

## **Statement on H.B. No. 6662 - An Act Declaring Racism as a Public Health Crisis and Establishing a Commission on Racial Equity in Public Health**

Appropriations Committee  
Elaine O'Keefe  
March 25, 2021

Dear Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Hartley, Representative Dathan, Representative Nolan, and Members of the Appropriations Committee,

My name is Elaine O'Keefe. I live in Easton, Connecticut. I am submitting this statement in support of H.B. No. 6662, **An Act Declaring Racism as a Public Health Crisis and Establishing a Commission on Racial Equity in Public Health**. 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: 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.

Over 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 Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. While it is important that all towns and cities in CT acknowledge the harmful legacy and continued impact of systemic racism on public health, and take appropriate action at the local level to examine and adjust policies and practices, many of the policy changes that will address systemic racism in our state fall within the purview of state agencies and our legislature, and in the absence of a clear commitment to examine and address the need for state level change in CT the effectiveness of local efforts will be thwarted and diminished.

By recognizing the significance of systemic racism on public health in CT H.B No. 6622 is an essential first step toward corrective action and offers the potential to incentivize 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.

H.B. No. 6662 will also create a Commission on Racial Equity in Public Health that more intentionally reviews and analyzes ethnic/racial health disparities in CT, including the disproportionate impact of the COVID pandemic on people of color in CT, and facilitates development of a cross-sector, executive level statewide strategic plan with broad community input, with mandated obligations to report on its findings and recommendations to the CT General Assembly. In addition the Commission will support studies on health care workforce diversity and trainings on implicit bias and cultural humility for students in health programs.

Again, I urge your support of H.B. No. 6662 and thank you for for considering my input.