

May 16, 2020

Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Reopening Advisory Board
Boston, Massachusetts

Dear Members of the MA Reopening Advisory Board,

We are a multi-sector group appointed by Mayor Martin J. Walsh on the City of Boston's COVID 19 Health Inequities Task Force, created to address the pandemic's disproportionately negative impact on communities of color. We are writing to request that an equity impact analysis be conducted for all plans and decisions made about opening the economy. As you know, the impact of COVID#19 has laid bare historical economic inequities that exist in our cities, Commonwealth and country. The best way to address the disparate impact is to eliminate these disparities as we move to reopen our economy. The results of an intentional equity impact analysis must be used as the guidepost to ensure that these disparities are not pushed into the background and new solutions do not create a larger divide in the wellbeing of our communities of color.

Collaboratively, we have been working intensively to analyze the impact of the COVID Pandemic and to meet resident and community needs and fill gaps to mitigate risk and curtail the spread of the virus. We have worked in partnership with the City of Boston to execute these goals through language and culturally appropriate multi-media and multi-format resident engagement, educational and information gathering webinars, and the distribution of personal protective equipment, support to increase the numbers of testing sites through our community health centers and compiling a variety of resources all available on an easily accessible Boston City Government COVID-19 website.

We engage in weekly meetings to have in-depth discussions of race and ethnicity data in Boston as it relates to the pandemic. These discussions have also been used to engage more explicitly in discourse and critical thinking about root causes of these data. One significant root cause is the lack of economic mobility for many immigrants and people of color.

The Pandemic has exposed and put the spotlight on inequities embedded in our system through decades of policies and practices. These policies have established a societal structure of dichotomous opportunities and socioeconomic populations that remain today. These policies are often relegated to marginalized neighborhoods, with limited access to financial services for homeownership and wealth-building opportunities. Environmental and economic conditions in these same neighborhoods harm residents' health and contribute to chronic illnesses that made black, brown, and immigrant populations more vulnerable to COVID-19. An inability to prioritize health equity creates fertile ground for chronic conditions that increase vulnerability and risk.

Our Commonwealth has a chance to face and reverse these historical disparities. We encourage the task force to work with intentionality and integrate a systematic examination of how different racial and ethnic groups will likely be affected by a proposed action or decision in the frame for reopening. This requires an analysis of proposed policies, institutional practices, programs, plans, and budgetary decisions. Such a transparent process can prevent the perpetuation of institutional racism and help identify new choices to remedy long-standing inequities. Ensuring that there is documentation, evaluation, and action on the following at every stage will begin to uproot these disparities in our current systems: Race and Ethnic Data, consideration of disparate impact, advancing equitable impact, funding mechanism, and indicators of success.

An intentional and deliberate strategy to address root causes of the inequities of our commonwealth is a source of excitement and presents a unique opportunity we must seize now. There is consensus that the recovery and path forward is not to return to where we were but to where we should be. We can imagine different data outcomes when people are thriving economically and can prioritize health and wellness. We have an opportunity to establish a legacy in our state. We can imagine a boost to our overall economy when many more people have an opportunity to fully participate in it and contribute to it. As you shape a path forward, we urge you to think of equity as the matter of greatest importance when developing the framework in which Massachusetts will reopen.

We implore you to consider that a one size fits all approach does not account for the most disadvantaged, in fact it further reinforces decades of discriminatory policies. With this in mind, we strongly recommend that the Reopening Advisory Board and Commonwealth of Massachusetts be intentional in addressing the root causes of the disparities we have documented and consider the following policies and actions:

- *Testing and Tracing* - Focus testing expansion efforts in the hardest-hit and most vulnerable areas of the Commonwealth, and ensure that the State hires a diverse staff of contact tracers with multilingual and multicultural competencies.
- *Testing and Tracing Educational Campaign* - To educate those who will inevitably receive calls, a campaign should be conducted to educate Massachusetts residents about contact tracing – including the logistics, what to expect, and the benefits. Marketing and outreach efforts must also eliminate real or perceived barriers to testing, including concerns about the potential impact on employment, housing, or immigration status. Special efforts should be made to reach populations who may react negatively to unsolicited outreach from government agencies – such as immigrant populations. Content should also highlight the safe, fast, easy, and convenient nature of the service while underscoring the negative ramifications of undetected COVID-19 infection on an individual’s close contacts and the community as a whole.
- *Quarantine and Isolation Space* – Step up efforts to make isolation and quarantine spaces available for our residents who are most vulnerable and living in crowded housing where they cannot isolate themselves. More college dorms and vacant hotel rooms for these purposes.
- *Access to Health and Wellness* - Support the Community Health Centers that serve communities of color and the community-based based organizations that address the social determinants of health which cause the long-standing health inequities such as access to culturally sensitive, high-quality, community-based wellness and prevention services, safe and affordable housing, access to insurance and programs addressing the psychosocial issues.
- *Transportation Access* – Prioritize the safety and mobility of communities of color in any transportation plans. This includes increasing service frequency in neighborhoods with highest need, adding capacity through new shuttles and bus routes, connecting neighborhoods to centers of economic activity, and expanding free ridership options for Blue Bikes.
- *K-12 Education* - Work with school districts to innovate around how to continue providing K-12 students with access to high quality learning opportunities through the pandemic. Leverage community based organizations to help meet the academic needs of students in their communities during the pandemic.
- *Child Care Access* – Provide subsidized child care while schools are still closed to enable families to return to work without the added financial burden of child care to low-income families. Employers must provide funding for childcare for onsite workers deemed essential or business critical.
- *Access to Contract Opportunities* – Include Minority Business Enterprises (MBE) and Women Owned Enterprises (WBE) in any new contracting opportunities resulting from the pandemic. As the pandemic

catalyzes local manufacturing, ensure that there is targeted outreach to certified vendors, and develop a communications strategy to promote statewide sourcing from local and diverse businesses.

