

Good morning, Chairman Burke and members of the Senate Health, Human Services and Medicaid Committee. I come before you today to present proponent testimony for S.C.R. 14 during the 133rd General Assembly Regular Session.

My name is Helen Sheehan and I have spent more than one-half my life as a Registered Nurse in Cardiac Surgery ICU, the Emergency Department as well as cardiovascular research [nationally and internationally]. I have also been involved in advocacy efforts in Virginia and Ohio for improving health care outcomes, social justice and voting rights.

I believe that S.C.R. 14 represents a positive step forward to identify and address racism and offers action consistent with promoting racial equity in the State of Ohio. S.C.R. 14 explicitly addresses disparate outcomes based on race, and provides mechanisms to reduce those disparities.

The effects of the racist system on which this country was founded are still felt in society today. For 400 years, black Americans were enslaved, for 58 years Plessy v. Ferguson and Jim Crow laws meant that black Americans lived and worked under separate systems from white Americans, and for the last 50 years black Americans have been forced to catch up.

Housing policies such as redlining and subsequent white flight from cities means that black Americans continue to live in communities with fewer resources, increased policing, and less access to healthy and affordable food. Each of these pieces of American history continue to affect the social determinants of health, or the social and economic conditions that influence public health, for black Americans, leading to radical disparities in health.

Infant mortality in black Americans is more than twice as high than their white counterparts (<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/white-health.htm>).

Black Americans are at higher risk for obesity related diseases including heart disease and stroke (<https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/aahealth/index.html>, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/hus/spotlight/2019-heart-disease-disparities.htm>).

The average life expectancy of white Americans is over three years more than black Americans (https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr68/nvsr68_07-508.pdf).

Today, we even see the disparate effects of the novel Coronavirus, where 1 in 3 hospitalizations are of black Americans despite only making up 13% of the US population (<https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/08/830030932/cdc-hospital-data-point-to-racial-disparity-in-covid-19-cases>).

As with all epidemiological and public health questions, the data speak louder than words. There is clear evidence of the racial divide in healthcare in Ohio and the United States of America. At a minimum, the State of Ohio is obligated to acknowledge and act upon the trove of data that has been gathered, published and disseminated for decades and hold our legislators, state agencies accountable. Now is the time to counter the devastating racial inequities that continue to persist today. This Resolution is an imperative step toward equity and justice that is long overdue in the state of Ohio.

By failing to explicitly talk about and act on racism, especially at this time of public outcry, protest and dialogue, we are bolstering the status quo and enabling the perpetuation of inequity even as society is calling for change.

I stand with Governor DeWine, who said, "We should all be outraged that in the year 2020, in Ohio and in this country, there's still inequality of opportunity and there is still racism." He also noted that, "The essential function of government is to protect the most vulnerable among us. We still have too many Ohioans that are living in the shadow of opportunity. There is racism in Ohio and across the country. It is our job to defend the defenseless." DeWine also noted that it's time for change.

The critical aspect of S.C.R. 14 names and addresses racism as a public health crisis and offers specific solutions to promote a sustained, dedicated plan that prioritizes racial equity in Ohio that creates new practices and relationships in our communities.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. stated: "Racism still occupies the throne of our nation." I am asking you to begin dismantling that throne and support passage of S.C.R. 14.