

Testimony for Legislative Session 6/29/20

Good morning Chair Comerford, Chair Friedman, Senator Hinds and other panelists.

Thank you for holding this listening session and for literally putting equity first on your agenda. I am Carlene Pavlos, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Public Health Association. MPHA began convening a [Task Force on Coronavirus and Equity](#) in mid-March to call on state leaders to put equity at the core of our response to the public health pandemic.

Today's session is taking place at an historic moment when many White people in America are joining people of color in recognizing the 400-year-old public health crisis of systemic racism and white supremacy. And, make no mistake, the structural racism that enables police violence against Black people and the murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks, Tony McDade, Elijah McClain, and uncounted others is the same structural racism that gives rise to racial health inequities and has led to the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on communities of color in Massachusetts.

The Department of Public Health released data on June 19th showing that the rates of hospitalization and deaths for both Blacks and Hispanics far exceed those for Whites. This is not because of race. This is because of racism and white supremacy which – along with xenophobia and poverty – have created inequities that are being exploited and deepened by the pandemic.

The Equity Task Force has been calling for a reopening that proceeds with equity at its core and on June 4th we issued four clear [Criteria for an Equitable Reopening](#) – endorsed by more than 110 organizations!

1. Infection Rates Dropping for All Groups

We are all relieved that key indicators of COVID are trending downward in Massachusetts, but without data about specific populations we are unable to monitor patterns of infection and of death, and we will be unable to identify or respond to new outbreaks. We need ongoing data about race, and we need as-yet-to-be-collected data on people with disabilities, people who work in high risk occupations and people who do not speak English.

Thanks to the Legislature, we have a strong new statute requiring collection and reporting of this data and we know through productive conversations with Department of Public Health staff that they are developing plans to address challenges in implementing this law.

Having quality data to prevent illnesses and death was an urgent need four months ago and it is no less so when hundreds of new cases are reported weekly and the death toll continues to mount.

2. Enforceable Protections for Workers and Support for Small Businesses

We must provide resources for local boards of health and the Department of Labor Statistics to enforce workplace reopening guidelines and we must also provide technical assistance and financial support to small businesses to comply. The Attorney General's office is collecting complaints about workplace violations – we hope that this data will be reported publicly, and that the Administration will follow up with action to protect workers.

3. Expanded testing

Expanding access to testing is critical to a modern, effective and equitable public health response. This will require expanding the criteria for testing beyond either having symptoms or having had close contact with someone who has been diagnosed.

Because the virus can be spread by people with no symptoms, some community leaders are taking responsibility and offering testing outside of these restrictive criteria; but the state testing criteria have not changed.

As a reminder, the Baker Administration has laid out a goal for 45,000 tests per day by the end of July, yet the average daily number of tests is dropping and so far this month is about 7,800 per day or not quite 10.5% of the goal.

As the majority of states see increasing infections, we need the monitoring that expanded testing will provide. The state must change its criteria and add testing for those who are at high risk – including “essential” workers and others who are returning to work, people living in shelters, prisons, jails, and long-term care

facilitates; and people in low-income communities that have been most impacted – and this testing must be free of charge.

4. Creating a Seat at the Table for those most impacted.

There is no ongoing body providing the Governor with guidance on reopening that includes representatives from the communities most impacted by this pandemic.

The Department of Public Health’s Health Equity Advisory Group is composed of respected leaders, but is not focused on reopening and what’s more, neither the Governor nor the Secretary have made any commitments to explore let alone implement the quality recommendations they developed and released over a week ago.

Our Equity Task Force is and will be monitoring and regularly reporting on the Governor and his Administration’s response to these equity criteria.

We are all impatient for a full reopening. But, a reopening without adequate protections for low wage workers and communities of color is a policy decision about the value of Black and Latinx lives.

Moreover, as we move forward into *recovery* there will be an urgency for [policies that center equity](#).

MPHA is calling on you, the Legislature, as well as the Administration, to lead with the needs of those most impacted by this pandemic in the front of your minds.

For example, this is not the time for an austerity budget that will result in greater homelessness and hunger or reduce access to public transportation, health care and education. This is a time to look for opportunities to invest in strategies that improve health outcomes and equity – such as the Prevention and Wellness Trust Fund. It is also a time to invest in public health, particularly local public health - an area where our state’s decades of inattention and disinvestment has been laid bare by this pandemic. MPHA and our allies are going to be calling for progressive revenue solutions over budget cuts to help close the enormous budget gap being projected for FY21. We hope

that you and your colleagues will be listening and that you will make a statement of your own values by infusing the FY21 budget with a commitment to dismantling racism and promoting equity.
