



Health Education Council's Commitment to Community

Here is the truth...Racism is a public health crisis underlying the disproportionate burdens of disease, trauma, violence, mental health, illness and death in the black community and other communities of color. The events of the past weeks and months have brought this reality into the light yet again. I was reluctant to release a quick statement on George Floyd's murder because I wanted to offer more than familiar words and promises.

When I started the Health Education Council (HEC) in 1991 to address the health disparities unequally borne by minority communities, I knew race was a foundational driver of health outcomes. A year later in 1992, the Rodney King police brutality case and the subsequent Los Angeles uprising; racial tension and pain and destruction, helped the world to more clearly see violence as a public health crisis. Since then, incremental changes have been made in policing policies. But nearly 30 years later, I continue to be outraged, and profoundly saddened by incidences of police violence and community death. George Floyd's murder has led me to deep reflection on the effectiveness of 'incremental change' when police brutality keeps happening over and over again.

I have questioned whether HEC has focused on the right things in our programs and approach to community safety and health. For perspective, I reached out to public health colleagues; and our HEC team and former staff who work with residents living in communities impacted by violence. I wanted to listen and work together to process our thoughts and feelings. One person spoke of deep, unresolved wounds that their family experienced during the LA Riots. Another partner spoke of growing up in the South, the niece of Reverend Ralph Abernathy, her reluctance to recall what she has seen and experienced over her lifetime and her sad realization that her grandchildren continue to experience similar things. Another partner asked if anything has really changed and she answered not in her lifetime. Others were struck by the small businesses vandalized during protests, many owned by people of color.

There is no question that we need stronger, more sweeping, enforceable system and structural changes that stop police brutality. Additionally, I believe HEC's work has shown that facilitating relationships between people who are often at odds can stimulate frank conversations on race and racism and begin the trust building process. Having honest conversations and listening in a different way can lead us out of stalemates and see the world through others' point of view. As my friend the late Bishop Sherwood Carthen told me, "it (doing equity work) is all about building relationships and we do that by building a history of work together which builds that trust".

Trust. History. Relationship.

These are at the heart of HEC's work. When people build relationships, minds and hearts can change. There is no magic pill to change centuries of racist systems, policies, structures and attitudes; but mobilizing our collective outrage and working across a continuum of issues can move us forward.

As I reflect back on why HEC was started and our mission to reduce health disparities and to leverage the power of collaboration to improve health, I am both frustrated and hopeful. Frustrated because we, as a community, have not yet made the underlying, fundamental changes that will end police violence; frustrated with being satisfied with 'incremental change' for so many years and frustrated that we, as a community, still don't value and prioritize prevention.

However, I am hopeful. Because of events like COVID-19 and George Floyd's death, people's eyes are opening wider to inequity; brutality; disconnection. These simultaneous pandemics have shown so clearly the interconnectedness of health to structural inequalities in the ways we eat; access quality of health care; the locations in which we live; and the jobs we can get. Grassroots efforts, community builders and policy makers seem to be aligning behind the importance and urgency of these issues and moving toward actions for fair, equitable, healthy communities.

I am hopeful because more and more diverse voices are joining together; asking critical questions; activating; and demanding change around how we govern our schools; ensure community safety and craft economic policies.

At HEC, we are recommitting as a staff to reflecting, listening, learning and taking action - bringing voices from the community together with voices from power, working towards common ground and workable solutions.

Specifically, HEC will

- **Lead with race.** Acknowledging in all spaces that race impacts health. Lifting up the aspects of race and cultural culture which have led to powerful resilience in communities and fighting systemic racism which has denied opportunities for health and well-being for generations.
- **Lead with community.** Listen more deeply and more intently. Community residents are acutely aware of the problems present in their neighborhoods and they also know the answers. Our job is to lift up those answers linking them with resources and power to make them a reality.
- **Promote social connection.** Former Surgeon General Vivek Murthy declared an epidemic of loneliness impacting health prior to the pandemic. Racism, fear, and brutality stop people from knowing each other and from trusting community leaders. HEC is committed to supporting connections between people and their leaders which can impact health.

- **Have tough conversations.** Continue to convene our multi-sector collaboratives to address youth violence, health and safety; use 'relational activism' to build relationships, programs and policies that can change systems and that have broad buy in from all.
- **Promote resources for parents and children.** We've been asked to share ways for parents and families to teach kids about race and we are committed to identifying and sharing those resources.

On behalf of HEC's staff and Board, I thank you for walking this sometimes-difficult journey with us over the years and we look forward to our continued work with you.

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