- *Support Workforce Diversity* - Organizations must have a diversity plan to monitor COVID-19 policy impact on workforce diversity. Organizations must report employment and layoff data disaggregated by race/ethnicity to the state to help us monitor state-wide impact and develop targeted supports.
- *Language Access* – Translate all guidance, protocols, templates, training materials and signage into the Commonwealth's predominant languages and make them widely accessible in multiple formats. This includes translating public health jargon into information that is understandable and actionable to a general audience, as well as engaging community partners and ethnic media outlets in any communication strategies for promulgating these guidance and changes to protocols.
- *Targeted Reopening Communication and Preparation* - All reopening guidance should be issued with a minimum of two weeks lead time so that impacted businesses can prepare their facilities, staff and operations to meet safety standards. All communication should be clear and specific to effectively manage expectations of business owners and the public as to what is reopening and when it is happening.
- *Access to PPE* – To ensure that businesses with fewer resources can reopen on the same timeline as their industry peers and stay competitive, we ask that the State specifically provide the required cleaning supplies and PPE to all businesses with under 35 employees or making less than \$2million in revenues for 8 weeks, either outright or by giving them access to State inventories at a fair price and reliable volume.
- *Flexibility in Implementation and Access to Alternatives* - As protocols are written, it is critical that their implementation does not create any additional, unintended obstacles that would exclude less resourced businesses from opening on the same timeline as their industry peers. For example, occupancy regulations could be paired with policies allowing smaller businesses to access parks, public streets, and sidewalks to expand their footprints if they are unable to reasonably allow for social distancing on-premise. Additionally, any protocols on employee screening could consider allowing symptom-checks as an alternative to required temperature checks, which would place the burden of procuring hard-to-source thermometers on business owners, and are cited as being minimally effective for intercepting potential cases.
- *Employers should provide broadband access* and other technology to employees working from home, or the state should provide tax credits to workers purchasing home office equipment. Efforts should be made to close the digital divide by expanding access to the internet to target internet deserts that prevent equal access to remote learning and/or work.
- *Provide supports for reskilling* of the workforce as we transition to more frequent remote working. Work with existing organizations, ie: the Urban League that specialize in workforce development training in communities of color.
- *Worker Safety* - Mandatory health standards that protect vulnerable essential workers in high public contact industries, require employers to provide protective equipment specifically to these workers including: (i) masks, gloves and hand sanitizer for workers, (ii) unlimited COVID-19 related sick leave; and (iii) hazard pay for those who must be on site making them more susceptible to infection.
- *Privacy and Civil Liberties* - Any use of technology-assisted contact tracing methods, fever detection technology, so-call “immunity passports” or other potentially invasive surveillance technologies that historically target communities of color, should be efficacious, proportionate, time-limited to the duration of the crisis, and protective of civil liberties to avoid creating systems that needlessly violate civil liberties. The use of such technologies should only occur if public health experts agree they are necessary.

- *Digital Divide* - Ensuring equity in remote education and employment will require Massachusetts to close the digital divide by expanding access to the Internet, specifically in internet deserts.
- *Environmental Considerations* - Given recent reports showing that communities with highest rates of COVID-19 are communities of color that breath the most polluted air (<https://www.mass.gov/doc/covid-19s-unequal-effects-in-massachusetts/download>), a concerted effort should be made to develop an environmental justice task force charged with identifying and eliminating environmental contaminants in communities of color which have led to higher rates of health complications from COVID-19.

Thank you for making equity a top priority in Massachusetts' reopening! We believe that inclusion and recognition of support for our most vulnerable communities will be crucial to the success of our recovery. We will continue to share our observations, recommendations and analysis as we move forward together. We stand ready to help in any way we can.

Regards,

Samuel Acevedo
Executive Director
Boston Higher Education Resource Center

Dr. Jean Alves, MD
Bowdoin Street Health Center

Vanessa Calderón-Rosado, Ph.D.
Chief executive officer
Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción (IBA)

Karen Y. Chen,
Executive Director
Chinese Progressive Association
華人前進會

Petrina Martin Cherry
Vice President of Marketing
Boston Medical Center

Michele Courton Brown
Chief Executive Officer
Quality Interactions

Micheal Curry, Esq.
Deputy CEO & General Counsel,
Massachusetts League of Community
Health Centers

Linda Dorcena Forry
Vice President of Diversity
Inclusion & Community
Suffolk Construction
former MA State Senator

Rev. Ray A. Hammond, MD
Co-Pastor, Bethel AME Church

Thea James, MD
Vice President of Mission
Associate CMO
Boston Medical Center

Suzanne Lee

Manuel Lopes
President & CEO
East Boston Neighborhood Health
Center

Eva A. Millona
President and CEO
MIRA Coalition

Dr. Myechia Minter-Jordan
President and CEO
DentaQuest Partnership
Catalyst Institute

Alexandra Oliver-Dávila
Executive Director
Sociedad Latina

Dr. Lorna Rivera, Associate Professor
Director, Gaston Institute for Latino
Community Development & Public Policy,
University of MA--Boston

Carol Rose
Executive Director
ACLU of Massachusetts

Marie St. Fleur, J.D.
Chief Executive Officer
St. Fleur Communications
former MA State Representative

Tanisha M. Sullivan, Esq.
President
NAACP, Boston Branch

Guale Valdez
President and CEO
Mattapan Community Health Center

Paul Watanabe, Ph.D.
Professor of Political Science and
Director of Inst. for Asian American
Studies, University of MA--Boston

Rev. Gloria E. White-Hammond, MD
Co-Pastor, Bethel AME Church

Frederica Williams
President and CEO
Whittier Street Health Care Center

