

June 30, 2020

Robert R. Redfield, M.D.
Director
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
1600 Clifton Road NE
Atlanta, GA 30329

Re: **CDC Employee Letter to Address Workplace Racism and Discrimination**

Dear Dr. Redfield:

The COVID-19 pandemic's disproportionate impact on the Black community. The killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and Rayshard Brooks. These are just the most recent and tragic symptoms of the long-festering disease of racial discrimination and oppression in the United States.

All around the world, multitudes have marched, protested, and leveraged righteous anger to bring about change.

Within the Black community, the pain is palpable. Fresh wounds inflicted in cities such as Atlanta, Baltimore, Minneapolis, and Louisville serve as raw and persistent reminders that our lives and our loved ones remain vulnerable targets of race-based discrimination and violence.

We are hurt. We are angry. We are exhausted. And ultimately, we fear that, despite the global protests, little will be done to address the systemic racism we face each and every day.

At CDC, we have a powerful platform from which to create real change. By **declaring racism a public health crisis**, the agency has an unprecedented opportunity to leverage the power of science to confront this insidious threat that undermines the health and strength of our entire nation.

Yet CDC must clean its own house first.

During the past several weeks, we have received messages from agency leaders claiming solidarity with the ongoing protests and calls for racial justice. Though we are encouraged by these messages, their sentiments ring hollow in the face of our daily, lived experiences as employees of this agency.

After decades of well-meaning, yet under-funded, diversity and inclusion efforts, we have seen scant progress in addressing the very real challenges Black employees experience at CDC, such as:

- **The lack of inclusion** in the agency's senior ranks and leadership pipeline programs
- **A pernicious "old boy/girl" network** that stifles Black talent and blocks our opportunities for professional advancement
- A pervasive and toxic **culture of racial aggressions**, bullying and marginalization.

In light of the recent calls for justice across this country and around the world, we, as dedicated public health professionals, can no longer stay silent to the widespread acts of racism and discrimination within CDC that are, in fact, undermining the agency's core mission.

As signatories of this letter, we are calling on CDC to take **immediate, specific, and measurable actions** to address the systemic racism that continues to afflict this agency.

We **stand in solidarity with other colleagues of color, and our LGBTQ+ colleagues** who have made similar calls for change.

Attached to this letter is a list of **seven key demands and tangible actions** compiled by employees. Upon receipt, we respectfully ask that you respond to these demands, in writing, to committee@7ActsofChange.com, and initiate action on those items marked as immediate within **seven business** days.

This sense of urgency is prompted by CDC's untenable lack of intervention to these ongoing and recurring acts of racism and discrimination. Simply put, we [have been](#) here [many times](#) before with little change. In the meantime, lives and careers have been stunted and, in many cases, stolen.

Show us you are listening. **Act now.** Thank you. >>

7 Acts of Change

1. Declare **racism a public health crisis** in the United States
2. **Increase Black representation** among senior leadership and diversify the talent pipeline for future leaders
3. Acknowledge and take immediate, direct action to **address CDC's toxic culture of exclusion and racial discrimination**
4. **Dismantle the visible and invisible barriers to career advancement** for Black employees
5. **Move from talk to action:** implement policy changes that hold our leaders and colleagues accountable for measurable change
6. Make **implicit bias training and cultural sensitivity education mandatory** for all staff
7. **Resolve pending EEO cases** of racial discrimination

7 Acts of Change: Grievances and Asks

1. Declare racism a public health crisis in the United States

Grievance: The connection between systemic racism and poor health has been thoroughly [documented](#) by [public health experts](#); however, CDC has failed to effectively tackle this problem. The COVID-19 pandemic, with its disproportionate impact among communities of color, is just the most recent example of the critical need for CDC to address this issue urgently. Failing to address racism as a fundamental cause of health disparities is a key reason why we have witnessed little progress in reducing many of these disparities in the United States over the past 50 years. The health of the nation urgently demands we do better.

Asks:

- Publicly acknowledge that systemic **racism is a public health crisis** in the US warranting a major public health initiative (**Immediate Action**)
- Publicly affirm CDC's commitment to **eradicating racial discrimination** within the agency (**Immediate Action**)
- Create a **CDC Center** dedicated to correcting the cross-cutting effects of systemic racism across various diseases and disciplines
- **Establish Offices of Minority Health** in every center and increase funding, scope, and size of existing Offices by October 1, 2020
- **Increase opportunities for Blacks** to lead scientific and programmatic activities as they are typically more equipped to understand issues that disproportionately affect Black Americans
- Mandate that all **CDC scientific and programmatic activities consider systemic racism** in their designs, conceptualizations, and executions

2. Increase Black representation among senior leadership and diversify the talent pipeline for future leaders

Grievance: CDC suffers from an alarming dearth of racial and ethnic diversity within both its senior leadership ranks and its junior pipeline programs. While African Americans are disproportionately affected by many of the diseases this agency works to control and prevent, astonishingly few African Americans sit at the tables of leadership where critical decisions are made concerning these public health issues. Today, Blacks make up just six percent (2 out of 30 individuals) of all agency senior leadership.

Similarly, Black scientists made up a mere six (6) percent of CDC's 2019 Epidemic Intelligence Service class – the corps that often serves as the training ground for tomorrow's leaders within the agency. Representation matters, and it is one of the most important and immediate ways CDC can fulfill its mission to protect all Americans from health, safety and security threats.

