



Rep. Stephanie Howse and Rep. Erica Crawley
Sponsor Testimony for House Concurrent Resolution 6
State and Local Government Committee
June 23, 2021

Good Afternoon Chairman Wiggam, Vice-Chair John, Ranking Member Kelly, and members of the House State and Local Government Committee, thank you for hearing sponsor testimony on House Concurrent Resolution 6 (HCR 6), to declare racism a public health crisis and to ask the Governor to establish a working group to promote racial equity in Ohio. I am proud to sponsor this resolution along with State Rep. Erica Crawley.

“Racism is a system of structuring opportunity and assigning value based on the social interpretation of how one looks (which is what we call "race"), that unfairly disadvantages some individuals and communities, unfairly advantages other individuals and communities, and saps the strength of the whole society through the waste of human resources.” -- APHA Past-President Camara Phyllis Jones, MD, MPH, PhD. When you hear Racism is a Public Health Crisis, it is the compounded negative impacts of lived experiences in housing, education, banking, entrepreneurship, healthcare, the food system, the criminal justice system, the environment, and the family unit that negatively effects the quality of life and manifest into long term health problems, resulting in a shorter life span.

As we are taught, Ohio was founded in 1803.....but in fact it was not. According to the Ohio History Central, by the time the first European explorers arrived in North America in the late 1400s, the original indigenous people had inhabited what is today the State of Ohio for over 14,000 years. Starting with Ohio’s earliest ancient inhabitants, indigenous tribes and nations built and sustained rich, sophisticated, and productive societies and cultures. Ohio was not discovered by European explorers or settlers, as these lands were already claimed by indigenous people as ancestral homelands, and many indigenous people today consider Ohio their true home. A group of 44 white men legally structured Ohio by the new American standards in 1803, creating the Ohio General Assembly. In 1880, George Washington Williams became the first African American legislator to serve in the Ohio General Assembly. After the passage of the 19th Amendment, six white women were elected to the Ohio General Assembly in 1922. In 1978, L. Helen Rankin became the first African American woman to serve in the Ohio General Assembly. In 1995, John Garcia became the first Hispanic to serve in the Ohio General Assembly.

What could you do with 77 years, 119 years, 175 years, or 218 years and counting head start, with structuring how the State of Ohio will operate and who the State of Ohio will work for?

Since I have joined the Ohio General Assembly in 2015, I have requested each of the previous three Speakers to convene a group of legislators to begin the conversation on race and racism. The purpose of the conversation was to help legislators understand the role race continues to play in the laws and policies we pass and explore opportunities to create a better Ohio that works for all of us. Here are some of the key moments that prompted me to request conversations on race:

- In 2015, the Ohio Department of Transportation released its Disparity report, which reported that Black-American owned-businesses, Asian Pacific American owned-businesses, and Hispanic



American owned-businesses exhibited substantial disparities with qualitative and quantitative evidence of discrimination in the Ohio marketplace.¹

- In 2017, Ohio's Every Student Succeeds Act Plan prepared by the Ohio Department of Education outlined stated improvement goals for Ohio's students over a 10-year period, where the goals for African American children were below the standards in every category (proficiency, graduation, etc.).²
- In 2019, the Ohio Department of Health reported an Ohio infant mortality rate of 6.9, while the infant mortality rate for Black children in Ohio was 14.3.³
- In 2020, the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections reported a prison population of 51.4% white and 44.6% Black, although Ohio is comprised of 79% white and 13% Black.⁴

