

Racism is a public-health crisis, says commissioner

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ALBANY COUNTY — For three months, Elizabeth Whalen, Albany County's health commissioner, has been briefing the public on the coronavirus pandemic.

On Tuesday, after Albany erupted in protests over the weekend, Whalen said at Tuesday morning's press briefing, "I feel it is important for me today to discuss another public-health threat ... That public-health threat is racism. Racism is real."

Whalen called the killing of George Floyd — a white Minneapolis police officer knelt on Floyd's neck for eight minutes as he said he could not breathe — "a despicable act that has angered the entire country."

She went on, "But a large part of this anger is due to an underlying systemic problem that occurs across this country, and that is racism."

Whalen then read a statement from the president of the American Public Health Association, Georges Benjamin: "Racism is a longstanding systemic structure in this country that must be dismantled through brutally honest conversations, policy changes and practices. Racism attacks people's physical and mental health.

"And racism is an ongoing public health crisis that needs our attention now. We see the discrimination every day in all aspects of life, including housing, education, the criminal justice system, and employment. And it is amplified by this pandemic as communities of color face inequities in everything from a greater burden of COVID-19 cases to less access to testing, treatment and care."

Whalen said the county's health department works with community members "to try to address inequities in health." The department's mission is, in part, to "reduce health disparities and promote health equity," Whalen said.

"Equity," she said, is different from "equality."

"Equity means the absence of avoidable, remediable differences among groups of people whether those groups are defined socially, economically, demographically, or



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"Racism is real," says Albany County Health Commissioner Elizabeth Whalen.

geographically,” said Whalen. “Equity is a process, and equality should be the outcome of that process. It is a difficult process.”

She said her department engages in that process every day. It hosts listening forums on maternal mortality. Staff go door-to-door in high-risk neighborhoods to address disparity in conditions like asthma, diabetes, and heart disease. The department educates the public and works on task forces designed “to help bridge the gap,” Whalen said.

Perhaps most importantly, Whalen said, is the need “to listen to the communities of color, to listen to the very real concerns that they have, and to work hand in hand with them to come up with better strategies to close these gaps, to help this anger, and to make sure that we are all working every day on solutions.”

Whalen said of the county’s health department, “We know we can improve. We know we still have a long way to go and, really, the actions of the last week have shown me that in a way that nothing else ever has.”

Whalen said her grandparents and parents are from Albany. “Albany is my home city,” she said. Whalen noted that she works in the South End and she said she was happy when peaceful protesters marched by her home. She also said she has learned much in conversations with her children.

She concluded, “There are better ways of thinking. There are better ways of doing things and I want to partner with leaders to continue ... this very important work.”

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