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Lafayette declares racism a public health crisis

By Noe Padilla
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LAFAYETTE — Lafayette now considers racism as a public health crisis.

The City Council approved a resolution to that effect Monday.

The resolution, prepared by the city’s Human Relations Commission, addresses several societal aspects reportedly affecting minority communities more than white residents.

The resolution notes that social and material factors — including employment, housing, education, health care, public safety and food access — are known to have a lifelong effect on health.

“I think when you look at what public health is, you’re talking about the well-being of the entire community. And your community is not going to be healthy if there are people within your community that don’t have the resources or access to the resources that everyone else has,” said Stephen Smith, chair of the city’s Human Relations Commission, which prepared the resolution.

“And I think when you look at the statistics, if you go through the statistics within the resolution, they very strongly support that.”

The resolution referred to several statistics gathered by the YWCA of Greater Lafayette to help illustrate the needs in Tippecanoe County:

- 11.5% of Black and 19% of Latinx residents do not have health insurance coverage, compared to 9.3% of white residents
- the median infant mortality rate is 14.6 per 1,000 Black, Multiracial and Latinx births compared to 6.1% of White births
- the average median household income is \$28,191 for Black households compared to \$56,684 for non-Latinx White households
- 40.4% of Black and 19.5% of Latinx residents live in poverty compared to 15.6% of White residents
- 9.4% of Latinx and 11.07% of Black residents 25 or older have a bachelor's degree or higher, as compared to 22.6% of white residents
- among people employed full-time in Tippecanoe County the employment rate for White citizens is 63.9% compared to the 44.3% for Asian American and Pacific Islander citizens

The resolution committed the city to address and/or examine seven aspects dealing with racism in Lafayette:

- racism affects all community members and deserves action from all levels of government and civil society.
- frank and open discussions about race, racial disparities and inequalities.

- address racial inequalities by investing, as much as possible, in disadvantaged neighborhoods and those neighborhoods whose residents suffer most from racial disparities.
- review policies and procedures to eradicate implicit and explicit racial bias.
- immediately access all tools to eliminate disparities based on race, place or identity in areas including health, education, criminal justice, the environment, employment and the economy.
- create a plan to collect data about racial disparities in departmental staffing, contracting and all other extensions of city government to incorporate racial equity into the analysis of governmental action.
- collaborate with additional key community stakeholders to help them incorporate the above practices into their businesses.

After the votes were placed, Perry E. Brown, representing District 3 and president of the council, said such a focus was a long time coming.

“I’m here to tell you that it (racism) makes me sick. It grinds on you each and every day of your life. When you wake up and you got to deal with this sorta thing. And it’s about time that society needs to acknowledge that it has an effect on the way people live. It has an effect on their bodies, because, like I said, it grinds on you,” said Brown.

The City of Lafayette’s Human Relations Commission started working on this resolution after the murder of George Floyd killed by a Minneapolis police officer while in custody. His death sparked protests and awareness drives across the country.

“It feels great to have this pass, but this is just a step in the process. There are many things that need to be done in terms of creating some of those next steps and actions to ensure that this is more than just a declaration.

Lafayette Mayor Tony Roswarski said he was happy the resolution passed and mentioned the city has been proactive in addressing these issues.

Last year, the Lafayette and the YWCA of Greater Lafayette partnered to hire Floyd Keith as the senior director for race and social justice at YWCA Greater Lafayette.


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