

SENATE CONCURRENT RESOLUTION 14
PROPONENT TESTIMONY

June 15, 2020

Dear Chairman Burke, Vice Chair Huffman and members of the Senate Health, Human Services and Medicaid Committee. My name is Laura Perryman and I write in support of Senate Concurrent Resolution (S.C.R 14) to declare racism a public health crisis.

I have worked as social worker and mental health specialist in Ohio since 2000, serving youth and families. In my career, I have seen how poverty and racial disparity have negatively impacted the health, well-being and daily functioning of children and families. I work with children and families who are in the Franklin County Children's Services continuum of care. Social workers and mental health providers work on the front lines with vulnerable children and families who are disproportionately in minority groups. In this direct-care social service profession, a primary objective is to develop focused treatment plans that provide prescriptive interventions. The goal of treatment plans is to help children and families live together in stable homes, reduce risk of out of home placements and improve their overall functioning and quality of life. Often the best crafted and implemented treatment plans deliver limited progress due to barriers, related to public health, that the families we serve are experiencing.

Public health, as related to families within the Child Protective and Medicaid systems is a dynamic concept. We are often working to improve the health of the families and children on various levels; increased doctor/dental visits, improved nutrition, increased mental health services and linkages to educational and enrichment activities. There are numerous articles and empirical data that address how there is past and present racial disparity in the public health system. The article, COVID-19 Targets Communities of Color, published by The Harvard Gazette- Health and Medicine outlines how this COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated longstanding racial inequities in American societyⁱ. Mary Travis Bassett, commissioner of the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene spoke to an audience at Harvard T.H. Chan school of Public Health and stated "Public Health professionals must not be afraid to use the word racism when they see health inequities linked to issues like poverty, segregation and lack of access to care."ⁱⁱ

The Franklin County Rise Together Blueprint noted Franklin County's African American residents experience dramatically higher unemployment rates (overall 5.7%, African Americans 11.1%), face a higher poverty rate as a community (overall 16.7%, African Americans 29.9%), and have lower home ownership rates (overall 53.6%, African Americans 33.4%) and are more likely to live in neighborhoods with low performing schools and experience disproportionately higher incarceration rates (overall 223 per 100,000, African Americans 637 per 100,000).ⁱⁱⁱ

Senator Huffman's statements regarding higher rates of COVID-19 among African Americans made on June 9th questioning if "African Americans or the colored population" have been disproportionately affected by this pandemic because they "do not wash their hands as well as other groups" has driven me to provide my testimony to this committee based on my professional career and the personal loss my family has experienced due to COVID-19. When I heard his words, I experienced emotional pain, anger and felt his statement was an insult to people in my family and families I work to serve. On April 5th, 2020 our family lost our Mother, Brenda Perryman to COVID-19 and one week later on April 12th, Easter Sunday, her mother Pearlie Louie passed away from COVID-19. The lives of these two African America women are a focal point of pride for our family and the foundation for values and achievement.

Brenda Perryman had a passion for teaching and the arts. That passion steered her to a forty-year influential teaching career as a high school English, speech and drama teacher at Highland Park and Southfield High Schools in Detroit, Michigan. She also taught speech and drama at the collegiate level. The scope of Ms. Perryman's career was recognized locally, nationally and world-wide. She was a dynamic performer, author, director, acting coach, poet and host of a syndicated television show. Brenda was a true servant in using her life to help others achieve their goals.

Pearlie Louie, died at the age of 100 years old. To our family, her life is a lesson in history, perseverance, good morals and faith. In 1937 Pearlie graduated from Thomlinson High School and in the fall started college at "Colored Normal Industrial Agricultural and Mechanical College of South Carolina" which was renamed South Carolina State College in 1954 when our country was just beginning to recognize that the term colored was considered disrespectful to the African American people. Pearlie then took a Civil Service exam and achieved superior scores and was to be awarded employment. However, when Pearlie arrived in Charleston, South Carolina for the promised position, she walked into a room with other applicants and noticed that she was the only person of color. She was then taken to the side and told that there must have been some mistake and that the job was for another "Pearlie Burgess." Pearlie was then turned away and had to take the bus back home to Kingstree. In 1956 she became a nurse at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, Michigan and when the hospital opened their first neonatal unit, Ms. Louie was on the nursing staff who worked the unit. During her 26 year nursing career she was renowned for her work with children yet she experienced racism as families would request that the "colored nurse" not hold their babies.

I intentionally describe the lives of these two women as a point of pride, not to try to prove that Senator Huffman's statements are false, which I believe they are. His words were equally offensive to both people of achievement and people who experience struggle in life. Both of these women experienced direct racism in their lives but would not let racism hold them back and more importantly taught their children, including my husband, Ryan Perryman, a University of Dayton college graduate and student athlete, to always set and achieve goals. I refuse to let the narrative voiced by Senator Huffman in regards to the impact of COVID-19 on the African American community go unchallenged. The death of our beloved family members is not correlated with Senator Huffman's statements made to members of the Senate Health, Human Services and Medicaid Committee on June 9th.

I assert that Senator Steven Huffman's comments in regards to rates of COVID-19 among African Americans are detrimental to this political process, S.C.R 14 to declare racism a public health crisis. I call for his resignation on this committee.

I am proud to live and work in Ohio and in Franklin County. I urge lawmakers to support S.C.R.-14 to further this movement in addressing racism as a public health crisis.

Thank You.

Laura Perryman

ⁱ Walsh, Collen. Covid-19 Targets Communities of Color. *The Harvard Gazette-Health and Medicine*. April 14, 2020 <https://news.harvard.edu>

ⁱⁱ <https://hsph.harvard.edu>

ⁱⁱⁱ Franklin County Rise Together Blueprint. <https://commissioners.franklincountyohio.gov/COMM-website>