

June 9th, 2020

## **Written Testimony for The House Ways and Means Committee Hearing on The Disproportionate Impact of COVID-19 on Communities of Color**

Our country is sick from systemic racism. For far too long, our country has allowed commercial interests to exploit our workers while failing to provide basic protections which would strengthen our society and improve our standing in the world. COVID-19 has revealed the vulnerabilities of black and brown bodies, and the murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and now Tony McDade and David McAtee, have vividly revealed the struggles of the African American community in the US today. The violence--both bodily and psychological--perpetrated against black and brown people, and the underlying systems of mass incarceration, poverty, police brutality, and racialized capitalism that they reveal, will haunt us as a nation.

Healthcare plays a pivotal role in systemic racism. We are already seeing the evidence of this, with the knowledge that black mothers are three to four times as likely to die as their white counterparts, and COVID-19 is three to four times more likely to kill African American persons, and two times more likely to kill Latinx persons than white counterparts. Indigenous communities nationally and internationally have also faced disproportionate impact and reduced aid. It is essential that we as a nation expand the work that is already being done to commit to making this problem better not worse.

The tragically outsized impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on communities of color evidences just how deep these inequities have cut into our national fabric, and how far we have to go in healing the wounds of racialized capitalism. In Vermont, we have witnessed the unacceptable toll racial inequality takes on our fellow citizens. Black Vermonters are testing positive for COVID-19 at double their population share. Both Black and Hispanic Vermonters have [higher rates per 10,000 cases](#) than their white counterparts. There has also been a recent spike in new COVID-19 cases amongst the [New American community in Winooski, VT](#).

Weaponized discrimination against communities of color has historically abetted the criminalization and marginalization of minority groups, while distracting from this exploitation of workers of all colors and creeds. This exploitation has led to millions of immigrant families being deemed as essential workers yet being unjustly left out of coronavirus relief funds. Specifically in VT, Governor Phil Scott announced a \$400 million COVID relief package for the state which includes \$50 million to bail out the dairy industry [but no direct support for undocumented dairy workers](#) – or any other immigrant workers – who have been left out of all aid packages to date. This is cruel and unacceptable.

We thank the committee for addressing the issue of racial disparity as laid bare by the COVID-19 pandemic. This conversation is the beginning, but real change must be backed by financial investment. The budgetary commitment of the Ways and Means Committee is urgently awaited. Together we can leave health disparities behind us, and emerge from this pandemic with renewed strength.

We in the Vermont chapter of the Campaign Against Racism believe in and support the liberation of black, indigenous, and people of color. We recognize that this liberation will not be achieved while racial capitalism continues to exploit them. Therefore, we propose the following recommendations:

#### **Name Racism a public health crisis**

- Many cities across the nation have named racism as a public health crisis which is the first step in addressing systemic racism in the US
- Racist policies, economic systems, and institutions have been shaped by slavery and the consequences are that black lives are devalued and this must end
- Swiftly and urgently implement strategies to assess how racism operates from national to local levels

#### **Invest in black communities and divest from exploitative forces**

- Defund the police and invest in black and brown communities
- Redistribute the funds to increase the budgets of social workers, mental health services, health care, transportation, and other social services that will promote strong and healthy communities
- Zero tolerance for police use of excessive force of any kind
- Require mandatory reporting of excessive force use and subsequent termination of officers at fault
- Reverse the militarization of police forces and reduce the number of SWAT teams and the frequency of their deployment

#### **Abolish ICE**

- [ICE statistics](#) show that over 800 detainees have tested positive for coronavirus. Forcing people to remain in close proximity in these deplorable conditions without adequate medical care is dangerous and will result in more unnecessary deaths. All detainees in ICE custody must be released now to prevent this.
- Suspend all deportations, mass raids, and detentions
- Provide humanitarian parole for all detainees

#### **Provide direct economic relief**

- Create a Coronavirus Relief Fund to issue payments to all immigrant families excluded from federal relief due to immigration status
  - Relief payments should be the same as the federal stimulus payments - \$1,200 per adult and \$500 per child
- Provide regular payments to all persons regardless of immigration status throughout the economic recession
  - Payments should be greater for those who are disproportionately impacted
- Relieve all student debt
- Halt all evictions, foreclosures, and shut offs of water and electricity

#### **Implement a single-payer universal health care system**

- Provide free and accessible testing to all regardless of immigration status
- Guarantee any covid-19 vaccines or medicines invented using tax-payer funding be kept globally affordable

#### **Require all medical institutions to assess how racism operates at their institution.**

- Half of white medical trainees believe that black people have thicker skin and [feel less pain](#) and the resultant discrimination in care leads to poorer health outcomes
- Gathering data that lead to health disparities as well as implementing anti-racist education for staff, faculty, and trainees should be mandatory

#### **Abolish Private Prisons and Implement Prison Reform**

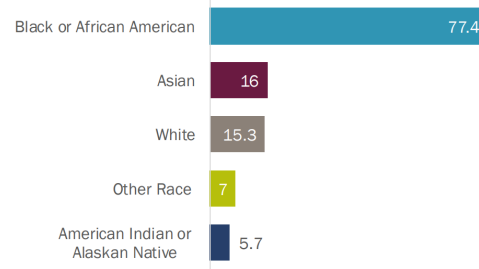
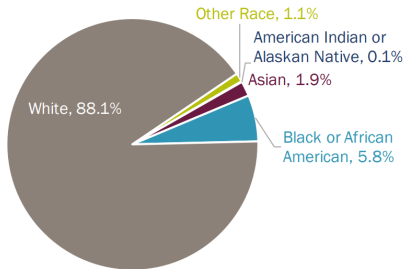
- The close quarters and overcrowding of prisons are breeding grounds for infectious disease, including Covid-19, HIV, Hepatitis B and C, and tuberculosis. This is a public health crisis not only for prisoners, but also for their friends and families.
- Prisons are among the largest mental health providers in the country because mental illness too often leads to a prison sentence. This is not how people suffering from mental illness should be treated
- We have by far the most prisoners in the world, more than 75% of released prisoners are rearrested within [five years](#), and the annual cost per inmate is [over \\$33,000](#). There is no evidence to support the status quo. The whole system must be reformed.

Chairman Richard E. Neal  
 House Ways and Means Committee  
 U.S. House of Representatives  
 1102 Longworth House Office Building  
 Washington D.C. 20515  
 Phone: (202) 225-36

## Appendix:

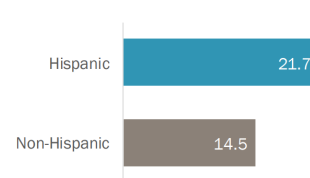
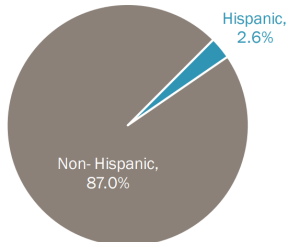
**White** Vermonters represent the majority of COVID-19 cases. **African American** Vermonters have the highest rate.

Rate per 10,000 Vermonters



**Non-Hispanic** Vermonters represent the majority of COVID-19 cases. **Hispanic** Vermonters have the higher rate.

Rate per 10,000 Vermonters



Vermont Department of Health

Note: Race is unknown in 3% of cases and ethnicity is unknown in 10% of cases.

10

Graphical representation of racial disparities seen in Vermont as of June 3rd, 2020 according to data from the [Vermont Department of Health](https://www.vermont.gov/health).