



**Testimony for the Appropriations Committee Public Hearing in support of
House Bill 6662: An Act Declaring Racism as a Public Health Crisis and
Establishing the Commission on Racial Equity in Public Health
Friday, March 26, 2021**

Sonya Jelks
Deputy Majority Leader, Meriden City Council &
Connecticut Director, Corporation for Supportive Housing

Greetings Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Miner, Representative France and the distinguished members of the Committee on Appropriations. My name is Sonya Jelks and I am a Deputy Majority Leader and City Councilor in the great City of Meriden. I also serve as the Connecticut State Director for national non-profit, Corporation for Supportive Housing – which seeks to advance solutions that use housing as a platform for services to improve the lives of the most vulnerable people, maximize public resources and build healthy communities and I thank you for the opportunity to express my support for HB6662.

This declaration will spur Connecticut to recognize racism as the public health crisis that it is and to address the problem by embedding anti-racist principles in the way that our state government works. This declaration is an essential first step towards the generational changes that have been proposed throughout all civil rights efforts in America. This effort to declare racism as a public health crisis at this time is critical and should not be delayed or politicized. During this pandemic, we are clearly seeing the effects of long-term health neglects and lack of focus and attention on the needs of those historically disenfranchised due to race and poverty in this country. Obviously the pandemic did not create the deep racial inequities in our state specifically, but this time can be seen an opportunity to start to address inequities in a direct and intentional way that can make a difference in the lives of those most impacted by historical discriminatory practices, policies, and systems. This bill, HB6662, takes steps to dismantle components of systemic racism and moves Connecticut closer to achieving health equity for all. Every one of us should care about this issue because addressing the healthcare needs of all will have an impact on the fiscal stability of the healthcare industry and the costs that it takes to care for the health needs of those in our community when we do not ensure that all have equal access to preventive and routine healthcare. This pandemic, COVID-19, has been the most glaring example of racial health disparities where a disproportionately high rate of infection cases and deaths among Black and Latino residents demonstrate the result of health inequities, income inequality, housing and education discrimination, and limited employment opportunities that have positioned Black and Latino workers in CT to be more likely than other populations to work in “essential” lower paid jobs, live in more crowded housing, and experience health conditions that make COVID-19 infection more dangerous and deadly for them.

So why does this declaration matter and why is it important to address this issue now? As you know, any major public crisis is historically addressed through large scale policy, executive and legislative changes. Racism meets all the criteria of what classifies as public health crisis as: 1) It affects large numbers of people; 2) It threatens long term health outcomes, and 3) It requires the adoption of large-scale solutions in the public interest. There is no question that racism is deeply embedded throughout our systems, policies, and culture; but we can pass legislation with actions to dismantle and change problematic systems and structures that have perpetuated racism and racist practices. We know that systemic racism is a social determinant of health itself, and also produces inequities across all social determinants of health. From disproportionately high Black maternity and infant mortality rates; inequities in infections and death due to cancer, asthma, heart and lung diseases; lack of resources for deteriorating mental and physical health needs; to harmful



interactions with police and the criminal justice system; to environmental racism and lack of affordable housing options on top of having unequal access to health care: racism, should indeed, be declared as a public health crisis in the state of Connecticut and this declaration should be followed by research, funding and policy initiatives to address tackling this crisis with comprehensive and long-term solutions and policies.

My work as a former state employee, city councilor has allowed me to work with our local and state health departments on issues of community health, which have often highlighted the disparities in health outcomes for people of color and the health challenges in which they may face daily. On the local level, we see the impacts of systemic and institutional racism on health the community through the data that shows the disparities for the members of our BIPOC community. Many of our local focuses try to address some of this issues like the lack of access to healthcare through programs like the school health centers and working with local actions organizations to try to provide access to healthier living environments and proper nutrition in food programs to help with racial and economic disparities. But there is so much more work to be done to build trust in communities of color and to combat the general mistrust of the medical profession. The work that could be addressed in this bill is so important to me personally and professionally because it can make a difference to the people that I serve and represent despite their challenges as we recover from the destruction of this pandemic.

A similar resolution to declare racism as a public health crisis is currently before the Meriden City Council, and thanks to organizations like Health Equity Solutions, this work is happening in many other communities throughout CT and around the country. So locally we are doing our part to help eradicate these health disparities for vulnerable members of our community and I would encourage the state to also take action and help our local work by creating state level requirements to help guide local municipalities and set standards for local health depts and health partners in the state. While this bill HB6662 does not include zoning proposals and Senate Bill SB1 included, I am also encouraging the inclusion of studying the impact of racism and zoning practices in housing as a health need because where you live and the quality of healthcare available to you is a determine of your overall health as well.

As a southern born resident now living and serving in CT, I am grateful and encouraged for these Connecticut discussions and legislative opportunities to really look at addressing racism head on. Looking at institutional racism and its long-term health effects on people of color and the efforts to look for solutions to correct this health crisis in our communities is crucial. Other suggestions I would encourage this committee to consider as you are addressing this concern:

- While we strongly support the HB6662 plan to establish the Commission on Racial Equity in Public Health, we would also suggest to you that representation on this Commission is just as important. Please ensure that the members of the commission formed, be diverse and most specifically include the voices of the BIPOC community about their health concerns and needs.
- The Commission on Racial Equity in Public Health should employ a Health Equity in All Policies approach. Connecticut has the opportunity to leverage the strengths of this approach as it has been implemented in other states and to address the challenges encountered as HiaP has been rolled out, including differences in need across each state, lack of funding, and stakeholder and community engagement in this work.
- We respectfully recommend that the bill include staffing and funding to create and conduct racial impact assessments on future proposed legislative bills and policies. This will enable the Connecticut General Assembly to evaluate the potential for policies to promote equity or have a disparate impact. When used effectively, these racial impact statements can facilitate meaningful engagement with community stakeholders, while ensuring that state officials are considering equity and the potential for disparate impact in their policy proposals.



- Finally, while this bill HB6662 does not include zoning proposal changes that were raised in Senate Bill SB1, we believe that it is important to look to address issues of segregation and lack of affordable housing throughout CT which we know contributes to poor health outcomes for those disproportionately impacted by discriminatory practices and policies.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of H.B. No. 6662, An Act Declaring Racism as a Public Health Crisis and Establishing the Commission on Racial Equity in Public Health.

Sincerely,

Sonya Jelks
Deputy Majority Leader, City Councilor
Meriden City Council
sjelks@meridenct.gov

Director, CT Office
Corporation for Supportive Housing (CSH)
Sonya.Jelks@csh.org