

The Fight to Dismantle Systemic Racism and for Racial Justice in Delaware As Seen Through the Eyes of the Delaware Racial Justice Collaborative

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Abstract

George Floyd's May 2020 murder ignited a racial reckoning and social justice movement nationally and locally. Awareness of present-day racism increased even as racial disparities widened across health, wealth, education, and other social determinants. The Delaware Racial Justice Collaborative (DRJC) responded to the moment as membership surged and antiracist efforts expanded. The DRJC, powered by the United Way of Delaware, is committed to addressing structural racism by organizing volunteers across seven impact areas. Health Equity is one of the seven established committees and focuses on health inequities in Delaware. The DRJC has also supported the creation of the Equity Counts Data Center in partnership with the Delaware Division of Public Health. The fight for racial justice continues two and a half years after George Floyd's life was taken, and we need you to #JoinTheMovement.

During the evening of May 25, 2020, a father of five purchased cigarettes from a local convenience store. The store clerk suspected a counterfeit bill was used in the transaction and called the police, who quickly responded. What happened next captured the attention of Americans across the country and inspired rage and a reckoning on race. This outpouring of emotion sparked what was arguably the largest protest movement in United States history.

George Floyd was immobilized by a Minneapolis police officer who held his knee on Floyd's neck for more than nine minutes, completely blocking his ability to breathe. Following Floyd's death, millions of Americans in shock and anguish mobilized to join the fight for racial justice. Across the country and in Delaware, people gathered in the streets of their local communities. They protested police violence and the unequal treatment of Black people chanting *Black Lives Matter!* - a seemingly simple and obvious statement with profound political significance. That movement in 2020 awakened those who thought racism was dead, didn't believe it existed, or had been willing to ignore it. The movement was a strong demonstration of Americans' willingness to reckon with systemic and institutional racism.

The reckoning for which many Americans had protested did not seem to translate into tangible changes for people of color. According to a Pew Research Center survey conducted in October 2021, 65% of the almost 4,000 Black Americans surveyed said the increased national attention on racial inequality did not lead to changes that improved their lives.¹ Additionally, almost 70% said discrimination was the main reason many Black people cannot get ahead.¹ Amidst a backlash against racial progress,^{2,3} there is still a great amount of work to be done to move the needle around racial justice.

Further compounding barriers for Blacks in America was the experience of the recent health crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affected Black households.⁴ Job losses were greater,⁵ education gaps widened,⁶ and life expectancy decreased.⁷ A disproportionate number of

Black Americans were “essential workers,” and were at higher risk to contract the disease while working longer, in-person hours in lower wage jobs.⁸ Black Americans saw a 3-year decline in life expectancy from 2019 to 2020 resulting in a life expectancy gap between White and Black populations that hasn’t been as large since 1999.⁷ These setbacks for African American households have hindered the march toward racial equity.

Dismantling institutional and systemic racism is a laborious and unrelenting process that requires time and attention. Great national public awareness, education, and debates are all necessary in advancing the cause but are not sufficient. What happens in the streets with a loud microphone and on social media needs to be matched behind the scenes with dedicated people focused on identifying the policies and procedures that inhibit people of color and replacing them with those that are more equitable.

In Dr. Ibram X. Kendi’s, “How to be an Antiracist,” he argues that racism is not a fixed part of a person’s identity.⁹ Further, he asserts that “a racist policy is any measure that produces or sustains racial inequity between racial groups.”⁹ An antiracist works to locate the roots of problems in power and policies,⁹ according to Kendi. It is within this antiracist framework that the Delaware Racial Justice Collaborative (DRJC) provides a safe space and platform for communities throughout Delaware to dissect and redress institutional policies and procedures related to racial justice.

The DRJC has been engaged in this fight since its inception in 2015. In its early days, this small but mighty collection of civic leaders and volunteers kept a laser-like focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion in State government employment. On the heels of the national racial reckoning and *Black Lives Matter* movement, the DRJC received requests from hundreds of new volunteers to join. People from across the state wanted to actively engage in the fight against racism in Delaware.

The groundswell of new members led the United Way of Delaware to fully embrace the DRJC. It has been, since 2020, officially powered by the United Way of Delaware, providing administrative support to expand its capacity. Today, the DRJC is comprised of more than 200 individuals and organizations working in committees to uncover, repeal, and restructure policies and practices that negatively impact people of color. The work is organized around seven impact areas: health equity, wealth creation, public policy, education, criminal justice, youth advancement, and Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI). They function in teams where “agents of change” from the grassroots to the grassroots join forces and work together to drive change.

