Franklin County: ‘Racism is a public health crisis’

By Marc Kovac
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The declaration was a first of its kind for the agency, and health officials say it’s more than just the statement of a formal opinion. Rather, the declaration included a number of action steps to address racism and disparities within the agency and in how it provides services to residents.

Franklin County Public Health formally declared racism a public health crisis this week and vowed to do something about it.

“We thought it was important that, as a health department, we go on the record ... to make sure our community understands the connections and how our
health is impacted,” county Health Commissioner Joe Mazzola said. “It’s a significant document.”

Franklin County Public Health began developing the resolution months before COVID-19 hit the scene, but the ongoing pandemic has further spotlighted health disparities among African American and other minority residents, including higher incidences of hypertension, diabetes and other chronic health issues. The Dispatch reported this month that black residents in Columbus and Franklin County continue to make up a disproportionate share of coronavirus infections and hospitalizations.

“For minorities and especially for African Americans, there are huge disparities,” said Assistant Health Commissioner Theresa Seagraves. “It is unfortunate that here in Ohio we are a state that has some of the best clinical and health services in the nation ... (but) when it comes to health care outcomes, we are consistently rated at the bottom. .... The underlying reason for these really institutionalized and systemic poor health outcomes and disparities does link back to racism.”

The public health crisis declaration adopted by Franklin County Public Health noted that black Ohioans have a lower life expectancy, a higher likelihood of death by heart disease or stroke, and a higher infant mortality rate, among other indicators.

Among other actions, the declaration calls for increased efforts to educate the public about the effects of racism on public health and a review of ordinances and agency polices to ensure equity and diversity.
Along those lines, the agency approved this week a $3,000 contract to provide training to employees on racism and equity in public health, and a separate resolution implementing a “Health and Equity in All Policies Policy” to further address related issues within the agency.

“We do mean for the policy to address all biases, all -isms, that are being demonstrated as we do our work,” Seagraves said. “We clearly spell out what the roles and responsibilities are for our employees, for our supervisors, for senior staff, and even for our board members. Everybody has a role in this.”

Seagraves said the public health crisis declared this week was modeled after comparable declarations by cities and counties in other states. Franklin County's is among the first in Ohio, with Cleveland also considering its own resolution.

“It’s my hope that this also gains traction in other city and county health departments across the state, particularly those in large urban areas, and that as we gain traction in those locations perhaps we could have some influences on the Ohio Department of Health to do something similar,” said Dr. Arthur James, a member of the county health board.

Franklin County commissioners formally acknowledged the need to address racial disparities as part of its poverty-eradicating plan, which was unveiled about a year ago. But all three commissioners said Thursday that they would support adopting a public health crisis resolution, too.
“It is new to declare that racism is a nuisance to public health,” Commissioner Kevin Boyce said.

Commissioner Marilyn Brown added: “The disparities have shown themselves in a much bigger way through this pandemic in every way possible. We knew they were there, but clearly, through the pandemic, we’ve seen disparities in every way possible.”

Commissioner John O’Grady said racism is its own pandemic, and one that’s been around for “all our lives ... If a resolution by the county commissioners calling it what it is ... can help, then I’m all for it.”

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