

RACISM AS A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS IN WISCONSIN

ISSUE: In October 2017, the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute’s Mobilizing Action Toward Community Health Group convened statewide partners at the inaugural Healthiest State Agenda Setting meeting. The convening supported the collective identification of six statewide health equity priorities, one of which was to declare racism a public health emergency. In May 2018, the Wisconsin Public Health Association (WPHA) adopted a resolution declaring that racism is a public health crisis in Wisconsin and committed to taking action. Milwaukee County took similar action and asked the Wisconsin Counties Association to consider doing the same.

The WPHA, along with several partner organizations, worked together to transfer the WPHA resolution content to a “Racism is a Public Health Crisis Sign-on.” The goal is for organizations and individuals to sign on to the declaration and commit to actions that are tailored to their specific contexts.

Following is the text of the declaration:

We agree that Racism is a Public Health Crisis and commit to take urgent action because:

- Race is a social construction with no biological basis.
- Racism is a social system with multiple dimensions: individual racism is internalized, or interpersonal and systemic racism is institutional or structural, and is a system of structuring opportunity and assigning value based on the social interpretation of how one looks, 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.
- Racism causes persistent racial discrimination in housing, education, employment and criminal justice, and an emerging body of research demonstrates that racism is a social determinant of health.
- More than 100 studies have linked racism to worse health outcomes.
- In Wisconsin, the highest excess death rates exist for African Americans and Native Americans at every stage in the life course and our infant mortality rate for infants of non-Hispanic black women is the highest in the nation.
- The American Public Health Association (APHA) launched a National Campaign Against Racism.
- Healthiest Wisconsin 2020 states that, “Wisconsin must address persistent disparities in health outcomes and the social, economic, educational and environmental inequities that contribute to them.”

- Public health’s responsibilities to address racism include reshaping our discourse and agenda so that we all actively engage in racial justice work.
- While there is no epidemiological definition of “crisis,” the health impact of racism clearly rises to the definition proposed by Galea: “The problem must affect large numbers of people, it must threaten health over the long-term, and it must require the adoption of large-scale solutions.”

As of February 13, 2020, the following counties and county-related organizations have signed on to the *Racism is a Public Health Crisis in Wisconsin Declaration*:

- Florence County Health Department
- Kenosha County Division of Health
- Milwaukee County
- Public Health Madison and Dane County
- Wisconsin Association of Local Health Departments and Boards

STEERING COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION: The WCA Health and Human Services Steering Committee recommends that the WCA Board of Directors sign the Wisconsin Counties Association on to the *Racism is a Public Health Crisis in Wisconsin Declaration*.

RECOMMENDATION: It is recommended that the WCA Board of Directors sign the Wisconsin Counties Association on to the *Racism is a Public Health Crisis in Wisconsin Declaration*.

Wisconsin Counties Association

2020 Conference Resolution Late Resolution 1

Offered for consideration this 20th Day of September 2020 by
Milwaukee County

Relating to

Calling Upon the State of Wisconsin and All Wisconsin Counties to Make Positive Policy Changes Which Will Work Toward Eliminating Systemic Poverty and Inequality

WHEREAS, the May 25, 2020 murder of George Floyd has reignited the national conversation on race, poverty, and inequality; and Wisconsin counties, as arms of the State of Wisconsin, fulfilling many vital state-mandated services, are on the frontlines in addressing the social ills facing many Wisconsinites; and

WHEREAS, the Pew Research Center's "Race in America 2019" report uncovered the following statistics regarding racial bias in the United States:

- Approximately 65 percent of Blacks "say someone has acted suspicious of them or as if they weren't smart" compared with 37 percent of Latinos, 34 percent of Asians, and 25 percent of Whites
- Approximately 78 percent of Blacks "say we haven't gone far enough in giving blacks equal rights with whites" compared with 37 percent of Whites agreeing
- Approximately 64 percent of Blacks are pessimistic toward the notion "we will eventually achieve equality"

; and

WHEREAS, in 2018, in the University of Wisconsin-Madison "Supplement to the 2016 Wisconsin Poverty Report," university researchers found:

- Using the Wisconsin Poverty Measure, in 2016 30.3 percent of Blacks and 18.5 percent of Latinos and other minorities lived in poverty compared to 10 percent of Whites
- Overall poverty in Milwaukee County is significantly higher than the rest of Wisconsin – 17.5 percent versus 10.8 percent in 2016
- "These data suggest that improving economic and social outcomes for individuals and families in Milwaukee, especially for blacks, would reduce poverty rates within the county and overall in the state."

and there is a well-established common understanding of the correlation between poverty, crime, and social achievement; and

WHEREAS, Wisconsin Superintendent Carolyn Stanford Taylor issued a press release on October 30, 2019 relating to Wisconsin's 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), noting, "Wisconsin's scores reflected a wider gap between the performance of black and white students than any other state or jurisdiction except one, the District of Columbia;" and

WHEREAS, Milwaukee County has worked toward addressing the societal ill of racial inequality by:

- Creating the Office of African American Affairs in April 2017 (File No. 16-726)
- Declaring racism a public health crisis in April 2019 (File No. 19-397)
- Prioritizing federal Community Development Block Grant dollars toward projects which improve local community and economic development rather than routine public works maintenance in April 2019 (File No. 19-153)
- Co-creating the Milwaukee City-County Joint Taskforce on Climate and Economic Equity in July 2019 (File No. 19-582)
- Creating Chapter 108 – Achieving Racial Equity and Health in the Milwaukee County Code of General Ordinances in April 2020 (File No. 20-174)

; and

WHEREAS, the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. once said at the 1963 March on Washington, "We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are, confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there 'is' such a thing as being too late. There is no time for apathy or complacency. This is a time for vigorous and positive action;" and

WHEREAS, the Committee on Finance, at its special meeting of July 21, 2020, recommended adoption of File No. 20-576 (vote 6-0).

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Wisconsin Counties Association, in conference assembled, does hereby call upon the State of Wisconsin and all Wisconsin counties to seize the moment to constructively work toward positive change against systemic racism and inequality; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this resolution be distributed to member counties with an invitation to work collaboratively toward positive change against systemic racism and inequities.

RESOLUTIONS COMMITTEE ACTION: Motion by Nicholson, second by Kruse, to recommend consideration and adoption of Late Resolution 1 by Milwaukee County. Motion carried.

RESOLUTIONS COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION: Consideration and Adoption.

2020 CONFERENCE ACTION: By unanimous consent, Late Resolution 1 was brought before the body. The Chair sought unanimous consent to adopt Late Resolution 1. Objection was heard. Motion by Kenosha County, second by Milwaukee County, to adopt. Motion by Burnett County, second by Vilas County, to refer to the Board of Directors. Motion carried.