



RESTORING OUR OWN THROUGH TRANSFORMATION

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Public Testimony:

SCR No. 14 - Declare Racism A Public Health Crisis/Promote Racial Equality

Good afternoon, Chairman Burke, Ranking Member Antonio, and members of the committee. My name is Jessica M. Roach, and I serve as Chief Executive Officer of Restoring Our Own Through Transformation - also known as ROOTT. I am joined by my partner Dorian L. Wingard, who is the Chief Operations Officer at ROOTT. This morning, our testimony is in full support of SCR No. 14, and its long overdue proclamation that Racism IS a public health crisis.

For context, ROOTT is a collective of concerned Black families, community members, advocates & interdisciplinary professionals dedicated to decreasing Black maternal & infant mortality in Ohio. Our mission is to comprehensively restore the Black family's collective well-being through collaboration, resource allocation, research & re-empowerment, in a way that meets the needs of Black parents & families, through direct service, policy, advocacy, and education that finally centers the voices and needs of Black families.

What is unique about our organization is that our values drive our full spectrum approach on reproductive healthcare, specifically as it pertains to Black families,



and our lived experiences. As a result, we have achieved and have been able to maintain a 0% maternal and infant mortality rate since our inception.

ROOTT has been able to achieve such success because we anchor our services in the reality that institutional and structural racism have been the cornerstone of our country for far too long - and - that this domestic pathology is a direct causative variable in the adverse birth outcomes our families experience.

Deficit driven health communications have caused these adverse consequences of maternal and infant mortality. We DO NOT focus merely on the social determinants that have become popular and safe to discuss publicly. We understand that the structural determinants of health and public policy steeped in racist ideologies have created the consequences we now call social determinants.

While we support this resolution, we feel it is necessary to illuminate the inequity and disappointment in its timing.

As an organization, we have been intentional in proclaiming that **racism** is a public health risk factor, not one's **racial or ethnic** designation. In our work with healthcare providers, major hospital systems and other entities, we have challenged them to remove the misnomer from health communications that being of "Black or African American race", is a risk factor. What is finally being recognized as a public



health issue is something that community members, advocates, and those of us who are public health and policy experts in this area, have been speaking on for decades. Moreover, we have also been deliberate in communicating that identifying racism as a public health issue IS NOT limited only to law enforcement interactions. Rather it impacts all life domains required for a thriving Black family.

ROOTT contributed to the document that later became the formal declaration of the American Public Health Association in 2018, of law enforcement violence as a public health issue. Our research regarding *Georacism* and its relationship to law enforcement's assault and murder of Black mothers and fathers, AND the consequence of infant mortality by zip code in Columbus, Ohio was presented at APHA's conference in 2018.

While we were heard and respected for our work within a national platform and association, our organization, along with numerous community members and national entities have continued to be disregarded in Ohio - diminished, and dismissed by our local and state elected officials, some of whom are in this room today.

It seems as though certain events must impact political officials or become a part of the relevant media pop-culture conversation in order to be considered valid and be addressed. It is extremely disappointing that the voices of those who have



been directly impacted remain largely unheard and under advocated for, unless it's politically safe and expedient to do so.

Rhetorically, we wonder what exactly was your tipping point? Our Black maternal and infant mortality rates have been of great concern for a decade. Tamir Rice, 12 years old, was murdered by police in 2014, why wasn't he enough? Ty're King, 13 years old, was murdered by police in 2016, why wasn't he enough? Henry Green, 23 years old, was also murdered by police in 2016, why wasn't he enough? Why weren't any of their deaths enough?

To reiterate, we support this resolution. However, our support is with the caveat that we **expect** tangible deliverables that include strict accountability and Black community-level inclusion. Further, we expect that Black-led community-based organizations and community members directly impacted by racist practices, racist health inequities, and negative interactions with law enforcement born from racism be the **first** to be appointed to the advisory council.

Said differently, we expect specifically that Black LED, owned, and operated organizations - NOT just predominantly white institutions (PWIs) that have Black employees on marketing materials, but in no real role of autonomy, be appointed with priority. We expect that community members who have had actual negative



experiences, and/or negative health outcomes due to experiences with law enforcement violence be appointed.

We are clear that race neutral solutions will not correct race specific challenges. Given the disproportionate impact of infant and maternal mortality on Black families, that occurs for a variety of institutional and systemic reasons that directly correlate with racism in the form of violent community policing, it is counterintuitive to expect solutions that ignore this unique specificity to be effective.

SCR No. 14 provides an opportunity to structure and fund a critical response process to what we know is a social pathology, with origins dating back centuries for Black families. ROOTT requests your support of this resolution and asks that you demonstrate your care and concern for Black families as you traditionally have for all families. To not do so would be immoral, unethical, and violation of your oaths of office. Thank you for your time