

The Columbus Dispatch

Opinion

Editorial: Racism is a public health crisis

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Mayor Andrew J. Ginther said it during his State of the City address in February.

The Franklin County Board of Commissioners and Franklin County Public Health each said it this month.

The Dispatch stands with all of them in saying it: Racism is a public health crisis. We must work together to confront and address this deadly problem.

And we echo the commissioners in asking Gov. Mike DeWine, House Speaker Larry Householder and Senate President Larry Obhof to “join with us to declare racism as a public health crisis and to enact equity in all policies in the state of Ohio.”

In his February speech, Ginther called out racism as a deadly dividing force in Columbus that must be healed for the city to realize the potential for all residents. The Dispatch commended the mayor at the time for his stand against racism, and we similarly praise the county commissioners and health officials for their declarations.

The costs of not acting are immense and unacceptable.

As the coronavirus pandemic has raised everyone's awareness of serious health risks, it is entirely appropriate that county officials are viewing racism as a public health crisis.

In the narrow context of COVID-19 statistics, African Americans make up 13% of the U.S. population but account for 22% of coronavirus-related deaths, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported earlier this month. In Columbus and Franklin County, black residents comprise 23% of the population but 29% of known COVID-19 infections and 32% of hospitalizations.

Similarly, the commissioners noted that black people also have significantly higher rates of low birth weights and infant mortality, are more likely to be overweight or obese and have greater incidence of adult diabetes with long-term complications, to die of heart attack and stroke, and to die prematurely.

These higher rates of illness and death fit within the larger context of racism as a social determinant of health, which is borne out by data.

As noted in the county commissioners' Tuesday resolution, African Americans in Franklin County — before coronavirus shutdowns sent job losses soaring for everyone — were twice as likely to be unemployed (11.1% versus 5.7% in the overall population); almost twice as likely to live in poverty (29.9% to 16.7%); much less likely to own their homes (33.4% to 53.6%) and close to three times more likely to experience incarceration (637 per 100,000 to 223 per 100,000).

In a Dispatch story in April, advocates for vulnerable workers and communities say the shutdown during the pandemic quickly revealed gaps in safety-net programs and is threatening to deepen income inequality, a measure that's grown steadily worse in the United States for years.

All of those disparities can be linked back to racism and the disadvantages that stem from it, cascading into hardships and health issues that diminish the quality of life for millions and shorten thousands of lives.

In one example of that, the news organization ProPublica recently reported that “despite the great scientific strides in diabetes care, the rate of amputations across the country grew by 50% between 2009 and 2015. Diabetics undergo 130,000 amputations each year, often in low-income and underinsured neighborhoods. Black patients lose limbs at a rate triple that of others.”

No one needs to look in the mirror to decide whether racism is a problem each of us should care about.

We should all care because of the propensity of racism to unjustly devalue and discriminate against individuals and entire communities without looking beyond their skin color to see the potential within. Such prejudice, the commissioners rightly recognized, “saps the strength of the whole society through the waste of human resources.”

It is why the commissioners' Franklin County Rise Together Blueprint for Reducing Poverty cites racial disparity as an “overarching problem” and why the

commissioners last year committed to racial equity training for themselves and their staff.

Building on that work, the commissioners resolved this week to “identify clear goals and objectives” to help them determine what progress their efforts will produce.

We urge state leaders, as well as business and community leaders, to do the same, because racism is a public health crisis that must be addressed.