Open letter advocating for an anti-racist public health response to demonstrations against systemic injustice occurring during the COVID-19 pandemic

On April 30, heavily armed and predominantly white protesters entered the State Capitol building in Lansing, Michigan, protesting stay-home orders and calls for widespread public masking to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Infectious disease physicians and public health officials publicly condemned these actions and privately mourned the widening rift between leaders in science and a subset of the communities that they serve. As of May 30, we are witnessing continuing demonstrations in response to ongoing, pervasive, and lethal institutional racism set off by the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, among many other Black lives taken by police. A public health response to these demonstrations is also warranted, but this message must be wholly different from the response to white protesters resisting stay-home orders. Infectious disease and public health narratives adjacent to demonstrations against racism must be consciously anti-racist, and infectious disease experts must be clear and consistent in prioritizing an anti-racist message.

White supremacy is a lethal public health issue that predates and contributes to COVID-19. Black people are twice as likely to be killed by police compared to white people, but the effects of racism are far more pervasive. Black people suffer from dramatic health disparities in life expectancy, maternal and infant mortality, chronic medical conditions, and outcomes from acute illnesses like myocardial infarction and sepsis. Biological determinants are insufficient to explain these disparities. They result from long-standing systems of oppression and bias which have subjected people of color to discrimination in the healthcare setting, decreased access to medical care and healthy food, unsafe working conditions, mass incarceration, exposure to pollution and noise, and the toxic effects of stress. Black people are also more likely to develop COVID-19. Black people with COVID-19 are diagnosed later in the disease course and have a higher rate of hospitalization, mechanical ventilation, and death. COVID-19 among Black patients is yet another lethal manifestation of white supremacy. In addressing demonstrations against white supremacy, our first statement must be one of unwavering support for those who would dismantle, uproot, or reform racist institutions.

Staying at home, social distancing, and public masking are effective at minimizing the spread of COVID-19. To the extent possible, we support the application of these public health best practices during demonstrations that call attention to the pervasive lethal force of white supremacy. However, as public health advocates, we do not condemn these gatherings as risky for COVID-19 transmission. We support them as vital to the national public health and to the threatened health specifically of Black people in the United States. We can show that support by facilitating safest protesting practices without detracting from demonstrators’ ability to gather and demand change. This should not be confused with a permissive stance on all gatherings, particularly protests against stay-home orders. Those actions not only oppose public health interventions, but are also rooted in white nationalism and run contrary to respect for Black lives. Protests against systemic racism, which fosters the disproportionate burden of COVID-19 on Black communities and also perpetuates police violence, must be supported.

Therefore, we propose the following guidance to support public health:

- Support local and state governments in upholding the right to protest and allow protesters to gather.
- Do not disband protests under the guise of maintaining public health for COVID-19 restrictions.
• Advocate that protesters not be arrested or held in confined spaces, including jails or police vans, which are some of the highest-risk areas for COVID-19 transmission.
• Oppose any use of tear gas, smoke, or other respiratory irritants, which could increase risk for COVID-19 by making the respiratory tract more susceptible to infection, exacerbating existing inflammation, and inducing coughing.
• Demand that law enforcement officials also respect infection prevention recommendations by maintaining distance from protesters and wearing masks.
• Reject messaging that face coverings are motivated by concealment and instead celebrate face coverings as protective of the public’s health in the context of COVID-19.
• Prepare for an increased number of infections in the days following a protest. Provide increased access to testing and care for people in the affected communities, especially when they or their family members put themselves at risk by attending protests.

• Support the health of protesters by encouraging the following:
  ○ Use of face coverings.
  ○ Distance of at least 6 feet between protesters, where possible.
  ○ Demonstrating consistently alongside close contacts and moving together as a group, rather than extensively intermingling with multiple groups.
  ○ Staying at home when sick, and using other platforms to oppose racism for high-risk individuals, and those unable or uncomfortable to attend in person.

• Encourage allies who may wish to facilitate safe demonstrations through the following:
  ○ Providing masks, hand-washing stations, or hand sanitizer to demonstrators.
  ○ Providing eye protection, such as face shields or goggles, for protection against COVID-19 and chemical irritants used to disperse crowds.
  ○ Bringing wrapped, single-serving food or beverages to sustain people protesting.
  ○ Providing chalk markings or other designations to encourage appropriate distancing between protesters.
  ○ Supplying ropes, which can be knotted at 6-foot intervals, to allow people to march together while maintaining spacing.
  ○ Donating to bail funds for protesters

• Listen, and prioritize the needs of Black people as expressed by Black voices.

