



40 Clifford Street, Hartford, CT 06114 \* Ph: 860-692-3066 \* ccfj.org

Written testimony submitted to the Connecticut General Assembly and the Appropriations Committee **in support of** H.B. No. 6662 An Act Declaring Racism as a Public Health Crisis and Establishing the Commission on Racial Equity in Public Health.

March 26, 2021

To the Honorable Senator Catherine A. Osten, the Honorable Representative Toni E. Walker and Members of the Appropriations Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly:

We write from the Collaborative Center for Justice, a Hartford-based social justice organization sponsored by six communities of Catholic women religious across Connecticut. We advocate for systemic change and educate individuals about justice issues in order to improve the lives of low-income and marginalized people.

We write in strong support of this bill as leaders of a faith-based institution. Racism is a public health crisis, and is harming the health and wellbeing of our brothers and sisters of color around the state. Our faith teaches us that we are all made in the image of God. Every person deserves to live with dignity and to have their basic human rights protected. In our country and state, our Black and brown communities continue to face racism and other injustices, with dire health, social, and economic consequences. It is critical that Connecticut address these injustices in meaningful ways so that every person truly can live a safe, dignified, healthy life. This bill will take important steps to doing just that.

We contend that the most important way that the state can decrease racist disparities in criminal justice outcomes is to not meet social problems with carceral solutions. This is especially urgent now that the pandemic has not only exposed our social problems – for which the poor and people of color bear disproportionate burdens – it has exacerbated them.

Fatal drug overdoses, for instance, have increased in Connecticut by 13% between 2019 and 2020, with the greatest increase taking place in April at the height of the pandemic in our state.<sup>1</sup> This tracks with the height of our shared social isolation due to the abrupt and necessary closure of communal spaces and the subsequent spike in unemployment. We must not respond to this increase with more tough on crime policies and rhetoric which rely upon, among other things, a false dichotomy between drug users and drug sellers. According to a 2012 survey by the

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<sup>1</sup> Connecticut Department of Public Health: [https://www.drugfreect.org/Customer-Content/www/CMS/files/August\\_2020\\_and\\_2019-Drug\\_Overdose\\_Deaths\\_Monthly\\_Report\\_Connecticut\\_-\\_Updated\\_9-17-2020.pdf](https://www.drugfreect.org/Customer-Content/www/CMS/files/August_2020_and_2019-Drug_Overdose_Deaths_Monthly_Report_Connecticut_-_Updated_9-17-2020.pdf)

Drug Policy Alliance, 43% of self-reported drug sellers met the criteria for substance use disorder.<sup>2</sup>

Importantly, drug enforcement is unequal along racial lines. In 2017, over 29% of the 2,313 arrests for drug abuse violations in Hartford County were Black<sup>3</sup>, while Black people only account for 15.8% of the county's population.<sup>4</sup> This is troubling for several reasons, not the least of which is that Black people are no more likely than white people to use drugs, and they are less likely to sell drugs. Even as drug arrests have declined in recent years, Black people remain grossly overrepresented among those arrested.

In addition to adverse physical health impacts, racism can have harmful impacts on the psychological wellbeing of those who experience it.<sup>5</sup> We believe it's important to explicitly add mental health to lines 101-102 of the bill, to read "mental and physical health". Particular attention should be paid to increasing the accessibility of mental health supports and treatment, both in the community and within schools. This is especially important because in under-resourced communities, the police are often first responders to mental health crises. This tendency has led to far too many fatal results. According to the Treatment Advocacy Center, people with untreated mental illnesses are sixteen times more likely than the general population to be killed by the police.<sup>6</sup>

We believe that people should be able to participate in their communities to the fullest extent possible. Racism is a barrier to human flourishing, which is a detriment to the individual as well as to the wider community. Our communities and state miss out when people are not able to live up to their potential and bring their talents and God-given gifts to bear in our communities. We must affirm the humanity of Black, Indigenous and other people of color across Connecticut by investing in their wellbeing and committing to dismantle racism.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in strong support of H.B. No. 6662 An Act Declaring Racism as a Public Health Crisis and Establishing the Commission on Racial Equity in Public Health.

Respectfully submitted,

Dwayne David Paul – Director

Rachel Lea Scott, MSW – Associate Director

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<sup>2</sup> Drug Policy Alliance: "Rethinking the 'Drug Dealer'". <https://drugpolicy.org/drugsellers>

<sup>3</sup> Connecticut Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection Crime Analysis Unit: [Crime in Connecticut 2017.pdf](https://www.ct.gov/deps/crime-analysis-unit/reports/2017/07/2017-crime-in-connecticut-2017.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> United States Census Bureau: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/hartfordcountyconnecticut>

<sup>5</sup>The Institute for Healing Justice and Equity at Saint Louis University. "Racism is a Public Health Crisis. Here's How to Respond." <https://ihje.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Racism-is-a-Public-Health-Crisis.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Treatment Advocacy Center. "Overlooked in the Undercounted." <https://www.treatmentadvocacycenter.org/storage/documents/overlooked-in-the-undercounted.pdf>

