

June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020

Hello, my name is Sarina Herman and first and Foremost I would like to thank the Ohio Senate health committee and chair for having me today, I am truly honored to be here. I am from Columbus, Ohio and just recently graduated from the Ohio State University this past semester earning my Master of Social Work degree. I chose to pursue social work for multiple reasons, one of them being I want to make an impact on the lives of young people, especially in the world we live in today. In fact, I come here today to give my testimony on why racism is a public health crisis and why I ask of you all to stand beside me and support SCR 14. First, I want to share my experiences of what it was like growing up with two refugee parents and being a first generation Asian American.

Both my mother and father escaped their respective homelands of Laos and Vietnam during times of political warfare during their adolescent years. My father spent 13 days in the middle of the sea on a small fishing boat with 60 other strangers and made it safely to a refugee camp with only about 27 people. The others died from hunger, pirates, and sunken boats. My mother swam across the Mekong river in the middle of the night, hoping and praying she wouldn't get killed while doing so to seek refuge in Thailand. Both of my parents escaped their country for the same reasons; to provide a better life for themselves and a better life for their future family. In time they were sponsored to come to the United States and gracefully invited to start a new life here, and for that they have been immensely grateful.

Growing up, my parents worked long hours and we only spent time with them mainly in the evenings and on Sunday's. In 1997, my grandparents from Laos came to the states as well to help take care of my brother and me. They helped raise us and we were so grateful to have them living in the home with us while our parents were working extra hard to give us a good life. \

There was always something that was so different about my family versus my white American friends' families that I just could not put my finger on at the time. I was not allowed to go to sleepovers or have friends over, my parents were hesitant about allowing me to go to birthday parties, and any time I was sick at school they were never the ones to come and get me. I was always so angry with my parents when they did not allow me to go and hang out with friends, but now I have a clear understanding of why. Their biggest fear was that something would happen to me while I would be away. Something like I would accidentally hurt myself, or get sick, or even worse, get bullied. Turns out, these fears became a shadowed reality; and I say shadowed because I never brought it up to them, it was never talked about in the home. It was not because they sent me to a friends' house or because they allowed me to go to a birthday party. It was at school, and it continued to be at school, a place where every student should feel safe and protected, that I was bullied for being one of the only students of color in my school at the time.

My parents always came to my concerts and school events, but not enough that my peers and classmates would notice that they were there. Classmates started to tease me and taunt me and tell me that I didn't have parents... or that they "went back to China" and left me here. Coming from an Asian family, I never had these difficult conversations with my parents surrounding race and how it felt to be different. I internalized all of my feelings and felt the need to hide a lot of what was going on in my life. To this day, my parents still do not have much knowledge of what I went through in grade school, unless they were to now watch this... Hi mom and dad! It was to the point that I have a scar on my knee from a student who physically kicked me off a school bus and told me to go back to where I came from all while the bus driver

did nothing and neither did my school. A place where I was supposed to feel safe and protected, failed me.

In middle school, I was called a horrifying, disgusting name. It had something to do with the color of my skin, and female genitalia. I remember that day clearly. I went into the girl's bathroom, stuck my head under the hand dryer and went to the nurse and told her I wasn't feeling good. She sent me home that day because of a "high fever", and I told myself in the car ride home "I am not going to wake up tomorrow, I will not return back to that school, and I will not be alive for another day of this awful feeling I have to live with knowing I am that much different from my classmates." I was 11. No 11-year-old should EVER feel the way I did, but unfortunately this has become a reality for a lot of children of color who are put into schools with predominantly white peers.

As an upcoming school social worker AND someone who's been targeted themselves, I can confidently say racism IS a public health crisis because it is affecting individuals and families across our city, state, and nation. I am here representing and advocating for my brothers and sisters of color, my future clients and students of color, and also my future children of color.

When looking more into public health, according to the CDC, black women are up to four times more likely to die of pregnancy related complications than white women. Why is that you may ask? Dr. Ana Langer, director of Women and Health Initiative at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health in Boston states "It's basically a public health and human rights emergency because it's been estimated that a significant portion of these deaths could be prevented,"... These deaths can be PREVENTED, so why is it not being done? Black men are more likely to be killed by police than white men? We have seen proof of this all over media and news outlets, and there are still people walking the streets free with no charge of murdering an

innocent black man. Innocent lives are being taken for reasons that are inexcusable and unavoidable.

Did you know a child's social class can be a significant predictor of their academic success? The color of their skin and their race can most definitely affect those outcomes as well. Schools are going MONTHS without air conditioning to which they must close on some days and it takes away from classroom instruction for students, these schools lie in the areas of predominantly black communities. We MUST do better.

During my internship experience, I have had students who clung on to me because they were afraid to go home because the police drove past their house twice during the weekend. I have had parents cry to me because they were unable to get their child the help, they needed due to long waitlists. I have had students cry to me because they felt they did not belong due to the color of their skin and people would call them out of their names and they did not feel safe in a place where they should feel protected by all staff and faculty.

Racism in public health settings has been an ongoing issue for decades and in turn this has been and will continue to be an ongoing battle, but I am confident and hopeful that this time we are in a firm position to end racial injustice. As an upcoming social worker, I will fight, and I will advocate for my students and their families. The same students and families who may not have had someone to fight for them before when they were treated unfairly and not given the same opportunities as their white peers and I respectfully ask you to join me in supporting SCR 14 and declaring racism a public health crisis. I have worked incredibly hard and am lucky and humbled to be given the opportunities to have gone to college and build a foundation for myself and my future. Yet for others, that may only be a dream for them... and I want to help students

and young people create a reality from some of those dreams! I want to show them that they can fight stigmas and defeat stereotypes and be just as successful as any and all of their peers.

## References

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