

June 23rd, 2020

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 Susan Sedlacko and I'm here to testify in support of Senate Concurrent Resolution 14 (SCR 14) declaring that racism is a public health crisis.

I have been a Buckeye all of my life. I was born and raised in Akron and then moved to Columbus for college and have stayed ever since. I am also a white woman from an upper middle class family. This status, given to me at birth through no effort of my own, has afforded me certain privileges in life. From a young age, however, I noticed that many people around me did not enjoy the same level of privilege that I had. I did not know until later in life that I was witnessing systematic racism in many of the every day institutions I was involved in. I would like to share some of the things I noticed. I will be focusing on the education system in my personal testimony because it includes some of the earliest and most vivid memories I have of witnessing systemic racism. My hope in sharing these memories is that it will bring additional attention to the abuse that many Black Ohioans face.

As a child, school was the first place I began to notice that something was wrong. I attended my neighborhood schools (in the Akron Public School District) my whole school career. In my early elementary years, my classes were filled with children of different races and ethnicities. Around 4th grade, however, I started to notice that many of my classmates were leaving my home school, either enrolling in the performing arts intermediate school or moving to the local suburbs. I started hearing comments from parents about how the neighborhood middle school was "rough", "underperforming" and "had a lot of kids from outside the neighborhood". Eventually, I connected the dots. The vast majority of the kids changing schools were white. The vast majority of kids in my home middle school were black. White parents were separating their children from black children.

There were many other issues I noticed during the rest of my school career. Honors classes always had a higher percentage of white students than black students, regardless of the demographic makeup of the whole school. Our teaching staff never accurately reflected the diversity of the students. Police officers were stationed in my middle and high schools. In middle school, we were required to walk through metal detectors at random intervals. In high school, it was not uncommon to see students arrested from the building or for police dogs to perform random searches of lockers and backpacks. After elementary school, there was never a full time nurse in the school, and if we had a social worker, it was not known to me. When traveling to other schools for sporting events, the difference in resources at predominantly white schools and predominantly black schools was shocking. One local school had the resources to lease a live tiger cub for high school football seasons. Another local school shared jerseys

between sports for many years without being replaced. During my senior year, Akron Public Schools made the decision to provide free breakfast and lunch to all students because the poverty level of the students was so high. By the time I graduated high school in 2013, it was abundantly clear to me that the color of your skin deeply impacted the way you received an education and interacted with the school system.

Schools are just one institution where Black people experience racism. Prisons disproportionately hold Black people. Grocery stores lock up “multicultural” hair products. Black infant mortality in Ohio alone is startlingly high. Home ownership among Black Americans is substantially lower than white Americans. College enrollment does not reflect the diversity of this country. Black people are dying at higher rates from COVID-19 than their white peers. Life expectancy of Black Americans is almost three years less than white Americans. Mental health issues among Black Americans are at an all time high. Black men disproportionately die by the hands of police officers. This list could go on for quite some time.

In the past, feeble attempts have been made to reform individual systems to stop racism. I believe this is the wrong approach. When an issue as deep and widespread as racism exists, we must acknowledge how it is literally shortening the lives of Black Americans and do everything in our power to stop it. This is why I am supportive of this measure to declare racism a public health crisis. We must address this crisis in every corner of our institutions because Black lives matter. This deep injustice has been allowed to control and oppress the lives of Black people since before the start of this nation. It is unacceptable and disgraceful. We must make drastic changes to stop this cycle.

I ask the committee to pass this resolution quickly and lead our state and our country in the fight against racism. It is high time that we build a state where Black education, housing, jobs, safety, health, trauma, and futures matter to all Ohioans.

I want to thank the committee, Senator Sandra Williams and Senator Hearcel Craig for their time and consideration of my testimony. I have attached additional articles to support my viewpoints below. I am open to receive any questions the committee may have.

Humbly,

Susan Sedlacko

<https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/summer-2019/when-schools-cause-trauma>

<https://www.schoolcounselor.org/asca/media/PDFs/FINAL-Race-and-Trauma-in-the-Classroom-Factsheet.pdf>

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/06/19/opinion/politics/opportunity-gaps-race-inequality.html>