

Health, Human Services, and Medicaid Committee
Proponent Testimony- SCR 14
6/24/2020

Chairman Burke, Vice Chair Huffman, Ranking Member Antonio and Members of the Senate Health, Human Services and Medicaid Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on SCR 14. My name is Tracy Nájera and I am the Executive Director of the Children's Defense Fund-Ohio. I am here today to offer support for SCR 14 which would declare racism a public health crisis and require the Governor to establish a working group to promote racial equity in Ohio.

Born out of the Civil Rights Movement, the Children's Defense Fund and its mission to leave no child behind has always been and will always be rooted in the pursuit of racial justice. We work to champion policies and programs that lift children out of poverty, protect them from abuse and neglect, and ensure quality education as well as appropriate and targeted access to resources to meet children's health and nutrition needs. Equity is at the core of our work, we strive to advocate for transformative policies and programs that serve health and social equity throughout Ohio.

For those of us working toward a better and more just future for our children, the fight for racial justice is the most important struggle we will face. Every Ohioan must stand up and stand together now to demand change and SCR 14 is a step forward. We must acknowledge and declare what we already know - that racism is a public health crisis so that we can effectively confront and dismantle the systems and structures that perpetuate racism and result in health disparities in our Black and Brown communities ranging from infant mortalities to early deaths from chronic diseases.

Racism is embedded in our society, in our economic and political systems, and it creates deep disparities in income, housing, education, health, and well-being that harm our children and families of color. The public health emergency has laid this reality to bare. While Black people constitute 13% of Ohio's population, they compose 26% of those testing positive for coronavirus, 31% of hospitalizations in Ohio and 17% of deaths—unacceptable numbers. While 3% of Ohio's population, Hispanics constitute 6% of those diagnosed with COVID-19, this number is likely even higher due to the large number of "unknowns" in the reporting. (Press briefing, Gov. Mike DeWine, May 21, 2020). But racism is widespread beyond just the immediate Covid-19 crisis. While Ohio has reduced the number of Black infant deaths, Black infants still die at 2.5 times the rate of White infants (2018). Asthma afflicts Black children at a significantly higher rate than White children: 21.6% vs 9.6% (2017). Black women are 2.5 times more likely to die of a pregnancy related condition than White women. (Governor briefing 5/21/20). According to the Ohio Department of Health the prostate cancer incidence rate in 2016 was 65 percent higher among Black men (152.7 per 100,000) compared to White men (92.3 per 100,000) in Ohio. The Ohio Commission on Minority Health reports that in Ohio, diabetes impacts 16% of the Black

population, compared to 11.6% of the Hispanic population, 11.6% of the multiracial population and 11.3% of the White population.

Racism causes health disparities for Black Americans. Until recently, this has been a contentious notion, despite substantial evidence. We can help to cultivate better understanding of how racism impacts public health by making this declaration official.

The cause of many of these disparities in health outcomes are a result of societal and economic factors – structural racism – that result in generations of Black and Brown individuals not having access to economic opportunity, adequate housing, nutrition, education, transportation, health care, etc. – what we call the social determinants of health. If those social determinants are manipulated through structural racism then we have the evidence right there of what must be done. Further, we know through research and evidence and this lack of access to basic needs or being subjected to violence and poverty can result in toxic stress and compromise the body's ability to maintain good health.

These disparities provide a snapshot of racism as a clear public health crisis which negatively impacts our community and our nation.

The late James Baldwin said, “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” We know that we will never achieve our mission to ensure every child a safe, healthy, fair and moral start in life and safe passage to adulthood without confronting and dismantling institutionalized racism in America and right here at home. We also know that as a state, to make meaningful changes we must acknowledge that racism exists and we must work on dismantling this original sin of our nation together. We urge you to pass this this necessary Resolution. I appreciate having the opportunity to provide testimony today.