

The root cause is racism



Your Turn
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Guest columnists

The hard but essential work of dismantling systemic racism begins by looking inward at our history, our institutions and ourselves.

United Way of Asheville and Buncombe County is committed to fighting for the education, health, and well-being of all of our neighbors. We believe that we are stronger and more resilient as a community when we “Live United,” and we recognize the role that racism plays in keeping us apart and determining the outcomes of our lives. It is for these reasons that we wholeheartedly support the recent, unanimous decision by the Buncombe County Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS)

Board to declare racism a public health crisis, and we call on the Buncombe County Commissioners to do the same.

The health and economic devastation inflicted by the novel coronavirus pandemic is disproportionately ending lives and upending communities in shamefully familiar ways. Across the United States, it is far too easy to predict on the basis of race which of our neighbors will fall behind in school, lose their jobs, get sick, and die as a result of the coronavirus. A recent New York Times study of Center for Disease Control data found that People of Color are three times more likely to get sick and twice as likely to die from COVID-19.

By declaring it a public health crisis, DHHS acknowledges the undeniable role racism plays in producing poor health outcomes in communities of color, and the complex relationship between these outcomes and other inequities. Here in Buncombe County, the average life expectancy of Black residents is nearly six years shorter than that of whites, and Black babies are four

times more likely than whites to die before their first birthday. Twelve percent of white children live in poverty in our county, as compared to 24% of Black children and 40% of Hispanic children. And we know our community is home to one of the most dire racial education opportunity and achievement gaps in the country. Until we embrace the fact that these stark and persistent racial disparities are the products of structural racism, we will be unable to make any meaningful improvement to the overall quality of life in our community.

On the eve of our 100th Anniversary, United Way of Asheville and Buncombe County is proud of our long history of service to our community. And yet, we recognize that our failure to fully understand and explicitly name the role that institutionalized racism has played in making and keeping so many of our neighbors poor has been a huge blind spot and a barrier to us achieving our own mission. This needs to change and change now.

On July 1 of this year, UWABC officially launched a new strategic plan that names racism as a root cause of poverty and calls on us “to challenge dominant culture narratives, norms and power

structures that prevent all people from belonging and thriving.” It calls on us to “ensure that our work is guided by community expertise, including the lived experience of people most impacted by poverty and injustice.”

The work of reimagining our institutions and communities with equity at the center will require us to be vulnerable, make mistakes, and learn from them. We call on all of our partners from the nonprofit, governmental and business communities to follow the courageous leadership of DHHS—and more recently, the Asheville City Council—and commit to dismantling racism within their own institutions.

As we approach our centennial anniversary, United Way of Asheville and Buncombe County believes in our vision of a united and resilient community where everyone belongs and everyone thrives. Eliminating racism as a barrier to belonging is the first step toward achieving a Buncombe County where all of our neighbors thrive.

Jennie Eblen serves as the chair of United Way of Asheville and Buncombe County's board of directors. Dan Leroy is the President and CEO of United Way of Asheville and Buncombe County.