



Senate Health, Human Services and Medicaid Committee
Proponent Testimony – SCR 14
June 9, 2020
Franklin County Board of Commissioners

Chairman Burke, Vice Chairman Huffman, Ranking Member Antonio and members of the Senate Health, Human Services and Medicaid Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Senate Concurrent Resolution 14. Thanks also to the resolution sponsors, Senator Craig and Senator Williams, for bringing forward this important measure to declare racism a public health crisis in Ohio and outline steps to untangle the horrifying legacy of individual and structural racism in this great country.

My name is Kevin Boyce, I am a Franklin County Commissioner, and I stand before you this morning on behalf of my colleagues, John O’Grady and Marilyn Brown, in support of Senate Concurrent Resolution 14. We respectfully urge you to support this resolution as both a statement of priorities to the residents of Ohio, and, most importantly, as a framework for operationalizing those priorities through state policy going forward.

Before COVID-19 in Franklin County, African Americans were experiencing higher unemployment rates (11.1 percent compared with 5.7 percent overall), higher poverty rates (29.9 percent compared with 16.7 percent overall), and disproportionately high rates of infant mortality, infectious disease, obesity, diabetes and hypertension. Additionally, the majority of our county jail population is black—nearly 65 percent. Now, in these extraordinary times of COVID-19, we know these disparities have only been further, and devastatingly, exacerbated. Although African Americans make up only 12 percent of the population within the County’s health jurisdiction, according to Franklin County Public Health, they make up 25 percent of COVID infections and nearly 26 percent of COVID deaths.

Franklin County declared racism a public health crisis on May 19th, but the work and our understanding of the relationship between racism and this data had really begun long before that. While Franklin County continues to be one of the fastest growing counties in the state and Midwest, with unemployment rates at historic lows, and an overall vibrant economy, we have realized we are a tale of two counties. In one tale, we are this fast-growing, thriving community, and in the other tale, we have communities being left behind, many with double and even triple the unemployment figures seen elsewhere in the county.

In 2018, we doubled down on our efforts to address this divide with a comprehensive and community-wide approach outlined in the Franklin County Rise Together Blueprint. This research-intensive approach peeled back the layers on issues around unemployment, education, healthcare and criminal justice, and when it did, it revealed the underlying element of race and the disproportional experience of communities of color with each issue area we identified. The Blueprint outlines a comprehensive action plan we will implement in the coming years to do our part to dismantle the systems that advantage some people over others, the most damaging of which is racism.

The Commissioners now approach county policy and investments with a racial equity lens, which is a way of looking at policies and programs to understand the outcome of policy decisions in all communities in Franklin County. For example, in our COVID-19 response, we specifically designed our small business recovery efforts to focus on low-to-moderate income and minority businesses because we knew those businesses were struggling more than most. We have also invested in racial equity training for our county directors, staff, and community partners to ensure our local decisions and policies—whether through human resources, vendor selection, or grants management—apply this racial equity lens as well.

These are concrete examples of what operationalizing racial equity means. It is not an academic concept and it does not supplant the cost/benefit analysis we use to make policy decisions. It is instead a more intentional and precise way of calculating those costs and benefits to ensure our policies and investments are applied equitably. We commend SCR 14 for proposing a similar approach at the state level—to review Ohio’s laws with a racial equity lens and examine new decisions and practices with that same lens. It is my hope that Ohio, and other communities and states across the country, join in this effort. In the last several weeks, I have been contacted by dozens of other entities exploring and researching ways to operationalize racial equity, starting with a common language around the root of the challenges we face.

As we work together to dismantle the generational consequences of shameful chapters in our nation’s history and rise to meet the enormous challenges of today, we must acknowledge that racism has existed for over 400 years, has always been a crisis, and yet remains embedded in our policies, our systems and our communities. We must also acknowledge that racism significantly limits both the individual and collective potential of all Ohioans and our ability to govern equitable systems.

Federal, state, and local policies built the inequitable systems we have today—from slavery and Jim Crow, to redlining and criminal sentencing—and policies must now, going forward, be intentionally designed to dismantle them. A codified racial equity approach is an important step in doing so, and as the events of the last several weeks have shown, the time for new solutions is now. We ask that you support SCR 14 to set a new direction for our state. If we turn our backs on this moment, we will join our predecessors on the wrong side of history.

Thank you again to the sponsors, to the Chair, and to the Committee for reviewing this important resolution. Franklin County stands with you in this work, and I would be happy to address any questions you may have.

Attachments:

Asmelash, Leah. “Officials in the largest county in Ohio say racism is a public health crisis.” *CNN*. 21 May 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/21/us/franklin-county-ohio-race-public-health-crisis-trnd/index.html>

Torres, Ella. “Racism declared a public health crisis in Ohio’s most populated county.” *ABC News*. 20 May 2020. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/racism-declared-public-health-crisis-ohios-populated-county/story?id=70786062>

Price, Rita. "Racism declared a public health crisis by Franklin County." *The Columbus Dispatch*. 19 May 2020. <https://www.dispatch.com/news/20200519/racism-declared-public-health-crisis-by-franklin-county-commissioners>

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Washington, Julie. "More than 20 Greater Cleveland organizations pledge to address racism as a public health crisis." *Cleveland.com* 4 June 2020. <https://www.cleveland.com/community/2020/06/more-than-20-greater-cleveland-organizations-pledge-to-address-racism-as-public-health-crisis.html>

Wartman, Scott. "Hamilton County to vote soon to declare racism a public health crisis." *Cincinnati.com*. 3 June 2020. <https://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/2020/06/03/hamilton-county-vote-soon-make-racism-public-health-crisis/3134176001/>