

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

July 16, 2020

Contact: Olivia LaVecchia  
(802) 734-0617

**Mayor Miro Weinberger, Vermont Racial Justice Alliance, and 30-plus Chittenden County Organizations Together Declare Racism a Public Health Emergency**

*Organizations announce immediate actions to address this emergency both internally and in their work, and commit to ongoing joint action to eliminate race-based health disparities and systemic racism in Chittenden County*

**Burlington, VT** – Today, Mayor Miro Weinberger, the Vermont Racial Justice Alliance, and more than 30 Chittenden County organizations announced a community declaration of racism as a public health emergency. As part of the declaration, all participants also announced: 1) a commitment to the sustained and deep work of eradicating racism within their organizations; 2) immediate and specific actions that they are taking to address the emergency in the work that they do; and 3) a commitment to participate in ongoing joint action, grounded in science and data, to eliminate race-based health disparities and eradicate systemic racism in Chittenden County. Department of Health Commissioner Dr. Mark Levine and State Executive Director of Racial Equity Xusana Davis also announced the State of Vermont’s intention to support and collaborate in this regional public health effort.

“Deep and structural racism has shaped the systems of our nation and community for far too long. Here in Burlington, we have shown while battling the coronavirus pandemic, the climate emergency, and the opioid crisis that when government, non-profits, businesses, and residents share a vision, focus on science and data, and collaborate closely, we can forge remarkable progress on even our toughest challenges,” said Mayor Miro Weinberger. “Today’s declaration signals that going forward the major institutions of Chittenden County will apply these principles of collective action to eliminating systemic racism and its attendant stark disparities in health outcomes. I look forward to working with the Racial Justice Alliance and many other community partners to achieve this long overdue progress, and creating a Burlington where our structures and policies support opportunity, well-being, and true health for every member of our community.”

“We at the Racial Justice Alliance are proud to have spurred the declaration that racism is a public health crisis,” said Mark Hughes, Vermont Racial Justice Alliance. “But it is imperative that our fellow Vermonters recognize that this is not a new crisis. The systemic racism that has pervaded our society for years – from sub-standard medical treatment caused by limited resources and doctors’ bias, to eugenics, to environmental racism that causes people of color to be unjustly exposed to pollutants that make us sick. Racism has been a health crisis since the inception of this country. We must work together to ensure that being Black or a person of color is no longer a pre-existing condition.”

## **Impetus for Community Declaration**

The community declaration of racism as a public health emergency comes at a pivotal moment. First, the globe is contending with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, across the nation and across Vermont, Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) have raised their voices to speak out against systemic racism and police violence in response to the death of George Floyd in May. On June 29, the City of Burlington, in partnership with the Vermont Racial Justice Alliance, joined a small but growing number of municipalities that declared racism as a public health emergency in response to the enormous health disparities between Blacks and whites in many areas, including COVID-19 infection and mortality rates, infant mortality, morbidity and mortality rates of many chronic diseases, and police-involved killings.

To truly address these disparities, however, will take much more than a governmental response. Over the past two weeks, a steering committee of the City of Burlington, Vermont Racial Justice Alliance, University of Vermont Medical Center, Howard Center, and United Way developed a vision for a community response of many individuals, organizations, and institutions working together to bring sustained focus and action to eliminating race-based health disparities in Chittenden County.

The organizations participating in this effort represent a broad coalition of partners whose work spans the social determinants of individual and public health, including opportunities and outcomes for employment, education, housing, justice, and health.

In all of these areas, disparities based on race are stark and persistent, caused by systemic racism, and adversely impact the health of Black people and all people of color. Recently, the coronavirus has exacerbated these disparities. Black and Latino people in the United States have been nearly three times as likely as white people to become infected with COVID-19 and nearly two times as likely to die, and those disparities are even more marked among younger age groups. These same disparities exist in Vermont, and during the current pandemic, though Black residents comprise just over 1 percent of Vermont's population, they account for approximately 10 percent of the total confirmed COVID-19 cases as of July 8, 2020.

These disparities extend far deeper than the current pandemic: race-based disparities exist at the local level in many areas that are the most important social determinants of health. For example, in housing, only 4 percent of homes in Burlington are owned by people of color though people of color comprise 18 percent of Burlington's population, and potential home applicants who are Black are four-and-a-half times more likely than white applicants to be denied for a home loan (83.3 percent to 18.2 percent).

Such disparities continue across many other critical metrics of economic well-being. In Chittenden County, 26 percent of Black residents are in poverty compared to 10.6 percent of white residents, 8.1 percent of Black residents are unemployed compared with 4.3 percent of white residents, and 39.6 percent of Black residents have a bachelor's degree or higher compared with 49.9 percent of white residents.