Asks:

- Increase **Black representation in all agency senior and leadership** positions (GS-15+ staff) both at HQ and in country offices to at least 25% by FY 2021
- Increase the proportion of **Locally Employed Staff (LES) in positions of leadership** in the countries we support
- **Engage an objective, diverse third-party panel** to select senior leaders with panelists required to have completed specific training that addresses bias, discrimination and privilege
- Include **diversity and inclusion goals as part of HR reviews** of all resumes, guided by the demographic make-up of the communities being served
- **Meaningfully engage LES** in the hiring of CDC country leaders (**Immediate action**)
- Expand each CIO's portfolio of internship and fellowship programs to **include at least one HBCU** by Fall 2020 (**Immediate action**)
- Document the current proportion of **Black scientists recruited through the EIS, PHAP and PMF** training programs and increase this percentage by 50% in FY 2021

3. Acknowledge and take immediate, direct action to address CDC's toxic culture of exclusion and racial discrimination

Grievance: To be Black and an employee at CDC often means being subject to a toxic environment of racial discrimination that, in many ways, mirrors the larger culture in which we exist. Throughout the agency, Black employees, both here in the U.S. and in countries we support, routinely experience bullying, excessive criticism, hostility, implicit bias and overt racism from white colleagues with little recourse. These daily, racial aggressions are inflicting profound and enduring damage to our psyches and our careers while violating a tenet of CDC's stated pledge to "treat all persons with dignity, honesty and respect." This must stop!

Asks:

- Establish and fund **an empowered diversity and inclusion (D&I) committee** to implement diversity and inclusion initiatives, shape D&I policies and monitor progress
- **Establish advisory committees** at the Division, C//O, and Agency level charged with assessing employee issues, developing new policies and initiatives, enforcing existing ones and ensuring staff input (**Immediate action**)
- **Establish safe spaces, outside of the EEO space**, where employees can lodge concerns and complaints re: discriminatory behavior and be heard without fear of retaliation
- **Create spaces for dialogue and learning** that offer opportunities for colleagues to be educated on racial history and discrimination, better understand bias, and acknowledge privilege and benefit from the current system. Include this curriculum as mandatory supervisory training for calendar year 2020

4. Dismantle the visible and invisible barriers to advancement for Black employees

Grievance: There is a culture of exclusion at CDC. A system of elitism and discrimination in which hiring managers (who are predominantly white) consistently promote only those employees who share the same backgrounds and racial characteristics. This effectively restricts the advancement of Black employees in the workplace and has resulted in an oppressive monoculture that stifles the growth of Black professionals and inhibits their ability to fully contribute their talents and skills.

Asks:

- Implement **routine and objective HR reviews** of promotion decisions and policies that ensure fair and equitable selection processes
- **Review the agency hiring process** and initiate an audit of hiring/promotion decisions of the last five years to ensure the agency engaged in fair and equitable selection processes
- Initiate management and **leadership training, mentorship, sponsorship**, and other career development programs for Black employees and other employees of color
- End the CDC-wide practice of promoting and **elevating those within hiring managers' networks** and who share similar racial characteristics (**Immediate action**)
- Create racially diverse committees across grades to oversee the equitable **distribution of time off and cash awards** and other performance-based benefits (**Immediate action**)

5. Move from talk to action: implement policy changes that hold our leaders and workforce accountable for measurable change

Grievance: After decades of well-intentioned diversity and inclusion efforts, we have seen little progress in making Black voices a more representative part of this agency and its efforts. Health equity offices have been wholly underfunded and marginalized and talk of diversity and inclusion have led to few actions. We call on CDC to implement key policy changes that hold our leadership accountable to make the critical changes needed to effectively and efficiently dismantle and penalize racist structures and practices at this agency.

Asks:

- **Track workforce diversity data** and, starting in September 2020, publicly report these on an annual basis, to create accountability for the Branches, Divisions, Centers and agency
- Tie specific, measurable **diversity targets to performance management outcomes** for all management
- Launch an independent review of Center, Division and Branch **hiring, grading and performance evaluations** to determine if there is bias and/or discrimination in both opportunities and performance evaluations (**Immediate action**)
- Enforce a **zero-tolerance policy** for managers with multiple (two or more) racial discriminatory grievances or complaints and for Center Directors with numbers of Center-wide complaints that are, proportionally, greater than the agency average.
- Make leadership and **supervisory training** available for all FTEs

6. Establish mandatory implicit bias training and cultural sensitivity education for all staff

Grievance: Systemic racism is not just a concept perpetrated outside these walls; it is a crushing reality for people of color in their daily lived experiences here at CDC. Acknowledging this reality and then acquiring the tools to address this is a critical first step in ending the cycle of racial bias and discrimination and complicit silence that disenfranchises employees with so much talent to offer. The healing must begin now.

Asks:

- Launch an **external audit of agency policies** and culture before the end of 2020 to ensure the environment we work in is equitable and inclusive of a diversity of backgrounds
- **Mandatory implicit bias training** for all staff within 30 days of onboarding and every year thereafter (**Immediate action**)
- Mandatory **360-degree evaluations** for all staff
- Create agency-wide **educational opportunities** for staff to examine how, whether and where employees hold conscious or unconscious biases toward those who possess characteristics different from them

7. Resolve pending EEO cases of racial discrimination

Grievance: CDC has had a longstanding history of racially discriminatory practices as evidenced by a recent proliferation of EEO complaints and cases – many of which remain unsettled. In response to systematic racism, Black CDC employees have filed hundreds of Equal Employment Opportunity grievances and complaints over the past decade only to be met by inaction, or worse, retaliation. Current EEO practices are designed to protect the agency rather than promote a fair and equitable environment. Our employees deserve better.

Asks:

- Overhaul the **EEO strategic plan**
- Engage a third, neutral party to launch **a systemic review of outstanding EEO cases** across agency – as well as those from the previous five years – and move to settle all cases where the evidence suggests discrimination, retaliation, and bias against the employee

Signed,

