

June 2, 2020

An Open Letter to the Deans, Administrators, and Faculty of the OHSU-PSU School of Public Health:

In addition to other communication you have received, we are writing to urge the leaders of the OHSU-PSU School of Public Health to take assertive action against the state-sanctioned violence that led to the recent murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, James Scurlock, and countless others. These murders do not just occur elsewhere but have existed in our own community in Portland, including Kendra James, James Jahar Perez, Patrick Kimmons, Keaton Otis, Terrel Johnson, Andre Gladden, Quanice Hayes, and Jason Washington [who was murdered by PSU police officers in 2018](#). The lack of engagement with these difficult conversations stretches from administration to students, where a minority of individuals try to raise their voices to those who rest in positions of power. We are writing because it is our duty as public health students to demand that the OHSU-PSU School of Public Health do the work to become an [antiracist](#) institution.

**It is our responsibility as a school of public health to condemn and actively work to dismantle the systems that perpetuate violence against Black communities. Full stop.**

The American Public Health Association (APHA) acknowledges that [law enforcement produces and reproduces](#) physical and psychological violence against communities of color. Additionally, the American Psychological Association has described the events of the past week as part of an ongoing [racism pandemic](#), calling for an end to police brutality. We understand that the public health community, especially in Oregon, is devoting many resources to the COVID-19 pandemic. APHA has also explicitly released statements that "[policing and punishment do not protect public health](#)" as it relates to public measures to prevent the spread of coronavirus. These issues are inextricably connected. We know that Black and Indigenous communities are disproportionately at risk for [coronavirus exposure](#), police [brutality](#), and [death](#). While Dean Bangsberg has addressed the issue of health disparities related to COVID-19, the School has not taken an explicit stance against police brutality, and there is no working process for supporting people of color in the School of Public Health or addressing white supremacy in the classroom.

Our School of Public Health envisions eliminating the causes of injustice and disparity, yet our own students and faculty of color bear the extreme burden of structural violence in their lives and places of school and work and do not feel seen or heard within our own institution. **It is not the job of faculty, staff, and students of color to challenge racist acts or prove their existence matters.** In our school, those of us with race-based privilege must take a deep dive inward, acknowledge our positions of power, and 1) challenge our own individual racism and that of institutions, 2) listen to those who are hurting, 3) center the narratives and perspectives of the people most affected and 4) work to be actively antiracist.

Here are examples of what other universities have done:

- [University of Minnesota has divested its relationship from the Minneapolis Police Department](#)
- [University of Washington School of Health Sciences leadership \(Deans\) are creating space led by students and faculty of color to discuss what it means to be an antiracist institution](#)

Following up with these actions that other universities have taken, OHSU-PSU could disinvest in funding for police-sanctioned public safety officers, from the [Department of Public Safety](#) and [Campus Public Safety \(CPSO\)](#), at OHSU and PSU, respectively. At PSU, the group, "Disarm PSU" has been advocating for the disarming of CPSO officers for several years, without avail.

Our institution can also support community and internal student organizations that are already engaged in strengthening communities of color, building political power and material support, and working for accountability and access to justice systems and political decision-making. It is the responsibility of our institution to use our privilege to teach and to engage with the work that these organizations are doing to address police brutality and structural racism.

If our mission as a School of Public Health is "to prepare a public health workforce, create new knowledge, address social determinants, and lead in the implementation of new approaches and policies to improve the health of populations," **we are obligated to condemn white supremacy and acknowledge the state-sanctioned violence against communities of color. This begins with a frank, transparent discussion about how white and non-Black members (intentionally or otherwise) perpetuate inequality or benefit from white supremacy within higher education.** As [has been established](#), police violence and use of force policies are public health crises. Acknowledging this and providing our community with the expertise and resources to address this disparity in adverse health outcomes are essential during this policy window.

School of Public Health leadership can move forward by:

- Committing to institutional solutions and power sharing to engage with antiracism, by supporting recommendations and strategies for action put forth by Black and non-Black students and faculty of color. Individual behavior changes are not systemic interventions.
- Addressing OHSU-PSU SPH's complicity in reproducing systems of oppression against Black and non-Black students and faculty of color in every way possible.
- Hiring more faculty and staff of color, including those working in administrative roles.
- Incorporating disclosure of the racism in public health as a discipline, and the ways white supremacy is deeply embedded in our science. In every class, where relevant, engaging in critical discussion of eugenics, forced sterilization, ongoing unethical medical experimentation, and medical and scientific racism.
- Explicitly acknowledging the role of police and policing in the murders and systematic divestment of Black and Indigenous people and communities.
- Developing concrete practices for education and accountability around white supremacy and racism, so the work within the school can influence the wider community.
- Institute mandatory training embedded in antiracist and decolonial frameworks for all members of the SPH community. A short course on implicit bias is not enough.
- Developing a process to address white supremacy in the curriculum and incorporate anti-oppressive practices in every class to address racist behaviors and attitudes expressed in the SPH by professors, guest lecturers, and administrative staff, and students.
- Provide resources and spaces for culturally-specific healing and community building and continue to provide students the space to voice their concerns.

The OHSU-PSU School of Public Health needs to be a leader in correcting health inequities in our community. This is the time for action. We commit to the real work of public health science, with racial justice at the center and in every aspect of every discipline. We anticipate you will

receive other communications and demands for action steps, and we expect a conversation of how to move forward that centers the experiences of students, faculty, and staff of color.

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