

# Racial Equity in Public Health Commission

Co-Chairs: Melissa McCaw, OPM Secretary & Dr. Tekisha Everette, Executive Director Healthy Equity Solutions

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## Regular Commission Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2021

12:30 PM – 2:00 PM

Via Teams

**Members Present:** Co-Chair Melissa McCaw, Co-Chair Tekisha Everette, Astread Ferron-Poole, Carline Charmelus, Chavon Hamilton, Diana Reyes, Craig Burns, Heather Aaron, Hilda Santiago, John Frassinelli, Jonathan Steinberg, Kenyatta Muzzani, Kyle Abercrombie, Leonard Jahad, Marina Marmolejo, Mary Daughtery Abrams, Natalie Braswell, Steven Hernández, Tammy Hendricks, Tiffany Donelson, Vanessa Dorantes, Victoria Veltri

**Alternates Present:** Claudio Gualtieri, Danielle Palladino, Dashni Sathasivam

**Guest Presenters:** Office of Legislative Management Team (Jim Tamburro, Caroline Beitman, John Harnick, and Susan Skehan)

**Members Absent:** Leonard Jahad, Ryan Calhoun, Travis Simms

### Opening Remarks from the Co-Chairs

Secretary McCaw opened the meeting at 12:32 PM and welcomed members to the Commission's first meeting. The Secretary framed the work ahead as follows:

- Taking on essential tasks to inform policy and programs that tackle racial equity and promote health and well-being
- Evaluating and strengthening healthy equity in an honest and open dialogue
- Building on equity-drive investments that were at the core of the state Budget, American Rescue Act Plan (ARPA) allocations, and policy priorities in the past legislative session

Dr. Everette added that Connecticut is taking a different approach to racial equity, not a static symbol but rather an active commitment.

### PowerPoint Presentation

The Secretary, Dr. Everette, the Public Health Committee Chairs, and representatives from the Office of Legislative Management each lead various slides that were part of the PowerPoint presentation to the Commission.

Dr. Everette provided a review of equity focused legislation from the 2021 Session. Legislation included:

- PA 21-46/SB 2 – AAC Social Equity And The Health, Safety And Education Of Children.
- PA 21-54/SB 972 – AAC Communication Services In Correctional And Juvenile Detention Facilities.
- PA 21-159/HB 6442 – AAC Equitable Access To Broadband.

- SA 21-8/HB 6476 – AAC A Disparity Study.
- SA 21-37/HB 5614 – AA Establishing A Commission On The Disparate Impact Of Covid-19.
- PA 21-2/HB 6515 – AA Creating A Respectful And Open World For Natural Hair.
- PA 21-3/HB 6516 – AA Mitigating Adverse Tax Consequences Resulting From Employees Working Remotely During Covid-19 And Concerning The Removal Of Liens On The Property Of Public Assistance Beneficiaries And A Three-Tiered Grants In Lieu Of Taxes Program.
- PA 21-15/HB 6321 – AAC Adoption And Implementation Of The Connecticut Parentage Act.
- PA 21-34/HB 6531 – AAC The Right To Counsel In Eviction Proceedings, The Validity Of Inland Wetlands Permits In Relation To Certain Other Land Use Approvals And Extending The Time Of Expiration Of Certain Land Use Permits.
- PA 21-176/HB 6687 – AAC Medical Assistance For Children And Adults Without Health Care Coverage.
- PA 21-149/SB 1004 – AAC Dental And Vision Insurance Coverage For Children, Stepchildren And Other Dependent Children.

Secretary McCaw summarized policy investments in the Budget, Budget Implementer and ARPA. Key highlights in the Budget included:

- Expansion of Affordable Health Care Coverage through Covered CT program, providing access to zero premium health insurance and no-out-pocket costs for up to 40,000 individuals
- Expansion of postpartum care coverage for up to 12 months after a woman gives birth.
- Expansion of eligibility for medical assistance to certain individuals, subject to income limits, regardless of immigration status.
- Additional funding for community health workers to help families connect to services and supports throughout the state
- Removing TFA family cap, cash assistance program

She explained how Connecticut wove equity into the distribution of ARPA dollars:

- Investments in DCF for children’s mental health to address behavioral health needs exacerbate during pandemic
- Grants to food pantries
- Legal representation in housing eviction
- Funding to stabilize nursing homes and improve quality of care
- Universal home visiting to address disparities beginning at
- Workforce development programs

The Secretary then provided an overview of PA 21-35/SB 1 AA Equalizing Comprehensive Access To Mental, Behavioral And Physical Health Care In Response To The Pandemic. Public Health Committee Co-Chairs and Commission members, Senator Abrams and Representative Steinberg, also provided remarks. SB 1 was the top priority for the Senate Democratic Caucus in 2021 and passed both chambers with bipartisan support. The main policy goal of the legislation was to equalize comprehensive access to mental, behavioral, and physical health care in response to the pandemic. The bill declared racism a public health crisis, created the Commission, and made both policy and programmatic changes across agencies

to address inequities in public health. The scope of the bill extended beyond traditional public health issues. For instance, the bill looked at environmental health and racial inequities, higher education will report on recruit and retention, gun violence, implicit bias training in hospitals.