These are strategies for harm reduction. It is our sincere hope that all participants will be able to follow these suggestions for safer public demonstrations, assisted by allies where possible and necessary, but we recognize that this may not always be the case. Even so, we continue to support demonstrators who are tackling the paramount public health problem of pervasive racism. We express solidarity and gratitude toward demonstrators who have already taken on enormous personal risk to advocate for their own health, the health of their communities, and the public health of the United States. We pledge our services as allies who share this goal.

This letter is signed by 1,288 public health professionals, infectious diseases professionals, and community stakeholders.
Danielle Bloch, MPH
Danielle Desrosiers
Danielle Lafond, BUSM
Danielle McCarty RN
Danielle Rome MD, NYP-Columbia
Danielle Zerr, MD, MPH, UW/Seattle Children's
Danniell Zamora, Infectious Diseases, University of Washington
Daphne Schneider MD, Cambridge Health Alliance
Darcy Rao, University of Washington
Darragh Kerr, MPH, University of Washington
Daryl Nault
Dashawna Fussell-Ware, MSW, University of Pittsburgh
Data analyst, New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene
David Charles Mallinson, University of Wisconsin-Madison
David de Gijsel, MD, Infectious Disease and Addiction Medicine.
David Joseph Koesters - unaffiliated
David M. Aronoff, MD, FIDSA, FAAM
David P. Eisenman, MD, MD MPH, David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA, Fielding UCLA School of Public Health
David Swedler, PhD MPH
David van Duin, University of North Carolina
Dawn Fishbein, MD, MedStar Health Research Institute
DeAnn Rice RN
Deborah Sarson
Debra Williams
Deidre Alessio NP Cambridge Health Alliance
Delia Pinto Santini, AfroLatina Scientist
Denise McCulloch, MD, MPH, Infectious Diseases Fellow, University of Washington
Dental Student
Derek Prince, UWSOM
Deryn Isaac
Devang Amin, Internal Medicine Resident
Devin English, MD - Rutgers School of Public Health
Devin Perez
Dhruvi Chauhan, MPH Candidate ’21, Columbia University, New York, NY
Diana A
Diana M. Tordoff, MPH, PhDc, University of Washington, Department of Epidemiology
Diana Nguyen
Diana Schlotterbeck
Diane Kanjilal, RN Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center
Dimiter zlatkov
Divya Prajapati, UCSD
Divya Subramanian
Doctor
Dominic Facciponte
Dominika Seblova, postdoctoral research fellow Columbia University
Dominique Cantave, Harvard University
Dominique Heinke, Epidemiologist
Donna J. Curtis, MD, MPH, Pediatric Infectious Disease Specialist
Dr. Lee Pfaff
Dr. Miqdad Asaria, Department of Health Policy, London School of Economics and Political Science
Dr. Nicole Christian Brathwaite, MD
Dr. Summaya Zulfiqar, EM
Dr. Swati Chavda, Resident University of Calgary
Dr. Alex Moulton - Harbor UCLA
Dr. Andrea d’Aquino, Stanford
Dr. Ayesha Appa, UCSF
Dr. Dodie Arnold, CEO Arnold CR
Dr. Hilary Michel MD
Dr. Kate Sullenberger — Veterinarian
Dr. Katherine Muldoon
Dr. Megan L. Srinivas, University of North Carolina
Dr. Nahal Nikroo
Dr. Natalie Marshall, Clinical Microbiology Fellow, PhD in Microbiology & Immunology
Dr. Sarah Sanders, Cambridge Health Alliance
Dr. Sheldon Francis, Delaware Veterans Cemetery
Duane R. Taylor
Dylan Bickers, former USAF Public Health Technician and Community Health NCOIC
Earl Adsley
Ebony Hilton MD
Edberg Deborah
Edward Courchaine, PhD
Eileen Li, University of Washington School of Medicine
Ekene Nwoye
Elana Tan MD, Tristar Horizon Medical Center
Eleanor Murray, Boston University School of Public Health
Elena Diskin - Virginia Department of Health Epidemiologist
Elena Hernandez, MPH Candidate at UCLA Fielding School of Public Health
Elisa Cheng, MD, Clinical Instructor, Cambridge Health Alliance
Elisa Pasqual MD PhD (Spain/Italy)
Elise Moore, ASTHO
Eliza P Shulman, DO, MPH
Eliza Pelrine, MD
Elizabeth Adler, MD
Elizabeth Ahlers, PsyD
Elizabeth Aduean, MD, Infectious Disease fellow
Elizabeth Epstein-Tracy
Elizabeth Gulleen, Research Associate Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center
