

Thank you Chairman Burke, Vice Chair Huffman, Ranking Member Antonio and members of the Ohio Senate Health, Human Services and Medicaid Committee. My name is Bridget Watson and I'm writing to testify in support of Senate Concurrent Resolution 14 (SCR 14) declaring that racism is a public health crisis. I am a medical student training in Ohio, meaning many of the patients I care for are directly impacted by the public health crisis of racism. As protests over George Floyd's death continue nationwide, several doctors' groups -- the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Medical Association and American College of Physicians -- are emphasizing that racism is a public health issue and they're calling for police brutality to stop. The Ohio Academy of Family Physicians have also taken this stance.

Our citizens of color have been subjected to the effects of racism since the founding of the State of Ohio in 1803. Since that time, Ohioans of color have endured unequal education, unsafe work conditions, inadequate health care services, subpar housing, and an unjust criminal justice system, based on policies that were rooted in a belief that people of color are not worthy of the American Dream. For example, this racial inequity is evident in the outcomes of pregnant individuals of color. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the rate of maternal mortality in the US is four times higher for individuals of color than it is for white individuals. This health disparity exists even when the individuals are of higher education status and socioeconomic status, showing that racism is causing Black individuals to suffer and face higher mortality. This is in addition to the finding that the United States is the only developed country with increasing maternal mortality rates. Why is this? The detailed answer involves, among others, systemic factors such as access to healthy food, education, and safe neighborhoods; conscious and unconscious biases in the medical system; and the chronic stress induced by systemic, ingrained racism. Furthermore, at a time when COVID-19 is disproportionately hospitalizing and killing the black community because of racism, the time to act is now. Early data has shown that the African American community makes up 21% of COVID-19 patients across the state, which is certainly disproportionate to the African American population in the state of Ohio, which is somewhere between 13% and 14%. Since this is preliminary data in an ongoing crisis, as additional data comes in, the number of cases affecting the African American community in Ohio is likely to be far higher than the 21% indicated so far. By declaring racism a public health crisis, we acknowledge that racism impacts all members of our society and deserves action from all levels of government.

This resolution, if passed, would be the first in its kind passed at the state level. By being the first state to adopt this resolution, we hope Ohio can be a model for the nation, showing the rest of the country how we can lead these difficult discussions and enact real and meaningful change. Black Ohioans deserve to be heard today, tomorrow, and always. I know where the Ohio Legislative Black Caucus (OLBC) stands when it comes to addressing the hurt people across this country and in the State of Ohio feel. The real question is where does Governor DeWine, Lieutenant Governor Husted, President Obhof, Speaker Householder, Members of the Ohio General Assembly and other white people in positions of power stand? When will they be forced to address the injustice of this country and the State of Ohio against black and brown people?

Lastly, it is important to note that a handful of Ohio cities and counties have already declared racism a public health emergency, such as Cleveland and Columbus. This is a start to the statewide response that is desperately needed in order to push for sustained change.

Thank you to the committee and the sponsors of the resolution (Sen. Sandra Williams and Sen. Hearcel Craig). I am open and willing to answer any questions.

Sincerely,
Bridget Watson

Source:
Racial and Ethnic Disparities Continue in Pregnancy-Related Deaths. (2019, September 6).
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