The Colorado Health Foundation™



Racism is a Public Health Issue: What George Floyd's Death Can Teach Funders

When racially-motivated ideals lead to overt misuse of power and senseless death, we have conversations at the Foundation about how the event connects to our mission. How does the death of a man at the hands of police in Minneapolis have anything to do with bringing health in reach for all Coloradans?

The answer? **It has everything to do with our work.**

In fact, it's exactly what we're fighting against. Racism has historically and persistently poisoned our systems, institutions and societal structures, resulting in race-related disparities in education, employment, wealth, housing, food access, criminal justice and health care. These disparities are as old as our country.

Racism is a public health issue. If we are to make any progress in our attempts to close the equity gap, we – as funders – must understand this inextricable link and hold it at the center of every discussion about our community investments and community engagement strategies.

What happened to George Floyd is wrong. What's happening to communities that have historically lacked power and privilege is systematic oppression. The two are deeply connected, and it's on all of us to lift up the starkly different reality communities of color live in every day. These are injustices we cannot – and will not – ignore.

In this unprecedented time, when the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has forced the most restricted nature of society we can imagine, racism is showing up with greater ammunition and magnifying inequities that have existed for a long time – one of the more visible is that COVID-19 is killing Black people 2.4 times

more than White folks in the United States.

As Phil Buchanan of The Center for Effective Philanthropy points out in his recent blog post, there's countless examples of how the health of Black communities is "linked to a history of oppression." He goes on to say, "The advantages of whiteness in this country are on stunning, horrifying display."

Those "advantages of whiteness" showed up last week when a White officer kneeled on a Black man's neck for nearly nine minutes, while three other officers supported his act of violence and onlookers peacefully pleaded to make it stop.

Mr. Floyd was robbed of his life in broad daylight for all to see. If that isn't a symbol of what's been happening to people of color in this country since its beginnings, we don't know what is.

Instead of working to untangle the web we've created throughout history for Black and Brown people, we just keep weaving in more oppressive threads, trapping more and more people of color. This is why people are protesting across the country. It's not just about Mr. Floyd, or Breonna Taylor or Tony McDade (and the list goes on). It's a collective display of the anguish of a people and their allies. They're saying "enough is enough," and we stand with them in that message. Silence communicates indifference and deepens disparities.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." That's because people bend it.

We must not be desensitized by the prevalence of public attacks on Black people like Mr. Floyd. We must not overlook the barriers to opportunity constructed with people of color in mind. We cannot afford to check out or allow our own inaction to uphold the status quo. **We've got to keep bending that arc.**

We need to hold on to hope right now – but hoping for a "return to normal" neglects the opportunity and responsibility in front of us entirely.

What we're witnessing right now is the "normal" people of color have maddeningly endured every single day of their lives. The stress you're feeling from the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic – the loss, exhaustion, fear and grief – is what people of color shoulder every day. Black, Latinx, Asian American/Pacific Islander, Indigenous, immigrant and refugee communities have continued to persevere despite these shackles for generations.

Hope, alone, cannot bend the arc toward justice. Hope, alone, has not dismantled oppressive institutions and systems that stand on foundations of bias and intentionally racist policies.

It's time – way past time – for philanthropies, and the people who run them, to take a hard look at ourselves in the mirror and recognize our own privilege, our own bias and our own misuse of power over the communities we exist to serve. We must stop kneeling on necks.

What are we doing – what changes can we make in our own approach – to bend the arc of justice toward a new, more equitable normal?

For communities of color, the impending long-term impacts of COVID-19 on employment, financial stability, civic engagement, housing, education and health are on the horizon. We need to ensure that our continued community engagement does not inadvertently perpetuate systematic biases or current inequities. **That is what our work must do.**

We know these times are uncertain and disorienting, yet our efforts should not just reflect quick actions fueled by good intentions, but be the evidence of a strong analytical approach around race and socioeconomic status to determine targeted investment of resources in communities. **That is what our work should do.**

We must reorient our power so that it is shared and acknowledges the value of people's lives, experiences and perspectives. We must nurture

relationships in communities hit hardest by the outcomes of racist practices. And we must follow communities' lead and support solutions designed by and with them.

This is our collective work – our greatest responsibility.

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