

H.B. No. 6662: An Act Declaring Racism as a Public Health Crisis and Establishing the Commission on Racial Equity in Public Health

Appropriations Committee

Daria Larson, Graduate Student, University of Connecticut
March 26th, 2021

Honorable Senator Catherine A. Osten (Co-Chair), and the Honorable Representative Toni E. Walker (Co-Chair) and the distinguished Members of the Appropriations Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly,

My name is Daria Larson, a resident of Willimantic, Connecticut, and I am a graduate student pursuing a Master of Public Policy at the University of Connecticut.

I am testifying in support of H.B. No. 6662, co-sponsored by the Honorable Representatives Nolan, Reyes, Simmons and Dathan. I want to start off by acknowledging my privilege to learn about racism rather than experience it in my daily life. That being said, it is still abundantly clear how systemic racism is a public health crisis in Connecticut. There are many examples of racist systems in Connecticut, however, coming from a background in environmental studies, I will provide an example of an environmental justice issue that displays how racism is a public health crisis. The Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) states that over 600 pollution sources exist in Connecticut's 5 major cities, which also are home to 71% of the state's minority populations. Studies by the University of Hartford and DEEP have found that the greatest predictor of where environmental hazards are placed is the percentage of Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) in the community. The pollution in these areas consequently leads to greater occurrence of health problems, such as asthma, which is 10% higher in Hartford than the national average¹. COVID-19 exacerbates these concerns, putting individuals with pre-existing conditions at higher risk, and disproportionately impacting communities of Black, Indigenous and People of Color. In a health-care system that is riddled with both implicit bias and overt racism, these health disparities can be fatal. **We live in an America where your zip code can predict your life**

¹ Dr. Mark Mitchell, former city health director and director of the Hartford Environmental Justice Network

expectancy. Environmental justice issues are just one example of how racism is a public health crisis. Nonetheless, these issues exemplify how racism is deeply systemic, creating a cycle that must be broken.

H.B. 6662 as it stands is not enough to create meaningful change. In support of **Connecticut Equity Now's Declaration Pillars**, I am asking you to consider amending this bill in the following ways to more clearly address systemic racism:

- Clearly define the problem
- Mandate collection of standardized, transparent, accessible and locally-based disaggregated data throughout the state
- Create accountability procedures and mechanisms
- Set sufficient and substantial appropriations
- Take immediate action and provide immediate COVID-19 relief

Although I am **in full support of the idea behind H.B. 6662**, I am asking you to **further develop this Declaration into the transformative legislation** the Connecticut people deserve. Actions always speak louder than words, and in this case, we *need* action. Therefore, in solidarity with the BIPOC members of our Connecticut community, I am testifying 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, with the addition of the noted amendments**. Thank you for the opportunity to speak on this issue.

Sincerely,

Daria Larson
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