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Racism Through the Lens of a Public Health Crisis

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Cleveland – September 14, 2020 – Systemic racism has impacted our country for over 400 years, and its abuses are not confined to the past. Racism has infected American society and disproportionately harmed the health and wellbeing of Black, Brown and Indigenous people, including (but not limited to): the negative health effects of toxic stress caused by racism, a lack of healthcare access and disparate treatment, food deserts, and environmentally-dangerous living conditions.

COVID-19 is yet another illumination of these structural and systemic inequalities. Reports have revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic is playing out along racial lines, continuing to deprive communities of color of physical, mental, and emotional equity in this country. These disparities point to what YWCA Ohio Council knows to be true: we must dismantle racism through the lens of racism as a public health crisis.

To that end, led by YWCA Greater Cleveland the Ohio YWCA Council made the declaration of racism as a public health crisis our strategic priority and joined a coalition of organizations in Northeast Ohio and across the state that have successfully advocated for the declaration of racism as a public health crisis in Columbus, Cincinnati, Dayton, Toledo, Hamilton County, Youngstown, and Cleveland among others. Now, efforts are gaining interest in the Ohio legislature. These resolutions are an opportunity to evaluate our societal structures, dismantle racial inequities, implement important changes for equity and justice, and--most importantly--create accountability for everyone.

This movement began in Milwaukee County in May of 2019, with YWCA Southeast Wisconsin playing a pivotal role. In November of 2019, YWCA Greater Cleveland partnered with First Year Cleveland to host “400 Years of Inequity: A Call to Action.” This two-day national summit in Cleveland, Ohio brought together the YWCA Ohio Council leadership along with roughly 500 people and leaders from Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin to commemorate the start of chattel slavery in 1619, discuss the issues of structural racism and its enduring impact on health, economic and educational inequities in America. The close of the summit launched the call to action –to declare racism a public health crisis.

Less than six months later as the COVID-19 pandemic swept the nation and the world, the racial disparities in infections and deaths demonstrate the urgency of the need to understand racism as a danger to the health and lives of Black people shifted into focus. And then the racist realities of the criminal justice system in America took center stage in the wake of the tragic deaths of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd. As a result of the fervent

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advocacy of YWCAs across the state of Ohio, Civil Rights and community organizations banded together to form coalitions of conscience striving for equity and justice. These official recognitions are important first steps in the long journey towards true racial equity in Cleveland, in Ohio, and in the United States.

Just as racism cannot be undone with one piece of legislation or one particular action, understanding racism as a public health crisis is one necessary component of a collective effort to create a more equitable city and just society. These declarations represent an important governmental acknowledgement of racism and its pervasive harmful effects on people of color, but this is just the beginning. The YWCA Ohio Council vow to continue our work with our organizational partners to eliminate racial disparities in every aspect of society, from education, police reform, healthcare to environmental justice to housing. Quite simply, there is more work to be done.

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About YWCA Greater Cleveland

YWCA is dedicated to eliminating racism, empowering women and promoting peace, justice, freedom and dignity for all. YWCA Greater Cleveland was established in 1868. It is the seventh oldest YWCA in the country and one of the oldest continuously operating nonprofits in Cleveland. For 150 years, YWCA has fought to bring shelter and structure to the vulnerable, to build greater racial equity and to provide a space where women's leadership is valued and promoted.

YWCA IS ON A MISSION