Elizabeth Hirsch, University of Minnesota
Elizabeth Jacobs
Elizabeth Kamai, MSPH; Gillings School of Global Public Health, UNC Chapel Hill
Elizabeth Lalasz, RN, National Nurses United
Elizabeth Larson, MPH Candidate
Elizabeth Morris, Colorado School of Public Health
Elizabeth Pinsky, MD, Massachusetts General Hospital
Elizabeth Traub, MPH -- Infectious Disease Epidemiologist
Ellen Kettler, MS4 at UC San Diego School of Medicine
Ellen Walker
Ellie Gladstone, JD, MPH, Public Health Institute, Oakland, CA
Ellie Grossman MD MPH, Harvard Medical School / Cambridge Health Alliance
Ellie Joo
Elspeth Fullerton, MS1, University of Washington School of Medicine
Elspeth Nolen, University of Washington School of Public Health
Elvira Aronzon
Emilia Hermann, MD MPH - Montefiore Primary Care and Social Internal Medicine
Emily A Kendall MD PhD, Johns Hopkins
Emily Beaudin
Emily Begnel, MPH - University of Washington
Emily Boes, MD
Emily Ciccone, Infectious Diseases Fellow, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Emily DeVichsel, University of Maryland, Baltimore
Emily Deichsel, University of Maryland, Baltimore
Emily Fleckenstein
Emily Gemmell, MPH PhD Student, University of British Columbia
Emily Herscher
Emily Malavenda, MD (Cambridge Health Alliance)
Emily Merchant
Emily Muller, MS3
Emily Scott, MD/MPH, University of Colorado
Emily Sousa, PNP, MPH
Emily Thorn, Medical Student
Emily Wong, MD, Africa Health Research Institute and Massachusetts General Hospital
Emma Ciersk, PHE graduate
Emma Clark, Public Health Advisor
Emma Glennon, University of Cambridge
Emma Kersey, Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health
Emma Mulligan, BUSM Class of 2022
Epidemiologist, Centers for Disease Control & Prevention
Epidemiologist, NIH
Epidemiologist, Regional Government, Canada
Eric Hausmann
Eric Rohr
Eric Stulberg, University of Utah
Erica Bass, MD PGY3 Internal Medicine at UCSF
Erica Chavis, Clinical Specialist Pharmacist
Erica Lukken, PhD - University of Washington
Erin Duncan MD MPH
Erin Flattery, Resident Physician, NYP-Columbia
Erin Hsu, MD, Infectious Diseases Doctor
Erin J Aiello Bowles, MPH, Kaiser Permanente Washington Health Research Institute
Erin James, postdoctoral associate Yale University
Erin L. Abner, PhD, MPH; Associate Professor of Epidemiology at University of Kentucky
Erin Mordecai, Assistant Professor, Stanford University
Erin Philpott, DO
Emie-Paul Barrette, MD, Washington University
Esther Ofei-Asamani, Mphil, MPH, School of Governance
Gimpa-Ghana
Ethel Yang, MBA/MPH
Eva Stein, MD; University of Colorado School of Medicine
Evan L. Eschliman, Johns Hopkins School of Public Health
Ezza Khan, MD Hunterdon Medical Center
Faisal Tan, BUSM
Faith Price, Community Prevention Coordinator and WSU Doctoral Student in Prevention Science
Faith Williams
Family medicine physician, Cambridge health alliance
Family Medicine resident, University of Nebraska Medical Center
Fanghua Lou
Fanny Gonzalez
Farley R Cleghorn MD MPH, Palladium
Fatima Al Dhaheri, MD. Infectious disease fellow
Fausto Gonzalez Torres
Felipe Findley
Fiorella Guido, MS3, Upstate University
Flynne Lewis, pediatrician CCHS
Former Probation Officer
Frances Oakes
Francesca Golightly, Boston University School of Public Health
Frederick L. Altice, M.D., Yale University
Gabriel Benavidez, PhD student in epidemiology @ The University of South Carolina
Gabriela Alcalde
Gabriela Velazquez
Gabriella Page-Fort
Gabriella Vargas, University of Virginia
Gabrielle Chamoun, Medical Student
Gabrielle Pollack, MS1
Gail R. Hansen, Hansen Consults
Gallaudet University Student
Genevieve Boland
Genna Braverman
Genya Shimkin, MPH, University of Washington Department of Family Medicine
George A. Alba, MD; Massachusetts General Hospital, Harvard Medical School
George Mekeel RN
Gerard Coste, MD Cambridge Health Alliance
Geri Medina, MPH candidate at Boston University School of Public Health
Ghadeer Hasan Rutgers RWJMS
Gillian Isabella Hollerich
Gillian Tarr, Environmental Health Sciences, School of Public Health, University of Minnesota
Ginger Johnston, Pastor
