Racism is a Public Health Crisis

Local public health officials across California, represented by the County Health Executives Association of California, are deeply saddened by the tragic deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and countless other black Americans that have been victims of police misconduct and racially motivated violence.

California's local health departments are committed to protecting and improving the health of our communities, and systemic racism threatens the health and well-being of black Americans and communities of color. The impact of systematic racism is evident in the disproportionate incidence of police brutality, incarceration, school suspensions, and health inequities amongst black communities, including the disproportionate number of African American deaths due to COVID-19.

Racism is a significant driver of the social determinants of health and a barrier to health equity. Acts of racially motivated violence, police bias, and living with the threat of discrimination and violence create toxic stress for black communities, including children and families. Continued exposure to threatening situations, which occur more frequently for black Americans, can have lasting negative effects on health, development, well-being, and opportunity. Furthermore, accountability for these harms caused in communities of color is limited by the misuse of policies intended to protect law enforcement agencies.

Racism can manifest in different ways ranging from violent attacks, to implicit bias, to subtle microaggressions. Structural racism creates institutions, including those within governments, that perpetuate inequities through implicit racist policies and practices. It is imperative that we recognize that systemic racism not only exists, but that it continues to impact the daily lives of black Americans and communities of color.

CHEAC urges governing bodies at the federal, state, and local levels to implement the following recommendations, which align with many of those put forward by the American Public Health Association:

1. Adopt resolutions declaring racism as a public health threat.
2. Enhance public education and messaging efforts to increase understanding and awareness around systemic racism from a public health perspective and elevate lived experiences from black Americans and communities of color.
3. Eliminate policies and practices that facilitate discrimination and violence against specific populations (including laws criminalizing these populations).
4. Institute robust law enforcement training and accountability measures.
5. Prioritize investment in promoting racial and economic equity to address social determinants of health.
6. Implement community-based alternatives to address harms and prevent trauma.
7. Better document law enforcement contact, violence, and injuries.

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CHEAC is a statewide organization representing local health departments throughout California and is dedicated to the promotion, protection, and improvement of the health of all Californians while addressing the unique health needs of our local communities.