

To: Mayor Peduto
From: [Pittsburgh Human Rights Working Group](#)
Date: April 24, 2020
Re: Call to establish COVID-19 Social Equity Task Force

We write in our role as policy advocates, researchers, and educators to call on you to **immediately establish a COVID-19 Social Equity Task Force** to respond to the emerging evidence that the overwhelming burden of disease and death from the Coronavirus pandemic is falling disproportionately on the Black community and people of color.

The *New Pittsburgh Courier* ([4/20/20](#)) reported that although African Americans make up 12% of our county's population, they represented 22% of those hospitalized with COVID-19. Recently available data show that African Americans make up around 30% of COVID-19 deaths, despite making up roughly 13% of the population. ([New York Times 4/14/20](#)).

Sadly, this is not surprising. Widespread structural racism in this country, and the socio-economic disparities with which it is entwined, mean that our most vulnerable communities already suffer most. In this pandemic, we lack accurate evidence about the full extent to which people in our community are exposed to, and suffering from, this deadly virus, but we must fear that exposure and risk follow the familiar lines of inequality in our communities.

Any effort to stem this pandemic requires that *all* residents have equitable access to prevention and protection, testing, and treatment. The persistence of disease in any population threatens the whole. Thus, concerted efforts to specifically target the needs of vulnerable communities—who make up a disproportionate share of our region's essential workers—will help us stem the spread of coronavirus and enable us to end physical isolation policies.

Our local governments need capacity to respond more pro-actively to this disturbing evidence of racial health inequities. The proposed Task Force should work to assess disease burden in minoritized communities and to develop targeted, effective responses that will address the particular needs of these communities and help better to protect them and all residents of our region. The work of this Task Force, moreover, would extend more broadly to help us address the already alarming health disparities in our region, which have been identified in numerous local studies. As local governments face huge shortfalls in their budgets, it will be imperative that we work *intentionally* to allocate limited resources in ways that do not derail efforts to remedy past inequities. The needs of those furthest behind must be addressed *first* if we are to build a resilient and just society.

It is essential that Task Force members have a diversity of expertise and an understanding of the social burdens of disease, including the relationship between social class, morbidity and mortality and political forces. We note that this Task Force would align closely with the City of Pittsburgh's existing commitments to addressing racial and gender inequities and to integrating the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) into our local framework for development.

As educators, scholars, and community leaders, we look forward to working to support City and County efforts to address human rights disparities in our region and to better prepare our community to withstand crises like the current pandemic and other challenges related to climate change and global economic uncertainty.