The Secretary and Dr. Everette then asked members to introduce themselves and share more about their personal and professional experiences as they relate to equity. The members present introduced themselves as follows:

- Astread Ferron-Poole, Chief of Staff – DSS
- Carline Charmelus, Collective Impact & Equity Manager, Partnership for Strong Communities
- Chavon Hamilton, Coordinator of Community Research Alliance
- Diana Reyes, Quality Improvement Data Specialist – OEC
- Craig Burns, Chief Mental Health Commissioner – DOC
- Heather Aaron, Deputy Commissioner – DPH
- Hilda Santiago, State Representative & BPRC Member
- John Frassinelli, Division Director for the Bureau of Health, Nutrition, Family Services and Adult Education – SDE
- Jonathan Steinberg, House Chairperson of the Public Health Committee
- Kenyatta Muzzani, Director of Organizing – Katal Center
- Kyle Abercrombie, Director of Government Affairs – DECD
- Marina Marmolejo, Program Manager, UniteCT – DOH
- Mary Daughtery Abrams, Senate Chairperson of the Public Health Committee
- Natalie Braswell, Chief of Planning, Legal & Regulatory Affairs – DEEP
- Steven Hernández, Executive Director – CWCSEO
- Tammy Hendricks, Access Health CT Director of Health Equity
- Tiffany Donelson, President & CEO - CT Health Foundation
- Vanessa Dorantes, Commissioner -DCF
- Victoria Veltri, Executive Director - OHS

The Office of Legislative Management gave an overview of and update on the recruitment process for an Executive Director and budget for the Commission. Caroline Beitman shared that OLM reviewed 22 applications for the positions of Executive Director and 2 candidates were invited back for a second round of interviews. Recommendations will then be put to the Commission co-chairs for consideration and input. Once they have a chance to interview the candidates, a selection will be made and approved by a majority vote of the Commission. John Harnick explained that the Commission's budget includes funding for three positions, money for start-up equipment, \$250,000/year for consultants to help staff develop the strategic plan and support demographic data collection, and mileage reimbursement for Commission members.

The Secretary and Dr. Everette reviewed the Commission's powers and duties, focus areas, and reporting requirements. The focus areas for Commission recommendations per PA 21-35/SB 1 include:

1. Structural racism in the state's laws and regulations impacting public health, where, as used in this subdivision, "structural racism" means a system that structures opportunity and assigns value in a way

that disproportionately and negatively impacts Black, Indigenous, Latino or Asian people or other people of color.

2. Racial disparities in the state's criminal justice system and its impact on the health and well-being of individuals and families, including overall health outcomes and rates of depression, suicide, substance use disorder and chronic disease.
3. Racial disparities in access to the resources necessary for healthy living, including, but not limited to, access to adequate fresh food and physical activity, public safety, and the decrease of pollution in communities.
4. Racial disparities in health outcomes.
5. The impact of zoning restrictions on the creation of housing disparities and such disparities' impact on public health.
6. Racial disparities in state hiring and contracting processes.
7. Any suggestions to reduce the impact of the public health crisis of racism within the vulnerable populations.

In order to address these areas adequately, members agreed to establish the following subcommittees: Structural Racism in Laws, Regulation, State Business & Hiring (Recs #1 & 6), Criminal Justice (Rec #2), Public Health, Health Outcomes and Healthy Living (Recs #3, 4, & 7), and Zoning (Rec #5). They also decided to create a Bylaw subcommittee. The Chairs stated that the first report is due to the General Assembly's Appropriations and Public Health Committees on January 1, 2022, and then semiannually.

Members then explored ideas and opportunities for robust and meaningful input. A few common themes emerged:

- General agreement on getting meaningful input and engagement from those most impacted by solutions, including at the subcommittee level and through presentations  
Voices of those served is important and their input is vital. The Commission should carefully consider the time/location of meetings to ensure community involvement
- Explore expansion of the Commission to include additional representation from those with lived experience
- Consider qualitative research
- Comment periods critically important to provide overview and feedback
- Need multiple levels of feedback, including some that can come in quickly, also long-range feedback and input. Use of anonymous surveys was suggested as a short-term opportunity
- Strategic plan should include strategies for including community voices, e.g. when and how we meet, virtual and in-person, and how those decisions impact who is involved.

### **Adjournment**

The meeting was adjourned at 1:50 PM. Members were told that the next meeting date and time would be forthcoming along with a job description for the Executive Director position, links to Ethics and FOI trainings, and a subcommittee assignment survey.