18 May 2020

Re: State Response to COVID-19 Impact on People of Color

Mr. Governor et. al,

Your efforts in bridging the gap in what is arguably the worst Vermont crises in state history are appreciated. We fear that there are some of us that are being left behind. Pre-COVID-19, African Americans had an unemployment rate twice that of whites. Further, the median wealth of whites was 13 times that of African Americans. Many people of color were pre-unemployed with no benefits, underemployed, struggling to start businesses, previously incarcerated or under the control of the Department of Corrections, unbanked or had no sufficient tax filing history. Recently the Center for Responsible Lending estimated that “upwards of 90% of businesses owned by people of color have been, or will likely be, shut out of the Paycheck Protection Program.”

COVID-19 is exacerbating ALL of the known racial disparities (housing, education, employment, health services access and the justice system) outlined in the Attorney General and Human Rights Commission ACT 54 Racial Disparities in State Systems Report and Recommendations, in December 2017.
Time doesn't permit me to share the specifics or discuss the pain and fear of many people of color in Vermont. These fears are rooted in real impact up to and including the higher likelihood of contracting and dying from COVID-19.

**Economics is at the heart of the challenges faced by Vermont people of color.** African Americans are indeed dying at highly disproportionate rates from COVID-19. Early in the crises we began to see the reports from Milwaukee, Michigan, Chicago, North Carolina and New Orleans. It should come to us as no surprise that the people of Vermont too are suffering from the COVID-19 at disproportionate rates along racial lines.

We know that pre-COVID-19 we were operating in a health system that delivers disparate outcomes to people of color. We also know that African Americans are much more likely to suffer from underlying conditions of heart disease, hypertension, asthma, high blood pressure and HIV? The CDC and our own Health Department have made it abundantly clear that the aforementioned underlying conditions are more likely to lead to fatal outcomes.

The recent release of Vermont Health Department racially disaggregated (COVID-19) data supports this conclusion. Compounding the issue, people of color are much more likely to work in service industries (essential workers) and less likely to be able to work from home. We have known that systemic racism has and continues to adversely impact people of color across all sectors and we now see them dying of COVID-19 at highly disproportionate rates.

We have called upon the Health Commissioner to collect and make public disaggregated COVID-19 testing, cases and death data. Now we are calling on the State to respond. Now is the time for the Governor to create an Emergency Racial and Ethnic COVID-19 Response Task Force. This is the moment for Legislators to develop policies that include medical, community outreach and education, and economic relief approaches that provide immediate targeted enhanced protection to Vermont people of color and ensure that this work is sustainable in moving forward.
The aforementioned 2017 Act 54 AG HRC report suggested a strategy: “**Vermont state government will devote sufficient resources to reducing identified racial disparities across all systems of state government.**” These are the recommendations we feel will offer the immediate protection and relief to Vermont People Of Color.

1. Targeted COVID-19 and antibody testing for communities and people of color
2. Funding to provide people of color the option to shelter-in-place “Stay-safe”
3. Centralized and funded language translation and targeted communications dissemination
4. Personal protection gear access and support
5. Technology and broadband carrier and family advocacy assistance for remote learners
7. Economic stimulus to those left behind from Federal and State programs
8. Economic development package that includes enhanced employment development, transition assistance and reentry
9. Enhanced oversight and liaison of law enforcement Statewide

We also offer strategic approaches to mitigate the impact of future crises:

1. Standardization, transparency and accountability for law enforcement use of force
2. Mandatory reporting of (high impact/high discretion) racially disaggregated data collection with ongoing prominent public visibility across all systems of State government
3. Creation of a Commission of Racial Equity staffed with policy, training, data analytics and outreach capabilities.
4. Addition of a Population Quality of Life outcome that addresses “fair treatment and equitable opportunity for Vermonters of color to prosper” (3 V.S.A. § 2311)
5. Adoption of legislation calling for the creation of a “Task Force to consider a State apology for Vermont’s role in Chattel Slavery and a Proposal for Reparations”

Respectfully,

Vermont Racial Justice Alliance
Steering Committee