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Opinion

In My Opinion: Actions to help communities of color

By Alai Reyes-Santos, Special to the Register-Guard

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All over the country, we are partaking in conversations on how to best address the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 in communities of color. These are concrete actions to consider as we seek to sustain the physical and mental health of communities of color now.

Educate ourselves and others

Here are some numbers that illustrate what we need to address with communities of color. In Illinois, 29% of diagnosed cases are black and 30% are Latino. In the city of Chicago, 72% of people who died of COVID-19 by mid-April were black. African Americans are 14% and Latinos are 17% of Illinois' population. In Illinois and New York, COVID-19 death rates are higher among black and Latino communities than in the general population. In Arizona and New Mexico, indigenous communities' death rates are five and seven times higher than for other groups. The Navajo Nation has the highest per capita rate of infection in the U.S. In Oregon, 33% of cases diagnosed have been identified as Hispanic/Latino where 12% of the state identifies as Hispanic/Latino. In the nation, infection rates in low-income zip codes are twice as high as those in wealthier ones.

Combat racism and xenophobia

Asian and Asian-American, and other communities of color, are facing increasing verbal and physical violence, vandalism. Many fear going to the grocery store or when people knock at their door. In social media, Latino and black communities are blamed for being vulnerable to the virus, while providing services essential for all of us, including farming, nursing, food preparation and

delivery, maintenance, cleaning crews.

Sustain the economic health of communities of color

Support Asian and Asian-American, migrant and people of color businesses.

Advocate for subsidies for minority-owned businesses.

Ensure protections for all workers, those who have been left unemployed and all those who can and must continue to work in health care, farms, grocery stores, pharmacies, construction, delivery services, meat processing, factories, utilities, janitorial services, gardening, the “gig-service” economy – many who are people of color and migrants. Provide access to paid leaves, unemployment benefits, protective face-wear and gloves, washing stations and bathrooms now and always.

Fight hunger

Support community gardens and indigenous efforts to maintain traditional food sources.

Provide true access to health care

Provide information about free or low-cost health care to migrants and communities of color. Make clear that health care does not impact residency and citizenship applications. Keep ICE out of hospitals.

Be mindful of well- documented bias and racism in U.S. health care systems

Let’s not replicate statistics of black women dying of breast cancer at higher rates than white women, of Latino men receiving less treatment for high-risk prostate cancer than white counterparts, of people of color in pain not receiving the medications they need. A Filipino-American family in Salem almost lost their dad – a hospital employee - to COVID-19. He was sent home twice with a pneumonia diagnosis, flu-like conditions and two pre-existing health complications. No test for the virus was provided until he went into cardiac arrest at home.

Rebuild trust

Mend ties between the medical establishment and people of color through education and true, culturally sensitive outreach. A variety of health-care initiatives in U.S. history – including non-consensual medical experiments and coercive sterilization campaigns – have damaged communities of color across generations.

Eliminate documentation requirements in state or federal aid

Make it possible for many migrants, unhoused people and queer and trans-identified people to survive loss of income, hunger, isolation and potential illness.

Make sure initiatives to address racial disparities are effective

Channel resources to those who already know how to reach communities of color. Federal and state relief funding must support indigenous and people-of-color-led organizations providing food, physical and mental health care, educational services, employment and information to their constituencies.

Fund projects

Fund projects designed and implemented by tribal governments and front-line organizations. Consult with them as experts on community needs.

Support closures of detention centers

Save the lives of migrants and their children without resources to care for themselves in detention.

Challenge racial profiling

Question racial biases in early-release programs reducing federal prison populations during the pandemic.

Advocate for appropriate health care in prisons

Prison conditions have led to the spread and outbreaks of the virus among inmates without proper testing or health care provided.

Keep the conversation alive so we can foster healthy communities for all. There

is not one answer. Together we may find multiple solutions.

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