

**Center for Youth Leadership at Brien McMahon High School  
Mayor's Youth Leadership Council at Stamford High School**

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*Why wait for someone else to make a difference?*

**Connecticut Legislature: Public Health Committee  
Testimony in Support of SB 1: An Act Equalizing Comprehensive Access to  
Mental, Behavioral, and Physical Health in Response to the Pandemic**

**March 17, 2021**

Hello Senator Abrams, Representative Steinberg, and members of the Public Health Committee. I have special greetings for Senator Kasser, who represents our interests in Stamford; Representative Gilchrist, with whom we have worked in the past; Representative Linehan, who welcomed us with open arms when we testified for mental health services before the Committee on Children; and Senator Moore, for her encouragement during our testimony before the Human Services Committee.

My name is Roja Yousuf and I am a member of the Center for Youth Leadership and McMahon Students Support Equity in Education, both which are activism organizations at Brien McMahon High School in Norwalk. I am testifying on behalf of those groups and the Mayor's Youth Leadership Council, which is our sister program at Stamford High School. I am testifying in support of *HB SB 1, especially sections 6 and 7 about racism as a public health crisis.*

We just finished celebrating Black History Month at my school. This testimony and this bill are about Black **futures**, and the futures of my Hispanic, Indigenous, and Asian classmates, and those who will follow in our footsteps.

As you know, racism meets all three criteria of a public health crisis. It affects large numbers of people, it threatens health over the long-term, and it requires the adoption of large-scale solutions (1). As of this writing, 185 government bodies have declared racism a public health crisis, including the states of Michigan, Minnesota, Virginia, and Nevada, as well as 20 municipalities in Connecticut (2).

Although this concept of racism has been gaining steam with state and local governments, it is not new. Public health officials have been talking about the social determinants of health since the 1990s, connecting racist practices in housing, health care, employment, and other areas to worse health outcomes for Black Americans (3).

What's changed is an increase in racial strife, COVID, and the fact that governments are talking about racism as the root cause of several problems. "The pandemic highlights racial inequalities quite well," said Rugaijah Yearby of the Institute for Healing Justice and Equity at St. Louis University, "and policymakers are beginning to see examples of how things like housing and education and health care connect" (4). As we have seen in many cities in the state, "disproportionately high rates of COVID cases and deaths among Black and Latino residents are the result of income inequality, housing and education discrimination that have led them to be more likely than other populations to work in essential jobs, live in more crowded housing, and experience health conditions that make COVID-19 infection more dangerous" (5).

In a similar vein, we have asked our school districts for a top to bottom review of how curricula, hiring practices, discipline policies, and social emotional learning practices impact student success. In other words, a review of the foundations upon which the education of 11,500 students is built. In Norwalk, for example, the Temple University Equity Lab is leading administrators on root cause analyses of school operations, with an eye toward disproportionality, equity, and anti-racist policymaking. Acknowledging the problem has been an important first step by school officials “...to intentionally address racism through a review of policy” (5).

The review of policies is key. That’s why we support SB 1. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, if it follows the lead of New Haven, for example, will commit the state to “...advocate for relevant policies that improve health in communities of color, and support local, state, regional, and federal initiatives that advance efforts to dismantle systemic racism” (6). Furthermore, the declaration called for in the bill will “...spur Connecticut to recognize racism as the public health crisis it is and address the problem by changing the way our state government works and embedding anti-racist principles in decision-making processes” (8).

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

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## **Notes**

1. *Health Equity Solutions*.

2. *Ibid*.

3. Emma Coleman, “Cities Declared Racism a Public Health Crisis. What Now?,” *Route Fifty*, October 19, 2020.

4. *Ibid*

5. *Ibid*, *Health Equity Solutions*.

6. *Connecticut By The Numbers*, “Racism is a Public Health Crisis,” July 14, 2020.

7. *Ibid*.

8. *Ibid*, *Health Equity Solutions*.