

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

Appropriations Committee

Jordana Frost, DrPH, MPH, CPH, CD(DONA)

Alison Tyliszczak, LCSW

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

Our names are Dr. Jordana Frost (Storrs Mansfield, Connecticut) and Alison Tyliszczak (Madison, Connecticut) and we stand 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**. Dr. Frost serves as Director of Strategic Partnerships and Alison Tyliszczak as the Director of Maternal Infant Health Initiatives for Connecticut at March of Dimes, a national organization that leads the fight for the health of all moms and babies through investments in research, education and programs, advocacy, and action-driven strategic partnerships.

In her role, Jordana supports the Mom and Baby Action Network: a national coalition of national, state, and local organizations and individuals who work to collectively address the root causes of inequities in maternal and infant health.

When analyzing the research, systems, and lived experiences related to poor birth outcomes in the U.S. our stakeholders agreed that it was imperative to include Racism as a key upstream cause of everyday stressors impacting mothers and their families. Stressors such as unstable housing, poor healthcare quality and access, inequitable exposure to environmental threats, lifelong economic insecurity, frequent experiences of discrimination and unequal treatment literally get under one's skin, translating into biological and psycho-social mechanisms that ultimately lead to adverse outcomes such as maternal morbidity and mortality, preterm birth and infant mortality experienced disproportionately by communities of color.

At the local level, Alison is leading the work with a cross-section of partners across the state to address these inequities and their link to poor birth outcomes. During 2017-2019 (on average) in Connecticut, preterm birth rates were highest for black infants (12.8%), followed by American Indian/Alaska Natives (10.1%), Hispanics (10.0%), whites (8.4%) and Asian/Pacific Islanders (8.4%). Additionally, in Connecticut, women of color were over-represented in relation to pregnancy-associated deaths (56.3%) and pregnancy-related deaths (63.6%) in comparison to their white counterparts between 2015 and 2017. March of Dimes believes that eliminating racial and ethnic health disparities is imperative if we are to achieve our vision of healthy mothers and strong babies.

We commend the Connecticut legislature for considering the proposed legislation that would lead to the state Declaring Racism as a Public Health Crisis (RAPHHC) and following such declaration with the establishment of a Commission on Racial Equity in Public Health. This commission would be tasked with developing a cross-sector strategic plan to address and remediate the systems and policies in which racism is currently implicitly embedded, as well as to prevent future new instances. These are necessary and strong steps in the right direction for the state of Connecticut. Should this bill pass, Connecticut would join at least 185 different entities that have declared RAPHHC, including the states of Michigan, Minnesota, Virginia, and Nevada, as well as 20 municipalities across Connecticut.

We strongly support H.B.6662, An Act Declaring Racism as a Public Health Crisis and Establishing the Commission on Racial Equity in Public Health. **We also respectfully recommend** the Commission on Racial Equity in Public Health be staffed appropriately and that it send regular reports to the Connecticut General Assembly on the status of the commission activities and progress made and recommendations for policy changes.

Mothers and babies are the bedrock of our nation, and yet we continue seeing preventable inequities affecting Black, Indigenous, and families of color, with Black mothers and infants dying at two to four times higher rates than their white counterparts. The pandemic did not create the deep racial inequities in our country or our state, but it can be an opportunity to address them. We cannot afford another preventable death. We dream of a world in which every baby has the opportunity to thrive, live the future they choose and grow up to change the world. Let's continue to work on this bright and equitable future right here in Connecticut, by passing H.B. 6662.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify 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.**

Sincerely,

Jordana Frost, DrPH, MPH, CPH, CD(DONA)

Storrs Mansfield, CT 06268

JFrost@marchofdimes.org

Alison Tyliszczak, LCSW

Madison, CT 06443

Atyliszczak@marchofdimes.org