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HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 537

Offered January 13, 2021

Prefiled January 10, 2021

Recognizing that racism is a public health crisis in Virginia.

Patrons—Aird, Bagby, Ayala, Bourne, Carr, Cole, J.G., Guzman, Hope, Jenkins, Jones, Keam, Kory, Levine, McQuinn, Mundon King, Price, Rasoul, Samirah, Scott, Subramanyam, Tran, Tyler, Ward and Williams Graves; Senators: Lucas and Spruill

Referred to Committee on Rules

WHEREAS, as the site where the first enslaved African people arrived in what is now the United States, the epicenter of the American slave trade, and the former capital of the Confederacy, Virginia has a long and embedded history of racism, particularly against African Americans; and

WHEREAS, the American Public Health Association defines "racism" as a social system with multiple complex dimensions, including internalized or interpersonal individual racism and institutional or structural systemic racism, which unfairly disadvantages some individuals and communities, unfairly advantages other individuals and communities, and saps the strength of the whole society through the waste of human resources; and

WHEREAS, systemic racism has manifested as a determinant to public health through persistent racial disparities in criminal justice, housing, education, health care, employment, worker protections, climate, outdoor access, food access, and technology; and

WHEREAS, more than 100 studies have linked racism to negative health outcomes, including research supporting that the cumulative experience of racism throughout one's life can induce chronic stress and chronic health conditions that may lead to otherwise preventable deaths; and

WHEREAS, many communities of color suffer from increased exposure to environmental hazards, poor air quality, lack of access to safe and affordable opportunities for outdoor recreation, lack of mental health services, and lack of educational and career prospects; and

WHEREAS, specifically, African American women are up to four times more likely to die of pregnancy-related complications than white women, African American men are more than twice as likely to be killed by police as white men, and the average life expectancy of African Americans is four years lower than the rest of the United States population; and

WHEREAS, racial health disparities have been on display during the COVID-19 pandemic, with African Americans more likely to be hospitalized by the virus and more than twice as likely to die from the virus as Caucasians; and

WHEREAS, the impact of systemic racism clearly rises to the definition of "crisis" proposed by epidemiologist Sandro Galea: "The problem must affect large numbers of people, it must threaten health over the long-term, and it must require the adoption of large-scale solutions"; and

WHEREAS, many local, regional, state, and national entities have recognized racism as a public health crisis; and

WHEREAS, Virginia is home to many ethnically and racially diverse communities that are subject to individual or systemic racism; and

WHEREAS, it is critical to engage with citizens, community partners, and stakeholders in the education, employment, housing, health care, and criminal justice fields to raise awareness of these issues and develop practical solutions; and

WHEREAS, there are numerous steps that Virginia can take to address systemic racism and its impact on public health, including:

1. Expand the charge of the Virginia Department of Health's Office of Health Equity to address racism as a public health crisis to ensure that statewide policy efforts are analyzed through an intersectional race equity lens and offer funding recommendations;

2. Retain the Commission to Examine Racial Inequity in Virginia Law as a permanent commission;

3. Require training for elected officials, staff members, and state employees on how to recognize and combat implicit biases;

4. Establish a glossary of terms and definitions concerning racism and health equity; and

5. Promote community engagement, actively engage all citizens on issues of racism, and provide tools to engage actively and authentically with communities of color; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED by the House of Delegates, the Senate concurring, That the General Assembly hereby recognize that racism is a public health crisis in Virginia; and, be it

RESOLVED FURTHER, That relevant state entities, including the Virginia Department of Health

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57 and its Office of Health Equity, be encouraged to consider steps to address systemic racism and its
58 impact on public health; and, be it
59 RESOLVED FINALLY, That the Clerk of the House of Delegates transmit copies of this resolution
60 to the Commissioner of the Virginia Department of Health, the Office of Health Equity, and the
61 Commission to Examine Racial Inequity in Virginia Law so that they may be apprised of the sense of
62 the General Assembly in this matter.