Glenn Stevens
Grace Mulholland, MSPH, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Graham Mooney, Johns Hopkins University
Gregg Gonsalves, Yale School of Public Health
Gretchen Snoeyenbos Newman
H. Hunter Handsfield, MD, Professor Emeritus, University of Washington
Hailey Boudreau
Hailey Wyatt
Hala Benmoussa
Haley Burdge, Upstate College of Medicine student
Sujatha Srinivasan, PhD. Senior Staff Scientist, Vaccine and Infectious Disease Division, Fred Hutch, Seattle
Sukhmani Bal, MPH - BUSPH/MGH CCCSEW
Suliman Ghafary, MPH
Sumeet Mankar, physician, primary care and public health
Supriya Rani Jain (Brandeis University)
Surabhi Nirkhe, Internal Medicine resident, UCSF
Susan Bolick RN, retired public health nurse
Susan Caisse
Susan Watson, LCSW, MPA, MHS
Sydney Perlotto, FP/RH Policy Advocacy
Sydney Pomenti, MD NYP - Columbia - New York Presbyterian
Sylvia Coleman, MD
Sylvia Czuppon
Sylvia Kang, Yale School of Nursing
Sylvia Romm
Talia Swartz, MD, PhD, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai
Tammy Wilhoite
Tanja Srebotnjak, PhD
Tara Alpert, PhD
Taxpayer & Mother of Black Sons
Taylor Kelley, Health District
Taylor Paul
Taylor Vincent, MPH
Tejas Venkat-Ramani, MPH
Tenley Brownwright, PhD, Penn State University
Teresa Johns
Terrel Sanders
Tessa Delaney, MD Vanderbilt University Medical Center
Tessa Pulido
Theresa Santos, UWSOM
Thy Huynh
Tiffany Kan, RSPH
Tiffany Pomares, MPH-Epidemiologist
Tilton Little, Publisher, Big4Bio
Tim Carpentier
Tim Lahey, MD, MMSc, Professor of Medicine & Director of Ethics, University of Vermont Medical Center
Timothy Barber
Timothy W Menza, MD, PhD, OHSU
Tomefa Asempa, Hartford Hospital, CT
Ton Johnson
Tori Cowger, MPH, Harvard School of Public Health
Toshali Katyal BA, UC Berkeley
Toyosi Oyelowo
Tran Huynh, medical student
Transgender educator from northern CA
Trey Simril, MD, University of Colorado Internal Medicine Resident
Tyler J Peck
Tyler Quigley UPSTATE NEUROPHYSIOLOGY
Tyrone
UC Berkeley School of Public Health
Uche BLACKSTOCK - Advancing Health Equity
Uchechi Mitchell, PhD, MSPH, University of Illinois Chicago
UCSF School of Medicine
Undergraduate Student, Milken Institute School of Public Health
University professor, North Carolina
UNMC 2nd yr. Medical Student
Uzma Syed, Infectious Diseases, South Shore Infectious Diseases & Travel Medicine Consultants
V. Morrison APRN Cambridge Health Alliance
V. Ram Krishnamoorthi, MD MPH, University of Chicago, Doctors for America
Vaish Sridhar
Valerie Press, physician
Van Park
Vanessa Aden
Vanessa Estibeiro MD, MPH
Vanessa K Ferrel, MD MPH
Vanessa Lamers
Vanessa Torrice, BUSM
Varun Goel - UNC Chapel Hill
Vera Schulte, University of Washington Medical Student
Veronica Grycan
Veronica Salvas, Epidemiologist Healing Communities Study
Vicki Alexander, MD, MPH, Healthy Black Families, Inc
Victor J. Schoenbach, PhD, emeritus associate professor
Victoria Cameron, Dartmouth Board of Health
Victoria Gontarz
Vidya Atluri, infectious disease fellow, UW
Vikas Saini, M.D. President, Lown Institute
Viral Shroff-Mehta, MD
Virginia Tan, Medical Student, Netter School of Medicine
Visiting Nurse Service of New York
Wendy Armstrong MD, Emory University
Whitney Wood, MS3, Elson S. Floyd College of Medicine
Wilfredo Lopez
Will Brown
Will Flanagan, UCB/UCSF graduate student
Will Patterson, Medical Student, CCLCM
William Andrew Hughes
William C. Goedel, PhD, Assistant Professor (Research), Brown University School of Public Health
William F Parker, MD, MS, University of Chicago.
William J Muller, MD/PhD, Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine
Xavier Hill
Xóchitl Silva
Y. R. Usodum
Yamile Molina, PhD MS MPH, Assistant Professor, Center for Research on Women and Gender, Community Health
Sciences, University of Illinois Chicago
Yasaman Zia, UW
Yasmin Kamal, MD/PhD student Geisel School of Medicine
Yefim Zaltsman, PhD, Postdoctoral Scholar, UCSF
Yehudith Dashevsky, alumna of the University of Pennsylvania
Yewande Dayo, Infectious Diseases Pharmacist
Zachary West, MD
Zara Wright, MA, Canvas Health
Zoe McLaren, University of Maryland, Baltimore County