This is just a snapshot of a couple of Ohio's systems that unfairly disadvantage some people and unfairly advantage some people. Our responsibility is to work to address problems identified that make living in Ohio a challenge for people. Last year, Senate Concurrent Resolution 14 – Declaring Racism a Public Health Crisis sponsored by Sen. Sandra Williams and Sen. Hearcel Craig was given two hearings. In those two hearings, over 175 people submitted proponent testimony, resulting in hours of in-person testimony. Unfortunately, the committee hearings were stopped due to the remarks made by Sen. Stephen Huffman and the national headlines that followed. This was a missed opportunity for the Ohio General Assembly and the people of Ohio. In that moment, members of the Ohio General Assembly should have come together to talk openly and honestly about what occurred and how we can move forward from the incident. Instead, members of the Ohio General Assembly decided to stop dialogue so that no member could say something racist. Americans, which includes you and I, have been conditioned (consciously or subconsciously) to believe that people that do not fit the American standard of being white are less than. The problem is not that people are going to say racist things. The problem is not preparing our citizens in the system that we have and the influence of racism on it, so that we can be prepared to address issues of racism in a manner that can be healing and restorative versus degrading and demoralizing.

Many people have referred to the happenings of 2020 as the two pandemics: COVID-19 and racism. When we look at the toll these two global pandemics took on Ohioans' lives, we have to recognize that we are not living up to the promises made in our creation documents. Our resolution declaring racism a public health crisis would work on addressing these problems and their root causes. The resolution outlines the following actions:

- Establishing a glossary of terms and definitions concerning racism and health equity
- Declaring that racism is a public health crisis affecting our entire community
- Incorporating educational efforts to address and dismantle racism, and expand understanding of racism and how racism affects individual and population health
- Promoting community engagement, actively engaging citizens on issues of racism, and providing tools to engage actively and authentically with communities of color
- Committing to review all portions of codified ordinances with a racial equity lens
- Committing to conduct all human resources, vendor selection, and grant management activities with a racial equity lens including reviewing all internal policies and practices such as hiring, promotions, leadership appointments, and funding
- Promoting racially equitable economic and workforce development practices



- Promoting and encouraging all policies that prioritize the health of people of color, and support local, state, regional, and federal initiatives that advance efforts to dismantle systematic racism and mitigating exposure to adverse childhood experience and trauma
- Training of all elected officials, staff, funders, and grantees on workplace biases and how to mitigate them
- Partnering and building alliances with local organizations that have a legacy and track record of confronting racism
- Encouraging community partners and stakeholders in the education, employment, housing, and criminal justice and safety arenas to recognize racism as a public health crisis and to activate the above items
- Securing adequate resources to successfully accomplish the above activities.

Getting this resolution passed by the General Assembly is just the beginning in addressing a crisis as old as our state itself. To renew Ohio's promise of safety, security and opportunity for all of us, that means expanding that same promise to those who have been shut out for far too long. The promise of better lives and brighter futures first begins by simply acknowledging the issues we face as a state and as a nation.

We are seeing real, actionable steps being taken in a number of communities across our state that have declared Racism a Public Health Crisis. From Franklin County, to Cleveland City Council, to Lima City Council to Butler County, there are more than 30 government entities within the State of Ohio that have declared Racism a Public Health Crisis. Beyond here in Ohio, the American Medical Association, the American Public Health Association, four states (MN, UT, VA, and DC), and over 150 other government entities have declared Racism a Public Health Crisis. While these are undoubtedly steps in the right direction, the fact is we need the State of Ohio to join the movement and declare Racism a Public Health Crisis.

In these divided times, one issue that should bring us all together is creating a safe, supportive environment for our children so they can live better, healthier lives, and have the opportunity for a brighter future where they can all reach their full potential. Declaring racism a public health crisis and employing actionable steps to begin dismantling systemic racism will undoubtedly move us in the right direction, and help us more fully realize the promises laid out in our state's Constitution.

Thank you again for providing my joint sponsor and I, the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony on this resolution and we look forward to answering any questions you may have.

References:

1. [ODOT Final 2015-16 Disparity Study Report.pdf \(state.oh.us\)](#)
2. [ESSA Ohio Consolidated State Plan September 2017 \(PDF\)](#)
3. [2019 Ohio Infant Mortality Report](#)
4. [2020 Ohio DRC Annual Report](#)