To improve health outcomes for Black residents of Chittenden County, and create true equity,

will require addressing disparities in all of these areas.

### **Immediate Actions from Participating Organizations**

This community declaration of racism as a public health emergency is the starting point for action to address this emergency that will be both immediate and ongoing. In joining the declaration, participating organizations also committed to immediate actions that they will take to address this emergency in the work that they do. Together, these groups represent some of the largest employers, educators, service providers, housing organizations, and others in Chittenden County. Several highlights of these new commitments are below, and **a full summary of commitments from all participating organizations is attached.**

- **City of Burlington:** Create a new Public Health Equity Manager position to expand the City's public health capacity, support the efforts of the City and partners who have declared systemic racism a public health emergency, and assist in crafting a strategic plan for the City's racial health equity work. The strategic plan will involve the restructuring of City operations to support this new capacity. *[For all of the City's commitments, see attached document]*
- **Burlington School District:** Review our core curricular materials and develop a plan to ensure our curriculum and teaching is culturally relevant, anti-racist, and holds high expectations for what all students know and are able to do. *[For all of BSD's commitments, see attached document]*
- **Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity (CVOEO):** Hire a Director of Racial Equity to focus on organizational development as well as working with the communities we serve. *[For all of CVOEO's commitments, see attached document]*
- **Howard Center:** Create a data dashboard system to identify health disparities and inform practice change within our agency's clinical practice and recruitment plan. *[For all of Howard Center's commitments, see attached document]*
- **Lake Champlain Chamber:** Provide education and resources for businesses on how to take action toward advancing racial equity. *[For all of the Lake Champlain Chamber's commitments, see attached document]*
- **UVM Medical Center:** Implement a Workforce Diversity Assessment of its 8,000 employees in August to ask them about how they experience equity and racism at work. This assessment will be used to increase recruitment and retention of BIPOC staff and leaders, identify gaps in equity within the organization, and reveal learning opportunities to increase cultural humility throughout the organization. The assessment will also take place across the UVM Health Network. *[For all of UVM Medical Center's commitments, see attached document]*
- **Vermont Housing Finance Agency (VHFA):** Disaggregate VHFA's programmatic data to make clear who VHFA's lending and assistance programs serve and which neighborhoods may be over/under represented. This information will be public and we will target future resources in response accordingly. *[For all of VHFA's commitments, see attached document]*

### **Commitment to Ongoing Joint Action**

To truly address race-based health disparities and systemic racism in Chittenden County will require sustained and coordinated work that is grounded in data and science. As part of this declaration, participating organizations also have committed to participating in ongoing work

and joint action.

The exact form this ongoing joint action will take is still emerging, however, Chittenden County has recent experience to draw from with sustained collective action around a public health emergency in the County's response to the opioid epidemic. Since the fall of 2016, dozens of Chittenden County organizations have convened at monthly meetings known as CommunityStat to review the data on the opioid epidemic, develop shared strategies, and rapidly deploy resources. Actions taken by these partners contributed to Chittenden County experiencing a 50 percent reduction in opioid-related overdose deaths in 2018, and sustaining that progress in 2019. The success of this effort has demonstrated the potential of collective action to address public health challenges, and this experience will now be applied to the urgent problem of eradicating systemic racism in Chittenden County.

### **Statements from Participating Organizations**

The more than 30 organizations that have joined this community declaration are a multi-sector group that span the County's largest employers and small non-profits, health care providers and affordable housing organizations, financial institutions and schools. These organizations shared the following statements on their commitment to this declaration, immediate next steps, and ongoing joint action.

Dr. Stephen Leffler, University of Vermont Medical Center: "The mission of the UVM Medical Center is to improve the lives of the people we serve through high-quality health care. That begins with doing everything we can to make sure that we treat each other with respect, humanity, and empathy, and doing the work to become an anti-racist organization. We're proud to join the city of Burlington and this coalition of community partners to tackle racism in our city."

Jesse Bridges, United Way: "Our United Way has long had a priority of fighting economic inequity with equity and inclusion as a foundational strategy – we need to do better in our role as individuals and as an organizations so we can actively engage in solutions to racial inequity and justice. We are committed to being an actively anti-racist organization by using our voice and platform to advocate, by mobilizing community resources and volunteers, and by making racial equity and justice a criteria for our community investments."

Catherine Simonson, Howard Center: "We are committed to a world without racism. With roots in social justice, Howard Center staff work each day to serve our community and strengthen diversity, equity and inclusion in our organizational culture and system of care. We look forward to joining together with our community partners to strategically and fully eradicate systemic racism throughout our community."

