

In Solidarity Against Anti-Black Racism

St. James Town Service Providers' Network & St. James Town Community Corner

“Racism is a public health crisis.” – Martin Luther King III¹

In response to the murder of George Floyd at the hands of four Minneapolis police officers, the collective voices and actions of citizens internationally have led to swift and unprecedented social and systemic changes. On Monday, June 8, 2020, the Toronto Board of Health voted unanimously to declare anti-Black racism a public health crisis, guided by a call for concrete action from the Black Health Committee, the Alliance for Healthier Communities, and the Network for the Advancement of Black Communities that, “anti-Black racism impacts health care, and as healthcare organizations, we must act now.”^{2 3 4}

Toronto Public Health's medical officer Dr. Eileen de Villa added, “the evidence is clear: anti-Black racism is a critical public health issue that impacts the physical and mental health of people of African descent. From education to employment, housing to health care, there is no aspect of life that anti-Black racism leaves untouched.”⁵ When viewed through a public health lens, systemic barriers faced by BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) communities can be turned into practical dilemmas on the road to community wellness across streets, borders, and oceans.

Over the past three decades, historical and intergenerational matters such as drug use and homelessness have also begun to be more accurately defined as matters of public and social determinants of health rather than individual, criminal, or entirely choice-based ones. In a recent visit to Toronto, Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot described our sister-city's response to the “epidemic of gun violence as a public health crisis” to Mayor John Tory through projects such as Advance Peace, which have effectively reduced gun violence through community-based measures similarly in New York and Los Angeles, and are now beginning to shape Toronto's mandate.⁶ Along these lines, approaching anti-Black violence from a public health standpoint is not a radical idea; it is merely a sensible one.

The St. James Town community is not only amongst the most densely-populated in Canada but also the most ethnically diverse, often referred to as a “world within a block.” The St. James Town Service Providers' Network (SJTSPPN) is a collective of diverse agencies focused on service coordination and integration in partnership with the St. James Town Community. The St. James Town Community Corner (The Corner) is a hub that is a unique partnership between service providers and residents. The Corner operates on a unique and flexible grassroots model of service delivery where both service provider and community-led programming co-exist. It is an innovative and collaborative space to inspire change.

The global COVID-19 pandemic has been viewed as a “great equalizer” in how its effects have become a shared experience internationally. While true, the pandemic has also been a great amplifier of pre-existing inequities, hitting the most socially and economically vulnerable communities the hardest. COVID-19 has brought to the surface the discrepancies that have ailed our neighbourhoods, cities, and countries for generations – which has been demonstrated by the escalation of anti-Black racism and discrepant access to health care for BIPOC communities in cities across the world, Toronto being no different.⁷

Amidst the tragedy and frustration, communities such as St. James Town have organized and stepped forward to meaningfully address local and systemic shortcomings robustly with a long-term, social justice, and public health-oriented outlook. This week's public health declaration is only the beginning.

The SJTSPPN and The Corner stand in solidarity with black communities and their leaders and are committed to critical engagement for the advancement of equitable public health at the frontline, community, and systemic levels.

Executive Committee

St. James Town Service Providers' Network

www.stjamestown.org/sjtsppn

Steering Committee

St. James Town Community Corner

www.stjamestown.org/thecorner

1. <https://twitter.com/officialmk3/status/1268385453021040645>
2. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/board-of-health-anti-black-racism-1.5603383>
3. <https://www.allianceon.org/news/Anti-Black-Racism-impacts-health-and-healthcare-organizations-we-must-act-now>
4. <https://www.allianceon.org/news/Statement-Black-health-leaders-Anti-Black-Racism-Public-Health-Crisis>
5. <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2020/06/07/covid-19-and-police-violence-fuel-a-push-to-declare-anti-black-racism-a-public-health-crisis.html>
6. <https://www.cp24.com/news/chicago-s-mayor-advocates-for-treating-gun-violence-as-public-health-crisis-following-meeting-with-tory-at-city-hall-1.4834531>
7. <https://globalnews.ca/news/7015522/black-neighbourhoods-toronto-coronavirus-racism/>

