

**S.B. No. 1, An Act Equalizing Comprehensive Access to Mental, Behavioral and Physical Health Care in Response to the Pandemic**

Public Health Committee  
Jennifer Barahona  
March 17, 2021

Dear Senator Abrams, Representative Steinberg, and Members of the Public Health Committee,

I am writing in strong support for SB 1 and particularly sections 6 and 7 that would declare racism as a public health crisis in the state and establish a commission to study the impact of institutional racism on public health and provide proposals to address disparities.

COVID has shone a light on an issue that many of us in the social sector have known for the entirety of our careers, that our systems are inequitable and the health outcomes for people of color are far worse than white counterparts. Our BIPOC citizens are facing two simultaneous health crises, one caused by a global pandemic and the other by hundreds of years of structural racism that continue to create inequities. As a resident of Fairfield, I was deeply struck by recent data that has showed my life expectancy to be 14 years longer than that of my neighbors in Bridgeport. And that a baby born in Westport will live 20 years longer on average than a child born in Northeast Hartford. That is an absolutely chilling statistic.

Racism clearly meets the criteria of a public health crisis in that it affects large numbers of people, threatens health over the long-term, and requires the adoption of larger-scale solutions. As the CEO of a collective impact effort in Norwalk, we are leading the systems change work that is necessary to improve outcomes for historically marginalized populations. Just this morning we provided a data walk for our members where presented a number of our disaggregated dashboards. The data shows continual patterns of disproportionality and inequities in every data set that we have examined. This includes alarming rates of over-representation of students of color in special education and disciplinary action, and under-representation in academically talented and gifted programs. Across the nation, gaps in health are large, persistent and increasing. Right here in CT there have been countless studies that show just how stark the contrasts are in health outcomes. Health disparities start from the very beginning of a child's life with infant mortality rates for black babies more than double that of white infants. Across the board, every social determinant of health has worse outcomes for individuals of color.

The data could not be more clear. It is time for Connecticut to declare what is already evident, that racism is a public health crisis. We must act with urgency to acknowledge and address these disparities and inequities. The children being born today cannot wait any longer for change to come. I urge you to join the increasing number of states and municipalities across the country that have declared racism a public health crisis.

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