problems of systemic racism and hate in this state, problems that Rep. Morris worked to change as a legislator.

As a state we are at a critical juncture, and we must take action. All Vermonters need to recognize the significance of Rep. Morris’ decision and how poorly it reflects on our institutions and our state. For too long we have propped up systems that work better for white people than for those of color. The silence of the white majority in Vermont allows this problem to persist.

We are at a crossroads as a state and as a community, and where we decide to go from here will be telling. Do we value a society that is free from the stains of institutional racism? What values do we as a people hold true and just? And what concrete steps are we willing to take, consistent with those values?

As organizations we are evaluating what we can do differently, looking to see what roles we have played that have created and perpetuated this culture, and what we can do moving forward to support and create equity and fairness. We are also calling on Vermont’s leaders — including in the governor’s office, in the Statehouse, all law enforcement officials in towns, cities, counties and state, all prosecutors in every district, including the attorney general, and even in the media — to critically evaluate what more needs to be done to support Vermonters of color and create a state that is truly welcoming to all.

The work Rep. Morris championed will continue and we look forward to her continued leadership. We must all work together to achieve the more equitable society that Rep. Morris and so many others have fought for.