Laura Zeliger, Burlington Housing Authority: "BHA stands together with the City of Burlington and community partners in these efforts to collaboratively eliminate systemic racism."

Tom Flanagan, Burlington School District: "We are grateful for the opportunity to be a part of the collaborative effort to declare racism a public health emergency. At BSD, we believe we have a critical role to play in combating racism and in employing anti-racist practices. We are committed to working with the City, and all of the partners who signed on to this declaration, to

ensure Burlington, Chittenden County, and the nation directly confront the systemic racism that plagues our nation.”

Tanya Benosky, Boys & Girls Club of Burlington: “We stand by racism as a public health crisis. We are committed to providing opportunities to our BIPOC Club members that will give them the experiences they need to live healthy lives, from providing food and warmth to educational and economic advancement.”

Donna Carpenter, Burton: “What feels right is to stop, and listen, and take a close look at ourselves, our sport and our industry.”

Kim Fitzgerald, Cathedral Square: “If anything positive can be said about the pandemic, we’re optimistic that it has opened the world’s eyes to the egregious inequities in all aspects of our society, and the institutional racism at the core of them all. We have a lot of work to do to dismantle structural racism and truly provide ‘equal opportunity for all.’ Cathedral Square is ready and eager to participate in this important work.”

Tyeastia Green, Director of Racial Equity, Inclusion, & Belonging, City of Burlington: “This moment isn’t about George Floyd, although the situation in Minneapolis sparked a world-wide effort for everyone to see systemic racism for what it is. Racial disparities in health and social determinants of health have been around for centuries. COVID-19 shined a bright light on that. I’m proud that this declaration is being signed today, and also proud to be a part of making it happen.”

Benjamin Ola. Akande, Champlain College: “We are proud to support the City's efforts to create a whole-systems approach to addressing the crisis of systemic racism that is threatening the lives and well-being of members of our community and our nation. Champlain College is committed to working in partnership with the City and those advocating for racial justice to advance this work in our community and contribute our institutional strengths and expertise to create a stronger, more inclusive Burlington for all who live, work and study here.”

Brenda Torpy, Champlain Housing Trust: “CHT affirms and reaffirms its commitment to fight racism and to the principle that Black lives matter in its policies, programs, and employment in all aspects of its work.”

Charlie Baker, Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission (CCRPC): “At CCRPC, we believe deeply that resources and opportunities – employment, affordable and plentiful housing, accessible transportation, quality education and health care, environmental justice, and overall quality of life -- must be allocated fairly so that all people can thrive. We must actively eliminate barriers to full, meaningful participation in community life and work tirelessly to correct past injustices. We are committed to working through these issues together with our member municipalities, partner organizations, employers and residents.”

Jeffrey McKee, Community Health Centers of Burlington: “Identifying and reducing health disparities has always been central to CHCB’s mission of care. As such, we are uniquely prepared to act as part of our local Population Health Alliance in addressing racism as a public health issue. We are eager and ready to work together with our organizational partners to build a

future built on antiracism and equity for all members of our community.”

Paul Dragon, Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity (CVOEO): "Systemic racism, systemic poverty, poor health outcomes and the disregard for our own environment are mutually destructive and all self-inflicted. We built it and we can now change it."

Nancy Owens, Housing Vermont: “Housing Vermont is glad to sign on to this community effort; it is through our collective action that we can make progress eliminating systemic racism and its negative impacts on public health.”

Vicky Smith, King Street Center: “"At King Street Center, we’ve been examining our own practices, programs, environment, and integrating this learning into our ongoing strategic plan. While we are not experts and recognize that this is an ongoing listening and learning process, we commit to being loud & proud members of an anti-racist community in which hatred and intolerance have no place.”

Aly Richards, Let's Grow Kids: “Racism—or antiracism—starts early. Children notice race and begin making judgments on race when they are very young. They begin to be treated differently, by other children and by adults, based on race when they are very young. They begin to experience inequity—in their health and educational opportunities—when they are very young. That’s why Let’s Grow Kids is recommitting our movement to creating an equitable early childhood education system that advances racial justice for the next generation of Vermonters.”

Reverend Christopher Von Cockrell, Vermont Racial Justice Alliance Steering Committee and Interim Pastor, New Alpha Missionary Baptist Church: “We wholeheartedly support the Declaration of the City of Burlington that racism is a citywide health emergency. As the only church in Vermont worshipping in the tradition of African Americans, our collective stories are rich with experiences of the impact of systemic racism. We commit more than ever to embedding in the message of Jesus Christ the resounding call for racial justice in our outreach to a hurting community and stand as a partner with the Racial Justice Alliance as the Mother church in organizing the Burlington community of faith for the purpose of eradicating systemic racism. We call upon the city of Burlington, nonprofits, and local businesses to stand with us in this work and our commitment to the construction of a new church that we will call home.”

