



Washtenaw County Board of Health

A Resolution Naming Racism as a Public Health Crisis and Confirming Our Collective Commitment to Health Equity in Washtenaw County

Washtenaw County Board of Health
June 30, 2020

WHEREAS, race is a social construct that has no biologic basis; and

WHEREAS, racism is defined as “a system of structuring opportunity and assigning value based on the social interpretation of how one looks (which is what we call "race"), that unfairly disadvantages some individuals and communities, unfairly advantages other individuals and communities, and saps the strength of the whole society through the waste of human resources," according to American Public Health Association Past-President Camara Phyllis Jones, MD, MPH, PhD; and

WHEREAS, [multiple public health studies](#) over time conclude that factors such as class and income do not fully account for the unjust differences in health and opportunity evident among non-white individuals and communities; and

WHEREAS, public health leaders, institutions and partners must name racism as a public health crisis that harms, kills and prevents individuals and communities from living healthy lives; and

WHEREAS, we must collectively commit to dismantling existing, racist and inequitable systems and structures and reversing our complicity in health inequities driven by racism; and

WHEREAS, for more than 18 years the Washtenaw County Health Department has tracked health disparities in the county, and finds that they are increasing in many areas; and

WHEREAS, Washtenaw County ranks 80 out of 83 Michigan counties for income inequality in the 2020 County Health Rankings and Roadmaps; and

WHEREAS, there is a 10-year difference in life expectancy between African American or Black residents and white residents, and a 17-year difference between Latinx and white residents; and

WHEREAS, the COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated existing racial inequities and further highlighted racism as a root cause of poorer health and continues to disproportionately cause devastation and death among people and communities of color; and

WHEREAS, Washtenaw County elected and agency leaders participated in training from the Government Alliance on Race and Equity about government and institutional policy and practices that have contributed to the racial, economic and health inequities and enacted an Equity Ordinance in 2018 to advance government-wide equity work; and

WHEREAS, the Health Department, with support of the Board of Health, determined that achieving health equity is a [key strategic initiative](#) and has dedicated increased staffing and resources to these long-term goals that include building equitable community-centered engagement practices, advocating for and maximizing resources for community impact, making data matter to address current and emerging issues, and strengthening and supporting an engaged workforce; and



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WHEREAS, the purpose of the County Equity Ordinance is to declare the Health Department's intent to purposefully and proactively address issues of racial inequity and to elevate our established vision and guiding principles for health equity as the foundation of these intensified efforts; and

WHEREAS, these commitments include sharing power, decision-making and resources with community members who are most impacted by local health disparities and who have direct lived experience within communities that are most impacted by disparities; and

WHEREAS, we further commit to working in partnership with community members, organizations and leaders who are engaged in anti-racist action, addressing community-defined problems and using community-driven solutions to commit to real transformation; and

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Washtenaw County Board of Health fully supports the explicit confirmation of racism as a public health crisis and the dedication of Department resources to deepen this work in solidarity with social movements for racial justice and in accordance with the Health Department's vision and guiding principles for health equity.

Washtenaw County Health Department envisions a healthy community where every resident has the opportunity to achieve optimal health and well-being and is committed to working with community members and partners to address the factors that influence health, including employment, education, housing, neighborhood, public safety, food access, air and drinking water quality, and health care. Our work toward health equity and social justice will be guided by the following principles:

- We value all people equally.
- We promote the improvement of living conditions in which community members are born, grow, reside, work, play, learn and age.
- We strengthen partnerships with community members that aid in community empowerment through community capacity-building, organizing, and mobilizing.
- We name racism and other -isms as a barrier to health equity and social justice.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Board of Health, in alignment with Washtenaw County's Equity Policy, will engage in an annual review and assessment of progress towards strategic goals, internal policies, procedures, practices, and budget allocations for their impact on racial equity, diversity and inclusion.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Board of Health will engage community members and partners in this annual review and assessment process; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Health Department engages in ongoing staff training and development, maintains an internal Health Equity and Social Justice team, seeks to incorporate Health in All Policies whenever possible – and commits to increasing staff and leadership diversity through equity informed practices developed in collaboration with Washtenaw County Human Resources and Racial Equity Office; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Board of Health urges actions by the Washtenaw County Board of Commissioners to support the direct work of the Health Department and other departments, entities and leaders to transform our current systems and institutions, to fully listen and act collectively with community members, and to dedicate flexible resources to these challenges – using local data and effective, collaborate strategies to effect sustained changes.

