

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 Habeeb Suara, a fourth-year medical student at The Ohio State University College of Medicine, and I'm here to testify in support of the Senate Concurrent Resolution 14 (SCR 14) declaring that racism is a public health crisis.

Over the past three months, the United States has been entrenched in its fight against the global COVID-19 pandemic. Almost 2 million cases in the United States, 36,000 in Ohio; and over 110,000 deaths nationwide. It's clear to see the incredible toll this illness has had on our country.

Yet, I would argue there is an even more prevalent sickness that has plagued our country for centuries that we are failing to properly acknowledge, and because of this continues to affect our current collective well-being: racism.

As I've learned during my time in medical school, it is important to distinguish between the acute and the chronic. COVID-19, in the context of American history, is a serious acute condition. Similar to an infection, seizure, or extreme fatigue; Now, acute illnesses can have specific reasons why they develop - certain exposures, risk factors, stress, etc. - but when properly treated, they can often go away without significant complications.

However, racism is a chronic condition in our nation's history. Just like diabetes, hypertension, chronic kidney disease, etc. And there are two things to keep in mind with chronic conditions. 1) if left alone, symptoms will continually recur and worsen. If your blood sugars are not in check, symptoms of urinating a lot and feeling very thirsty will continue to occur. The same for headaches and dizziness from high blood pressure, or swelling with CKD

And 2) most importantly, the chronic complicates the acute; known as an acute exacerbation of a chronic condition. Diabetes can worsen your infection; hypertension and CKD can worsen your seizures and fatigue; And when these conditions are left alone, serious complications can occur. And unfortunately, just like racism, these conditions disproportionately affect Black and Brown populations. Cyclically, these conditions revolve around the social determinants of health that are deeply rooted in systemic racism: housing, socioeconomic status, education, employment, access to health care, and too many more.

And we are seeing this with COVID-19 right now as well. According to the CDC, 33% of hospitalized patients were black, compared to 18% in the community. And here in Ohio, African Americans make up 17% of COVID-19 deaths, 26% of all cases and 31% of hospitalizations, although they make up only about 13% of Ohioans. Our health care providers, researchers, first responders, and all essential personnel deserve our praise for their efforts in the response to COVID-19. But once the storm is clear, our illness of racism will still remain; we will still be suffering from our chronic condition. What will we do when we fall ill next?

So here it is - Racism is America's chronic condition that we continually fail to address, and until we do it will either 1) worsen - or 2) continue to recur in acute exacerbations that will continue to diminish our health and strength as a society.

So if we are to acknowledge the acute presence - and rightfully so - of the Coronavirus as a public health crisis, then we must also acknowledge the widespread presence of racism in our history and current society as it continues to plague and weaken us as a nation. Let us pass this resolution and dedicate our efforts to promoting racial health equity and healing our minority communities.

"I would like to thank the committee and the sponsors of this resolution, Senator Sandra Williams and Senator Hearcel Craig. I am happy to answer any questions you may have."