The DRJC is proud of recent policy victories that chip away at inequities in Delaware and contribute to progress. Through its Public Policy committee, the DRJC successfully advocated alongside other community groups and advocates for legislative remedies to several racial inequities. In the last two years, the DRJC has successfully advocated for HB 195 (signed 7/21/21), requiring body worn cameras for police and other law enforcement officials. HB 198 (signed 6/17/2021), requires K-12 public and charter schools to incorporate Black history and the Black experience into K-12 curricula. HB 375 (signed 8/30/22), creates the Delaware Racial Equity Consortium. The Consortium, housed at Delaware State University, brings the African American task force into Delaware Code with the power and governing authority needed to act on the task force recommendations. It also guarantees a longer-term investment by the State of Delaware to remedy the systemic injustice that African Americans have experienced. The DRJC is actively tracking the implementation of these bills.

The DRJC's Health Equity committee is also gaining traction. It is comprised of providers, health professionals working in the field, advocates, and other interested parties. The committee meets monthly to discuss myriad factors contributing to inequities in health care, including access to medical care, the social determinants of health, and the structural features of the health system in Delaware. Inequities in health care create unequal health outcomes. To illustrate, infant mortality in Delaware is higher than the national average, and black infant mortality rate is more than two and a half times as high as the white rate of infant deaths.¹⁰ The Delaware Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) acknowledges that "growing research points to intentional work addressing institutional and structural racism policies as the way to close the mortality gap in African American babies and moms and change the trajectory for future generations."¹⁰

The Health Equity committee is working to address the lack of awareness of medical professionals of color and attracting and retaining doctors of color to Delaware. The need for culturally competent care was demonstrated in a Pew Research Center survey.¹¹ It found, "when asked to consider potential factors responsible for differences in health outcomes for Black people, 63% of Black adults view less access to quality medical care in the area they live to be a major reason why Black people in the U.S. generally have worse health outcomes than other adults."¹¹ To this end, the DRJC and the National Medical Association, First State Society, partnered to create a new online Black Doctors in Delaware directory to be launched in October 2022. To follow in the longer term are Delaware directories for Black Mental Health Professionals, Latino/Hispanic Doctors, and for other Doctors of Color (other races and ethnicities).

The Health Equity committee has also recently been using its advocacy voice. During the Delaware General Assembly's most recent session, a DRJC member and practicing physician offered public comment in support of increased funding for the State Division of Public Health's (DPH) Bureau on Health Equity during the Joint Finance (JF) Committee's FY 2023 hearing. The State's annual budget for the Bureau is \$45,000, making Delaware the smallest state-based health equity team of surrounding states including Pennsylvania, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, and Rhode Island. This committee recommended a significant increase in funds to support community driven initiatives to address the social determinants of health¹⁰ with the understanding that the funding was necessary but not sufficient and more investment is needed to have a systemic impact.

Further demonstrating its commitment to eliminate racial disparities and health inequities, the DRJC and the Delaware Division of Public Health (DPH), have created the new [Equity Counts Data Center \(ECDC\)](#). Located on DPH's "My Healthy Community" platform, Equity Counts is designed to provide access to data and resources that acknowledge structural racism as a root cause of inequities. According to Boston University's Antiracism center, "[t]he study of data concerning inequities and disparities allow us to better understand experiences of racism and to see more clearly how and where racism manifests."¹² By understanding where racism is occurring and how it manifests, "we can then identify racist policies so that we can craft antiracist policies."¹² The ECDC displays data across Delaware by Zip-code, race, ethnicity, and age based on the DRJC inspired "equity pillars" of health, criminal justice, wealth creation, and education.

It is vital to acknowledge and measure the disparities that exist. Data are required. Groups passionate about change are encouraged to better utilize data to measure, analyze and remedy the disparities and inequities across our society. Those who would like to learn more about Equity

Counts and how to power up their work at the intersections of equity and data are asked to contact Emily Kauffman, Equity Counts manager, at ekauffman@uwde.org

The DRJC is committed to the fight for racial justice and is grateful for wide-ranging community support. Throughout U.S. history, many of those who fought for freedom and equality were not able to enjoy the fruits of their labor during their lifetimes. We celebrate that some progress has been made, but the work is far from complete. Achieving a fully free and emancipated society is achieved through hard work each day by everyday citizens. The DRJC urges you to join us. Visit uwde.org/drjc to learn more and join the movement!

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