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June 9, 2020

Written Proponent Testimony on SCR14

Chairman Burke, Vice Chairman Huffman, Ranking Member Antonio and Members of the Senate Health, Human Services and Medicaid Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony on Senate Concurrent Resolution 14. The Center for Community Solutions is a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank that aims to improve health, social and economic conditions through research, policy analysis and communication.

Our organization has been in existence since 1913, and since that time, we have seen many moments of triumph, transformation and advancement in our state and in our country. However, there have also been moments of struggle, grief and tragedy. Racism has defined much of our nation's history, but at different moments, our country has responded by pursuing racial equality and justice, endeavoring to create a more perfect union. Through things like increasing access to voting or promoting civil rights, or more recently the targeted investment in communities that are disproportionately affected by maternal and infant mortality. Our democracy has evolved as our understanding has evolved, and we attempt to create a society that is of, by and for the people.

In our organization, we research and analyze policy issues related to health and human services, examine the impact that public policy has on community health and, when necessary, advocate for changes. Recently, with the support of our board and organizational leadership, we started to examine these policy issues through the lens of racial equity and have invested in our staff's understanding of racial justice issues through training and education. It became evident, even before the current political dynamic, that our society needs to change in a way that recognizes the profound impact of systemic racism. Below are a few findings of such racial disparities from our recent research.

- The odds that a Black or African-American mother will give birth to a baby with low birth weight is nearly twice as high than of non-Hispanic white mothers, even when controlling for other factors. In our study of more than 800,000 Ohio birth records, African-American women with four-year college degrees had significantly higher rates of poor birth outcomes than white women with only a high school diploma. Low birthweight, in addition to other poor birth outcomes that are more prevalent for Black mothers and babies, is a risk factor for infant mortality.
<https://www.communitysolutions.com/research/low-birth-weight-and-prematurity-in-ohio-a-multivariate-analysis/>
- According to the National Survey of Children’s Health, Black, non-Hispanic children in Ohio were more likely to experience two or more health conditions than their white peers, spanning a range of health issues. For example, Children who are Black were more than twice as likely to have asthma, 2.5 times as likely to have a learning disability, and about 1.5 times as likely to have allergies or anxiety problems.
https://www.akronchildrens.org/pages/Community_Health_Needs_Assessment.html
- We looked at life expectancy at the census tract level and found that in Ohio, not everyone has an equal opportunity to live a long and healthy life. Lack of access to fresh foods, environmental hazards such as lead and pollution, under-funded schools and lack of high-quality employment opportunities are all factors that negatively impact health in many areas across the state. In areas where a higher percentage of the population is Black, life expectancy tends to be lower. As our cities continue to be racially segregated, we see stark disparities in life expectancy between neighborhoods. Many cities around the state have majority white neighborhoods with life expectancies that are more than 20 years higher than nearby majority Black neighborhoods.
<https://www.communitysolutions.com/research/life-expectancy-race-ohio/>
- A survey of individuals living at or near poverty in Cuyahoga County conducted last year revealed some concerning racial disparities. Black residents were about twice as likely to have needed help finding a job in the past two years, and 18 percent said they had serious problems with the cost of transportation to work or school in the past year. That number is about double the rate of their white counterparts. Black residents were three times as likely as white residents to report that they had to choose between food and education. <https://www.communitysolutions.com/poverty-speaks-racial-disparities/>
- An analysis of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation & Correction’s 2019 Annual Report determined that black people in Ohio are nearly three times more likely to be in jail compared to the state’s general population indicating that justice is not applied equally across populations. While African Americans make up 13 percent of Ohio’s total population, Black males account for 47 percent of Ohio’s prison population and Black females account for 25 percent. The criminal justice system’s grip on the black family has contributed to spirals of poverty and fear.

<https://www.communitysolutions.com/criminalization-mental-illness-sud-impacts-african-americans-ohio/>

In addition to community organizations and grassroots entities, government and nonprofit organizations can and should begin to identify concrete policy steps that would provide momentum in our pursuit of racial equality. Indeed, the need for social progress was frequently mentioned by the late Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and closing racial disparities in health outcomes would be a sure sign of social progress. In fact, it was Dr. King who said “Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane.” And, when we are not making efforts to close the gaps in infant mortality, are we not tacitly in agreement?

These resolutions need to be more than words on a page, and will require hard work and policy innovation resulting in policy change, and the General Assembly needs to publicly acknowledge through a bi-partisan agreement that racism is a threat to our state’s public health and wellbeing. Recognizing and understanding that our current system disproportionately harms Black Ohioans, would be a concrete first step.

We are proud to support this resolution and support the idea that public health is critical to economic and community development, and to the future of our state. The disparities that currently exist are not acceptable but are not insurmountable. Just as with any puzzle or problem, we first need to recognize what needs to be solved. Public agreement that racial disparities exist, and that they are creating a crisis, will provide that recognition. That will, in turn, allow for everyone to unite around solving that one problem, which will hopefully allow the ensuing decisions and policies to fit together like puzzle pieces to help to shape the final picture.

We want to thank you again for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony as Community Solutions always values the chance to weigh in on policy that would greatly impact the health and wellbeing of Ohioans. We would welcome the chance to share additional research that we have conducted in this space and are happy to answer any questions.

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