



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

Tekisha Dwan Everette, PhD
Appropriations Committee
March 26, 2021

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

My name is Tekisha Dwan Everette and I am testifying today in my role as the Executive Director of Health Equity Solutions (HES). HES is a nonprofit organization with a statewide focus on promoting policies, programs, and practices that result in equitable health care access, delivery, and outcomes for all people in Connecticut. Our vision is for every Connecticut resident to attain optimal health regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status.

HES strongly supports H.B. No. 6662: An Act Declaring Racism as a Public Health Crisis and Establishing the Commission on Racial Equity in Public Health. H.B. 6662 would embed an equity lens in policymaking and hold us all accountable for the long-term work of dismantling systemic racism. This policy proposal is a timely response to the (COVID-19) pandemic’s exacerbation of longstanding health disparities and the outrage against violence experienced by people of color in our state and nation. In other words, **now is the time to create intentionally antiracist policy** and this bill is a necessary part of that work.

In response to the public outcry against racist violence and the unjust toll of the pandemic, HES has worked with partners across the state since June to call on all levels of government to declare racism a public health crisis and take steps to dismantle it.¹ 20 Connecticut municipalities and the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation have joined over 180 local, county, and state governments and institutions across the U.S. in making this declaration.² Publicly acknowledging that racism—through structural disadvantages and the “weathering” of daily experiences—is a public health crisis that results in far too much preventable suffering and death, is a starting point for action. **We urge the Connecticut General Assembly to recognize racism as the public health crisis it is and to pass the H.B. 6662 to embed health equity into government decision-making processes.**

Systemic racism is the root cause of health inequities and, in turn, the longstanding and disproportionate burden of death and disease experienced by Black, Indigenous, Latino, and other

¹ Health Equity Solutions. *Health Equity Solutions Petition to Dismantle Racism in Connecticut*. July 2020. [Press release].

² Health Equity Solutions. Health Equity Solutions Declaring Racism a Public Health Crisis in Connecticut. Retrieved from: <https://www.hesct.org/blog/declaring-racism-public-health-crisis-connecticut/>

people of color both long before and during this pandemic. Due to systemic racism and its resultant outcomes, people of color in Connecticut are more likely to live in densely populated neighborhoods, work wage-based jobs, have less wealth, and suffer from chronic health conditions such as asthma and diabetes.^{3,4,5} These longstanding injustices have resulted in a disproportionate toll of the social, physical, and economic hardships of the pandemic, including COVID-19 death and disease, falling on people of color.

Preventable death and disease continue to disproportionately impact people of color because of our collective failure to address the consequences of systemic racism. **Only by acknowledging the problem can we properly address it. But an acknowledgement alone is only a first step. H.B. 6662 includes additional concrete actions to embed antiracism in policymaking.**

The proposed Commission would bring together key stakeholder in state government, engage community members, and generate a strategic plan for reaching a set of clear goals. The proposed reports would draw on information already collected by state agencies to help inform the Commission's early work. By housing this commission in the Executive Branch and having it report to both the Office of Policy and Management and the Public Health Committee of the General Assembly, it will have the reach and oversight necessary to accomplish the goals for reducing racial disparities in health outlined in Section 2(k). Undoing the interwoven and complex harms of generations of structural racism and the resulting social and economic barriers to health requires cross-sector collaboration and robust community engagement to ensure success. H.B. 6662 creates a structure for Connecticut to do this work thoughtfully, with accountability and integrity.

HES respectfully recommends: (1) The Commission on Racial Equity in Public Health explicitly employ a Health Equity in All Policies approach. Connecticut has the opportunity to leverage the strengths of Health in All Policies as implemented in other states and to improve upon those efforts by accounting for differences in need across the state, adequately funding the commission, and bolstering stakeholder and community engagement in this work. (2) Allocate funding for 2 dedicated staff to conduct racial and ethnic impact statements on any proposed bill. When used effectively, these statements ensure that state officials have the information they need to consider policy proposals' potential for promoting equity or for disparate impact on people of color. Without staffing, there is no reliable source for generating these statements.

A declaration that racism is a public health crisis is a commitment to intentionally anti-racist policymaking. This declaration and the provisions of H.B.6662 are the first steps in dismantling the racism in our systems and embedding anti-racism in governance in Connecticut.

³ DataHaven. *Towards Health Equity in Connecticut*. Retrieved from <https://ctdatahaven.org/sites/ctdatahaven/files/DataHaven%20Health%20Equity%20Connecticut%20061820.pdf>

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *African American Health Creating equal opportunities for health*. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/aahealth/index.html#:~:text=The%20death%20rate%20for%20African%20Americans%20decreased%2025%25%20from%201999,high%20blood%20pressure%20than%20whites.>

⁵ John Hopkins Center for Health Equity, *The State of Black America*. Retrieved from <https://soba.iamempowered.com/sites/soba.iamempowered.com/files/Johns%20Hopkins%20Report%20PDF%20Download%20SOBA%202020.pdf>

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**. I can be reached with any questions at teverette@hesct.org or 860.937.6610.