

March 26, 2021

TESTIMONY SUPPORTING HB-6662: AN ACT DECLARING RACISM AS A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS AND ESTABLISHING THE COMMISSION ON RACIAL EQUITY IN PUBLIC HEALTH.

Dear Honorable Chairpersons Osten and Walker, Ranking Members Miner and France, Vice Chairs Hartley, Dathan, and Nolan, and all other distinguished Members of the Appropriations Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly:

My name is Colette Anderson, a resident of Meriden, and the Executive Director of the Connecticut Women's Consortium in Hamden. The Consortium supports legislation that promotes an equity-based, trauma-informed, and resilient Connecticut and the elimination of inequities and disparities relating to race. I am here to voice our organization's strong support for *HB-6662, An Act Declaring Racism as a Public Health Crisis and Establishing the Commission on Racial Equity in Public Health*.

Using advocacy, training, and education tools, the Consortium strives toward a behavioral health system which responds to the needs of women, LGBTQ individuals, and people of color, as well as the people and organizations that affect them. The Consortium collaborates with the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services to promote best practices in trauma-responsive behavioral health services across the state.

As racism is a social determinant of health, causing inequity and disparate outcomes in many areas of life, it demands recognition as a public health crisis. Racist practices and policies traumatize and then re-traumatize. As specialists in this field, we understand the significance of delivering trauma-informed care. The trauma of racism can potentially result in multiple lifelong consequences. Instead of asking individuals "*What is wrong with you?*" trauma-informed care directs us to ask, "*What has happened to you?*" We now consider the importance of adding, "*And what have we – systems [institutions,] and organizations – done to you?*"¹

In the summer of 2020, the Consortium released a statement supporting the Black Lives Matter movement and calling for "excellence in behavioral healthcare" whereby "Black voices, initiatives, and visions" are empowered within the behavioral health community "so that Black people receive the responsive, trauma-informed care that is so often denied to them." This statement sparked a motivation to meet the needs of those we serve and advocate both internally and externally for an equitable system within the Consortium. Within weeks, employees were holding frank conversations about the Consortium's role in the fight for racial equity, forming the first Equity Committee, and seeking new opportunities to promote and support people of color.

As co-founders of the Connecticut State Taskforce on ACEs and Resilience, we recognize the impact of a wide variety of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) that shape behavior and health. The essential thread through all the work of the Taskforce is expanding opportunity and addressing inequities and disparities. Our efforts center on amplifying the voices of those directly impacted by ACEs and educating that as a public health crisis, racism exacerbates ACEs.

COVID-19 has highlighted the health divide gap in Connecticut and "as news spread about the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on communities of color, high-profile acts of police

¹ Trauma Informed Oregon. (2020). Pledge of Solidarity. Retrieved from <https://traumainformedoregon.org/pledge-of-solidarity/>.

violence against Black Americans helped reignite the Black Lives Matter movement. These events are profoundly transforming the lives of American adults. So how will children fare in the face of these rapid changes?"² We vow to move forward with this question framing our work.

As a social worker, leading an organization and sector replete with social work colleagues, I know the devastation of systemic racism on the mental health of people of color: more anxiety, depression, and stress often with limited access to resources and inadequate care that is neither culturally responsive nor delivered with cultural humility.

Racism does not exist in a vacuum. Framing racism as a public health crisis is not just a matter of semantics. It allows all of us to address the broader crisis in the systemic ways other public health threats have been confronted over time. This includes strategic planning – across all sectors – in policies, practices, and support services. An essential component of this work is leadership at the state level, with the establishment of an Executive Department Commission on Racial Equity in Public Health and the resourcing that entails.

In closing, I urge the committee to support *HB-6662*.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

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² Center for American Progress. (2020, August 27). *Adversity in Early Childhood: The Role of Policy in Creating and Addressing Adverse Childhood Experiences*. Retrieved from <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/early-childhood/reports/2020/08/27/489805/adversity-early-childhood/>.