

Health equity

Testimony on SCR 14, “Racism as a public health crisis,” before the Senate Health, Human Services and Medicaid Committee

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Good morning, Chairman Burke and members of the committee. My name is Jasmine Ayres and I am the Policy Liaison for Policy Matters Ohio, a nonpartisan organization with the mission of creating a more prosperous, equitable, sustainable and inclusive Ohio. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. As we discuss our complicated history and move to right our wrongs, we must begin by admitting that racism is a public health crisis.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we are only as safe as the person closest to us, and our health is connected to the health of our neighbors and our community. With Black Ohioans getting sick at higher rates, the COVID-19 pandemic is shining a light on what has always been true: Public policy choices, for years, have denied Black and brown Ohioans the care and treatment we all deserve. That is why Policy Matters is urging members of the committee to vote to declare racism to be a public health crisis and follow it up with concrete action, like making sure Black Ohioans receive their fair share of testing for COVID-19.

Black Ohioans make up 14.3% of the state population. Yet they comprise about 25% of all positive COVID-19 patients while making up only 5% of Ohioans being tested.¹ Current and past policies that segregated Black Americans forced many into communities with less access to healthy food, fewer hospitals and more pollution. Discriminatory policy means Black people are pre-disposed to health conditions like asthma and high blood pressure that make them more susceptible to COVID-19 and more likely to die from it.²

In April, Gov. DeWine created the Minority Health Strike Force to address underlying causes of the disproportionate toll COVID-19 is taking on the Black community. The strike force’s final report must do more than sit on a shelf. It must lead to action that addresses the social determinants of health: external factors, like housing, education and employment, that play a large role in determining how healthy people are. The same is true for this resolution.

This resolution should be passed, but the state cannot rest on its laurels. The resolution must be supported with urgent action.

¹ <https://coronavirus.ohio.gov/static/MHSF/COVID-19-SFR.pdf>

² Christian Weller, “Systemic Racism Makes Covid-19 Much More Deadly For African-Americans,” Forbes (Forbes Magazine, June 18, 2020), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/christianweller/2020/06/18/systemic-racism-makes-covid-19-much-more-deadly-for-african-americans/>.

One place to start acting in the spirit of the resolution is to ensure Black Ohioans get COVID testing. COVID testing is about health equity, but it is also about democracy. Protests against policy brutality, organized by Black leaders, have occurred and are occurring in big cities and small towns across the state. Failing to expand testing puts people who are exercising their First Amendment rights to speech, in jeopardy. Along with the communities they live in and the workplaces in which they work.

Limits placed on in person voting are also challenging democracy and the state should act in the spirit of this resolution, to ensure people have the ability to exercise their right to vote. For many Ohioans, limited voting hours means they may miss pay, or hire a sitter just to vote. Every additional hour they stand in line costs them money, which means some people are paying to vote. Black and brown Ohioans are more likely to hold hourly jobs that pay low wages.³ Therefore, they are more likely to be harmed and discouraged from voting by a system that seeks to limit, instead of facilitate participation.

The resolution before you today is a necessary first step -- a call to action -- to address the root causes of racial disparities in COVID-19 cases and its related impact on our elections, but also in well documented health disparities from infant mortality to life expectancy. This committee should pass the resolution to declare racism a public health crisis. Then, back that declaration up with action.

³ <https://www.policymattersohio.org/research-policy/fair-economy/work-wages/minimum-wage/13-minimum-wage-would-help-14-million-working-ohioans>