

The Ohio Senate

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S.C.R. No.14

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Filmmaker / Public Speaker

**Written Testimony for Resolution: Racism as a Public Health Crisis and to ask for a working group to promote racial equity in Ohio.**

Today, I come here to express my solidarity as a citizen with the Ohio Legislative Black Caucus and other Legislators who support the passage of this resolution into law.

I am here to testify and be a witness that the racism I've experienced on an interpersonal, social, institutional and structural level have directly impacted my physical, psychological and emotional health. I've been diagnosed Hypertension, PTSD, Depression and Anxiety.

I've been an Ohioan all of my life. I was born and raised in Cleveland, attended college and earned my BFA from Wright State in Dayton, became a wife and mother in Cincinnati and as of the beginning of this year, I am now a resident of Columbus.

For those of you who doubt that racism is a public health crisis, hear me out. Racism had no doubt been a constant plague that has followed me everywhere I go and in all stages of my life. To be confronted by educators, medical professionals, neighbors, and law enforcement that to them, my voice has no power, no place in any of these spaces, has been a major hazard to my health and the health of millions of Black Americans in this state and the US as a whole.

I know first-hand what it feels like to be treated with less respect than a dog by a white kindergarten teacher in a predominately white suburban school. At the age of 5, she treated me like a burden and bullied me into silence.

I know what it feels like to be a child and afraid to go outside and play because white neighbors are calling my sister and I animals, niggers and yelling at us to go back to Africa.

I know what it's like to experience extreme poverty, homelessness and food insecurity while growing up. My mother didn't have access to the mental health resources she needed to help her navigate her own traumas that pushed her into drug addiction. My mother's trauma as a Black woman became my trauma.

I know what it's like to be a foster youth, trapped in an over stretched system with limited resources to help foster youth age-out safely with the necessary tools to establish a successful start to adulthood. If it wasn't for my foster mother cultivating me to have a love of education, a passion to explore my talents and show me how to grow into womanhood, I would have been lost.

As a woman, the shadow of racism still follows me. I've had college professors declare that because I'm Black, I'm less intelligent than everyone else. I've walked into breakrooms at places of employment and felt the unspoken threat that as a Black woman, I needed to shrink who I am because I wasn't welcomed there.

I've been harassed by local law enforcement because I'm a black woman - pulled over without probable cause, ticketed in accidents I didn't cause, followed by cruisers to the driveway of a home I own, without any explanation why.

White doctors who didn't take my health concerns seriously when I was pregnant with my only child. I had to go through five doctors over the course of five months and lose over 20 pounds to eventually be put on bed rest with home IVs before I was diagnosed

with hyperemesis gravidarum. I've had doctors dismiss my health concerns in other instances as well. The sting of not being heard, respected or taken seriously doesn't fade away.

When I was 23, right before Christmas, I took my mother to the hospital to be admitted because she was having complications caused by her Multiple Sclerosis. She was under the impression that she would receive some fluids and be discharged in a day or so. This happened in Cleveland and I lived in Dayton so my mother encouraged me to go back home she was going to be alright. We agreed I'd be back in a week. I left my contact information with the staff at the hospital, just like anyone else would. Do you think anyone called me when my mother's health began to deteriorate?

I hadn't heard from my mom and decided to return to Cleveland sooner than planned. When I walked into my mother's hospital room and saw the shape she was in: her legs and arms were covered with large blood clots and she was jaundiced. Not one doctor called me to tell me about my mother's condition. I was robbed of any chance to advocate for my mother's health and treatment. I was devastated and demanded answers and to speak to a doctor immediately. But it was too late, she died two days later.

As a mother of a biracial Black daughter, it would be irresponsible for me not to have a conversation about how her brown skin and curly hair will have a direct impact on her livelihood as a human being. As an educated Black woman who, by God's grace, worked twice as hard to do everything right in life, but still in 2020, be treated as a second-class citizen in this country. I can't go for a jog without feeling anxious, my heart jumps when I see a police cruiser drive right behind me, I can't even feel safe getting pizza from a local restaurant without feeling the threat of white supremacy. And some of you say, with a straight face, that racism isn't a public health crisis? And those who disagree with this being declared a public health crisis, would you ever trade places with me and live the life I lived, even if I offered you all the money in the world?

So I implore you to ask yourselves what side of history do you want to be on when our children's children look back and judge us? The whole country is watching this moment. Now is not the time to be complicit, it is the time to promote racial equality in all the unsafe spaces for Black and Brown people. To defund police departments who over police Black communities and invest those funds in mental health resources for youth of color who experience severe childhood experiences and trauma. And explore ways to combat health disparities in the Black community. The road is long and there's a lot to do, but the first step is to acknowledge the pain and destruction that racism has done to Black communities in Ohio and in the US. Pass this resolution into law, it is the humane thing to do.

I'd like to thank the members of the Ohio Legislative Black Caucus for introducing this resolution to declare racism as a public health crisis on a statewide level. And thank you to Rep. Stephanie Howse for posting information about this hearing on social media. I'm fortunate to have attended high school with Rep. Howse at the Cleveland School of Arts. It's because of her post that I am here and able to share my support of this resolution. Thank you.