

Statement on S.B. No. 1 - Declaring Racism a Public Health Crisis

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

My name is Elaine O'Keefe. I live in Easton, Connecticut. I am submitting this statement to encourage the Public Health Committee to support and advance passage of a statewide declaration acknowledging the impact of racism on public health in CT. Twenty CT towns/cities have made such declarations and/or passed similar resolutions since June 2020 and many of these municipalities are now actively engaged in efforts to address systemic racism through education and policy change. Easton is among the towns participating in this initiative and has formed a Task Force on Equity and Inclusion.

As a recently retired public health professional, who worked in local health departments for 25 years, and then at the Yale School of Public Health, I am acutely aware of the profound effect of systemic racism on the health opportunity and outcome of people of color in CT. Based on my experience, and an abundance of scientific data, there is no question that this issue meets the criteria for a public health crisis for the reasons articulated by others in public health: 1) It affects large numbers of people; 2) It threatens health over the long-term, and: 3) It requires the adoption of large scale solutions.

By recognizing the significance of systemic racism on public health in CT this declaration is an essential first step toward corrective action and offers the potential to incentive efforts to assess and change the way our state government works, to embed anti-racism principles in state level decision making processes, and to facilitate anti-racist policy making at all levels. For example, the state could examine existing deficiencies in and work to improve data collection on race, ethnicity and language that can be used to evaluate health inequities and inform changes in policy and practice across governmental sectors.

S.B. No. 1 will also set the stage to create a Truth and Reconciliation Committee that more intentionally reviews and analyzes ethnic/racial health disparities in CT; require hospitals to provide implicit bias training; establish a task force that focuses on the critical issue of racial inequities in maternal health and birth outcomes; and commission a study examining the disproportionate impact of the COVID pandemic on people of color in CT.

Thank you for conducting this public hearing and for considering my input on S.B. No. 1