



Testimony of Scott S. Osiecki
Chief Executive Officer, ADAMHS Board of Cuyahoga County
Ohio Senate Health, Human Services and Medicaid Committee
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Chairman Burke; Vice-Chair Huffman; Ranking Minority Member Antonio, and esteemed members of the Health, Human Services and Medicaid Committee. I would like to thank Senators Williams and Craig for inviting me to provide written testimony on Senate Concurrent Resolution Number 14.

My name is Scott S. Osiecki and I am the Chief Executive Officer of the Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services (ADAMHS) Board of Cuyahoga County. I am submitting this written testimony on behalf of the Board of Directors and staff of the ADAMHS Board of Cuyahoga County in support of Senate Concurrent Resolution Number 14, which addresses racism as a public health crisis.

As the local authority responsible for the planning, funding, and monitoring of public mental health and addiction treatment and recovery services, the ADAMHS Board has seen the direct impact that racism has on the mental health of the residents of Cuyahoga County. Racism causes prolonged stress, and long-term stress directly impacts the physical and mental health of individuals and entire communities. Stress causes a chemical reaction in the brain. When there is healthy stress, cortisol gives our bodies a sign to react or retreat. You often hear this called the “fight or flight response.” When the brain continues to receive that signal for an extended period, the body is flooded with cortisol and falls into a state of chronic stress. The longer the stress goes on unaddressed and unmanaged, the more significant issues can become with the mental and physical health of both individuals and communities. Chronic stress, including stress caused by systemic racism, can cause emotional trauma, and create further disparities in health outcomes.

Our whole nation, including Cuyahoga County, is the midst of community stress both from the coronavirus pandemic and civil unrest that has arisen in response to racism on all levels. This stress is adding to the trauma often experienced by racial and ethnic population groups as a result of premature deaths, major assaults on culture, and intergenerational lost opportunities. The experience of pervasive racism can itself be traumatic.

Racism is a public health crisis and a driving force behind many social determinants of health. Racism causes persistent discrimination influencing many areas of life, such as healthcare, housing, education, employment, and criminal justice. Systematic racism is kept in place by individuals in power who abuse their authority. Communities of color, people with economic instability, and individuals who have disabilities are more likely to experience poor health outcomes and higher instances of mental illness and substance use disorders as a direct result of community stress caused by racism. The current COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted and further exacerbated health inequities, especially in the African American community.

The ADAMHS Board of Cuyahoga County is not alone in the behavioral health field to believe that the recent deaths and trauma, witnessed by the world, have crystalized the anger and angst born out of a history of pervasive and systemic racism. All members of the Ohio Association of County Behavioral Health Authorities (OACBHA) have made a declaration that racism is a public health crisis that states it is long past time to act. What we have not done before, we must do now, and eradicating racism deserves action from all levels of government and society. The declaration further commits to:

- Acknowledge racism as a public health crisis and build alliances and partnerships that confront and work collaboratively to end racism.
- Develop local solutions to address disparities and actively engage individuals and communities in racial and social justice work.
- Develop, implement, and support policies and practices to end the inequalities in the health of people of color and mitigate exposure to adverse childhood experiences and trauma.
- Ensure health equity and cultural competence within all mental health and substance use disorder prevention, treatment, and recovery support programs, ensuring services meet the local needs of diverse populations.
- Engage ALL communities to work with state and local behavioral health leaders to develop and promote prevention and awareness efforts designed to reduce stigma, address trauma, and eliminate barriers to care.

We stand in solidarity with everyone seeking to achieve equity and a healthy community where racism is not tolerated. It is for these reasons, and the commitment of the ADAMHS Board of Directors and staff, that we support Senate Concurrent Resolution Number 14, to declare racism a public health crisis and ask the Governor to establish a working group to promote racial equity in Ohio.