

SCR 14
Proponent Testimony
Seante Health, Human Services and Medicaid Committee
J. Edward Johnson, Director of Public Health Policy

Chair Burke, Vice Chair Huffman, Ranking Member Antonio and members of the House Health Committee, my name is Edward Johnson and I serve as the Director of Public Health Policy for Columbus Public Health. I am here today representing Dr. Mysheika W. Roberts, Health Commissioner for the cities of Columbus and Worthington, our board of health and the over 900,000 residents we serve. Thank you for the opportunity to comment on Senate Concurrent Resolution 14, to ensure that we are meeting the needs of all of Ohio's residents.

This resolution would declare racism a public health crisis in the State of Ohio.

In the cities of Columbus and Worthington, the Board of Health passed a resolution to similar effect on June 1, 2020; and Columbus City Council also passed a resolution declaring racism a public health crisis.

Given the current demonstrations occurring nationally in the aftermath of the death of George Floyd, and the 401-year history of racism, discrimination and unequal treatment of non-whites in the United States, it may be difficult to discern what makes racism a public health crisis from what makes racism a political crisis, a public safety crisis, an economic crisis, or any other type of crisis.

In Columbus, such a declaration takes on a simple form: racial and ethnic minorities have lower life expectancies and a lower quality of life because of health inequities. According to the CDC's National Vital Statistics Report, a black boy born in 2017 can expect to live 71.5 years; whereas a white girl born in 2017 has a life expectancy of 81 years.¹

This, specific resolution can carry power, if we acknowledge that for 346 years, our country lived in its original sin of race-based domination and discrimination. It has only been for 54 years, that this country has had the opportunity to address interpersonal racism, institutional racism and structural racism.

It is those three forms of racism that have accumulated centuries of economic instability, poor physical environments, sub-standard education, food instability and exclusion, lack of health care access, and social instability. Those practices have led to excess mortality, morbidity, reduced life expectancy, diminished health statuses and functional limitations.

¹ Arias, Elizabeth, and Jiaquan Xu. "United States Life Tables, 2017." *National Vital Statistics Report* 68, no. 7 (June 24, 2019). https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr68/nvsr68_07-508.pdf.



The current pandemic has laid these conditions bare. In Columbus, nearly 60 percent of confirmed cases are non-white, with even higher proportion of hospitalizations being borne by our black, Hispanic, Asian and other minority communities.²

As we live in a more connected world, we must confront that the COVID-19 pandemic is the third novel coronavirus outbreak of the 21st century. It is not unreasonable to think that a fourth outbreak could occur before the end of this decade – and we must ask ourselves if we will find ourselves in a similar position.

Will we be in a place where chronic lung disease; moderate to severe asthma, diabetes; kidney disease; liver disease; and heart disease are the underlying health conditions for individuals to find themselves in a hospital bed, in the ICU or on a ventilator? Because those are all conditions that disproportionately affect black and brown Ohioans.

We have an opportunity to be the society that learns the lessons of our past and of this pandemic, and is committed to become the healthiest state in the Union. But we cannot do so without protecting the health and improving the lives of our black and brown Ohioans.

I urge the members of the committee to favorably report this bill to the full Senate for immediate adoption. There is much work to be done, and delay will only defer the dreams and aspirations of millions more Ohioans.

Thank you for your time and attention. I am happy to answer any questions you may have as I am able.

If you have additional questions after the hearing, please feel free to contact me at edjohnson@columbus.gov or 614-645-7284.

² Data available at www.columbus.gov/coronavirus/