



June 8, 2020

Good morning Chairman Burke & members of the Senate Health Committee:

I'm Dr. Ronnie Dunn, Chief Diversity Officer and Associate Professor of Urban Studies at Cleveland State University. I am here today to provide testimony on behalf of S.C.R. 14 – to declare racism a public health crisis and to ask the Governor to establish a working group to promote racial equity in Ohio.

I am an urban-sociologists and I have over twenty-years teaching and conducting research that intersects the areas of race, health, education, policing and criminal justice. In the early 2000s I worked on research entitled, the Urban Cancer Project which examined health disparities and cancer prevention behavior among low-income African Americans. This research produced a five-part, Emmy-award winning television health news series which aired on TV 5 and was credited with increasing cancer screenings by African Americans throughout the viewing area for months after it aired. It was also used in General Rounds training with medical students at Case Western Reserve and University Hospital and resulted in a number of scholarly publications including a journal article and a book chapter in a textbook on African American Healthcare. My testimony today is based on state and local health disparities data and a recent research study that examined the implicit views and values that shape Americans' ideas of health disparities and who deserves what, and why, relative to healthcare and to illuminate salient cultural barriers and help identify leverage points for targeted intervention.

The novel coronavirus pandemic which has taken more than 112,000 lives nationally and 2,259 in the state of Ohio as of yesterday has laid bare and exacerbated the racial health disparities that disproportionately impact African Americans and minority communities of color. African Americans represent 14 % of Ohio's population yet are 20% of COVID-19 deaths. In Cuyahoga County, Blacks are 30% of the population, 34% of COVID-19 hospitalizations, 38% of hospitalizations, 45% of ICU cases, and 26% of COVID-19 fatalities as of May 6<sup>th</sup>.

A growing body of research indicates that a person's health outcomes are significantly influenced by the socioeconomic conditions in which they live. These social and economic variables, referred to as *Social Determinants of Health* (SDOH), include education, poverty, access



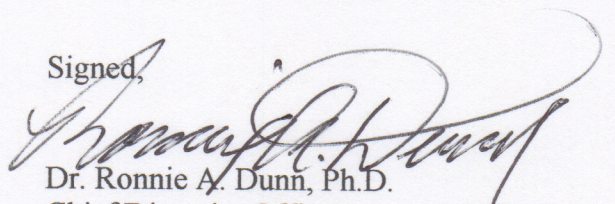
to healthy foods, employment, housing, environmental factors, transportation, and crime and safety, which all are related to the neighborhood in which one resides.

In Cuyahoga County, which is home to The Cleveland Clinic and University Hospitals, both world-class healthcare systems there is a 5-year difference in the average life expectancy for blacks and whites. Blacks in the county have an average life expectancy of 72.4 years of age compared to 72.8 years for whites. And there is a 12-year difference in the average life expectancy rate of 70-years for African Americans living in the predominately black, St. Clair-Superior neighborhood on Cleveland's eastside, compared to 82-years for residents living in the predominately white suburb of Lyndhurst, just 12-miles away.

There are also wide disparities at the other end of the life cycle where 16.1% of black babies are born with low birth weights compared to 10.4% of white babies and 19.3% of black babies are born premature in comparison to 13.2% of white babies. This contributes to 15.6% of every 1,000 black child births resulting in death within the first year of life in comparison to 2.5% of every 1,000 live white babies born within Cuyahoga County.

Many of the underlying health disparities that make African Americans disproportionately susceptible to COVID-19 and other negative health outcomes are the result of generations of discriminatory public policies and practices such as redline which created racially segregated neighborhoods. These exclusionary practices coupled with segregation and disinvestment in black and brown communities perpetuate overcrowding, and deterioration of housing stock which contributes to high levels of lead exposure, segregated and underfunded schools, high dropout rates, and high unemployment and crime rates. The culmination of these factors along with others, coalesces to create high levels of toxic stress which contribute to negative community-police relations, the manifestation of which we are witnessing in the protests here and around the world today. Therefore, I would strongly urge the legislature to adopt this bill declaring racism a public health crisis in order to address the structural and institutional racism rooted in our troubled past, yet still crippling our society today.

Signed,



Dr. Ronnie A. Dunn, Ph.D.  
Chief Diversity Officer, Associate Professor  
Cleveland State University