



**TESTIMONY OF:**

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**WRITTEN TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF:**

Senate Concurrent Resolution 14

To declare racism a public health crisis and to ask the Governor to establish a working group to promote racial equity in Ohio

Senate Health, Human Services & Medicaid Committee

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Chair Burke, Vice-Chair Huffman, Ranking Minority Member Antonio, and distinguished members of the Ohio Senate Health, Human Services, and Medicaid Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of Senate Concurrent Resolution 14.

My name is Erin Ryan and I serve as the Managing Director of the Ohio Women's Public Policy Network, a coalition of nearly 40 organizations working collaboratively to advocate for public policy solutions that build economic opportunity for women and families.

We believe that the measure of success for our state and our communities is in large part determined by the success of Ohio's women. Therefore, policymakers must advance public policies centered in equity, fairness, and justice that address blatant and systemic racism that is holding back, harming, and killing Ohioans of color. Without action from our state legislature, we will never dismantle the racism that harms the lives and futures of the women and families for whom we advocate every day. Racism and sexism are inextricably linked, and in order to advance gender justice, we must intentionally center racial justice in our work.

These shared goals shaped our interest in testifying today in support of Senate Concurrent Resolution 14, which would declare racism a public health crisis, and urge the Governor to establish a working group to promote racial equity in Ohio. Many local governments in Ohio and across the nation have passed similar declarations, and Ohio is one of a handful of states that are considering such resolutions in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protest movement. **This resolution would be an important first step in our state's efforts to build a state that works for all Ohioans, and we strongly urge the committee to support the swift passage of SR 14.**

Everyone, no matter what they look like or where they are from, deserves the opportunity to lead economically secure, safe, and healthy lives. But for many Ohioans, their futures and well-being are met with barriers simply because of the color of their skin.

Historically, our country's laws and policies have reinforced and perpetuated structural and institutional racism, discrimination, and bias towards people of color. Still today, many of the policies currently in place continue to perpetuate racial disparities in access to quality health care, workplace protections, economic opportunity, and freedom from violence. Our state lawmakers can actively dismantle these systems of oppression and racial injustice by advancing truly anti-racist policy solutions.

However, that means first acknowledging the dangerous and deadly role racism has on the health of people of color, particularly Black people. The passage of Senate Resolution 14 would move our state in this direction, declaring racism as the public health crisis it is, while also laying out a foundation for continued anti-racist action.

The coronavirus crisis has laid bare the ways in which racism impacts the health and livelihood of communities of color, and it illustrates the need for our policymakers to address policy solutions through a racial lens. As a direct result of our nation's racist systems and policies, the health and economic fallout of the crisis are hitting people of color the hardest: Black people are overrepresented in both the COVID-19 case counts and hospitalizations, in Ohio and nationally. Women of color make up the majority of the "essential" frontlines workers, putting their health and lives on the line to provide for themselves and their families. At the same time, Black and Latinx women have experienced the highest rates of unemployment, often resulting in economic instability, detachment from the workforce, and the loss of health insurance.

In the midst of the global coronavirus pandemic, which is disproportionately devastating Black communities, our state and nation have come together to protest the racist violence within policing and the criminal justice system. The violence against Black women, particularly transgender Black women, must not remain invisible in these efforts to call for justice and reform our systems. Our demands for change must include the end of racist violence against Black women, and our calls for justice must be vocal and vigilant for Black women killed by racist violence: Breonna Taylor, Sandra Bland, Atatiana Jefferson, Riah Milton. The murders of countless Black people at the hands of police and racist attacks have amplified the necessity for accountability and change to racist policies, not only in policing, but across the board within our health, economic, and criminal justice systems.

The reality is: racism and racial bias is embedded into the systems that shape health outcomes across a person's lifetime, including the health care systems where people seek care and services. We can look to our nation's racial disparities in maternal mortality and morbidity rates as one of the many ways that racism within health care has very dangerous, deadly consequences for Black women and women of color.

Black women are three to four times more likely to die from pregnancy-related deaths compared to white women, and Black women are also disproportionately affected when it comes to preterm birth rates - rising to a nearly 50 percent higher rate than other women. These inequalities exist not solely because of racial disparities in access to and quality of care, but primarily as a result of discrimination and implicit bias in the health care system experienced before, during, and after pregnancy, and stress and trauma associated with structural and institutional racism. As a society, we are often quick to point to the “social determinants of health” as the core reason for racial health disparities, rather than focusing on the root cause: racism.

In addition to declaring racism a public health crisis, Senate Resolution 14 outlines steps for concrete action, such as urging the governor to establish a working group to promote racial equity and adopting a “racial equity lens” in legislative work within the state legislature. These components of the legislation could create opportunities for our state lawmakers to move forward policy solutions during COVID-19 and beyond that center the experiences and needs of people of color by actively applying a racial lens to proposals.

By adopting this resolution, Ohio can lead the nation in these efforts to uproot racism from our structures and systems, and begin to work to provide just, equitable solutions to some of the biggest problems facing Black Ohioans and Ohioans of color. While this resolution would be an important step in the right direction, there is a long way to go. There are a number of anti-racist policy proposals currently pending in the State Legislature: establishing a living wage, enacting statewide paid family and medical leave program, and addressing racial disparities in maternal mortality and morbidity.

From health care to housing, from policing to economic opportunity, systemic racism is embedded into our country’s institutions, public policies, and even its founding. It is far past time for policymakers to come together and take swift, meaningful action to move forward these and other anti-racist policies that build a state where everyone - whether Black, brown, or white - can feel safe, live free from fear of violence, and work with dignity. **We urge the committee to favorably report Senate Resolution 14, with a commitment to continue efforts to move forward proactive, anti-racist policy solutions that build an Ohio that works for us all.**

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today in support of Ohio Senate Resolution 14. I am available to answer any questions by email at [ryan@innovationohio.org](mailto:ryan@innovationohio.org).

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