Christine Hughes, Vermont Racial Justice Alliance Steering Committee and Executive Director, New Seasons Vermont: “We stand in full support of the declaration ‘Racism Is a Health Emergency’ being put forward by the City of Burlington and the Racial Justice Alliance. As a black, woman-owned business in Burlington, New Seasons has been a benefactor of the false narrative of scarcity and we therefore fully embrace the prospect that for once we will be offered an opportunity to thrive. From employment development, to job training, adult basic education, basic computer skills, and reentry services, New Seasons will be a key player in ensuring the economic empowerment long awaited and deeply deserved by BIPOC communities in Burlington. We are encouraged that all sectors are converging on this community health emergency and have high hopes that as a result of this partnership that we will realize the resources required to save lives in Burlington.”

Kate Laud, Opportunities Credit Union: "Opportunities Credit Union stands in solidarity with all

Black, Minority and New American communities. We support ending systemic racism and reaffirm our 30-year commitment to racial justice. To honor our members, staff and volunteers, we will seek new ways to listen to Black perspectives."

Christine Lloyd-Newberry, Sara Holbrook Community Center: "At Sara Holbrook, we believe that our world is a better place the more diverse, equitable, and inclusive it is. While we further recognize the intersectionality facing those we serve, taking into account not only race and ethnicity, but gender identity, socio-economic status, and sexual orientation; we recognize that addressing racism needs to happen on its own right. Now. With no exception."

Benjamin Longmore, Vermont Racial Justice Alliance and Vermont Cannabis Partners: "The Declaration by the City Burlington of racism as a public health emergency is both timely and meaningful. For too long have minority-owned businesses been left behind, and this sad fact seems to be replaying itself in the Hemp and Cannabis industry in Vermont and Burlington. The key to this industry is land and capital, neither of which is at a premium for the BIPOC community, especially here in Vermont. It is for this reason that we are hopeful that efforts to eradicate systemic racism will open opportunities for black-owned businesses in the cannabis industry and lead us to the place where true wealth can be built in the BIPOC community. It is our hope that creative solutions will be developed as a result of the relationships established by the city and Chittenden County, local businesses and nonprofits that place us on the path of equity and prosperity."

Xusana Davis, Executive Director of Racial Equity, State of Vermont: "This declaration acknowledges the systemic and widespread nature of racial disparity in this country and this community. It signals the urgency with which we must address racism, and establishes anti-racism work as a priority for the city. We at the state stand ready to support the city's equity work."

Mark Levine, MD – Commissioner, Vermont Department of Health: "It is critical that we work together to address systemic racism at the personal, local, state and national levels. Health equity exists only when all people have a fair and just opportunity to be healthy – especially those who have experienced socioeconomic disadvantage, historical injustice, and other systemic inequalities."

Maura Collins, Vermont Housing Finance Agency (VHFA): "Housing finance and zoning have long been the primary tools used to make our nation's racism systematic. In doing so we have locked out Black and Brown households not only from affordable homes but also economic and educational opportunities. VHFA is joining the City's effort to combat this public health emergency because we all deserve equal access to housing and opportunity."

Mohamed Jafar, Vermont Racial Justice Alliance and Vermont Racial Equity Association: "As a Burlington-based, BIPOC-owned company offering professional and managed services specifically designed to eradicate systemic racism in businesses, non-profits, and government agencies, we strongly support the long overdue Declaration by the City of Burlington and the Vermont Racial Justice Alliance that racism is a public health emergency. The signatory supporters' work ahead will require new data-driven approaches and a framework that is built upon an integrated strategy, clear measures of progress, and methods to hold stakeholders

accountable. We're grateful that economic development opportunities are being created to support the advancement of the work of the BIPOC companies like the Vermont Racial Equity Association and we are looking forward to supporting a cross-section of the community to eradicate systemic racism within their organizations."

Kyle Dodson, YMCA: "It is almost trite to say at this point, but this "George Floyd moment" does seem to have a different energy; somehow broader and deeper, and more resolute than earlier efforts. All of us who are committing to this initiative, are stewards of our children's futures. Let's not squander this opportunity."

*For additional information, please see three accompanying documents:*

- *A. Community declaration of racism as a public health emergency, including list of all signatories*
- *B. Summary of participating organizations' immediate commitments*
- *C. Public action advisory from the Racial Justice Alliance about this declaration*

# # #