



**Representative Emilia Strong Sykes
Ohio House District 34
Minority Leader**

May 12, 2020

The Honorable Governor Mike DeWine
Vern Riffe Center,
77 S. High St, FL 30
Columbus, OH 43215

Dear Governor DeWine,

For years, I have echoed calls from community leaders and healthcare advocates to address health disparities among Black and Brown Ohioans. As COVID-19 began to exacerbate these issues and wreak havoc on minority communities, I along with many of my colleagues continued these calls and I was encouraged when you announced the creation of the Minority Health Strike Force (Strike Force) on April 20.

However, in the three weeks since its creation, the Strike Force has yet to issue recommendations or a concrete plan to address disproportionate—and preventable—coronavirus infection rates and deaths that continue to devastate Ohio's Black families. Furthermore, conversations about these disparities started weeks before the announcement of the strike force and your administration was alerted to the national trends that would likely materialize in Ohio. We may have flattened the curve in Ohio, but the inaction on health disparities has left Black Ohioans behind the curve. This stands in stark contrast to other working groups you have assembled, including for restaurants, bars and hair salons, whose recommendations were turned into action within a single week.

Minority communities deserve more than window dressing and empty promises. We deserve action.

Last week, I sent you an email with actionable items to address racial disparities in COVID-19. One recommendation is to place a health equity subject-matter expert within the emergency operations who participates in all major briefings in the COVID-19 response to ensure health equity is built into the policy framework. A second recommendation is to enhance community-based COVID-19 testing for families from minority backgrounds including making modifications for those with disabilities, and increasing testing sites in locations where individuals have limited personal transportation. Other achievable actions include mandating the collection of race and ethnic information, requiring local boards of health to develop a plan to address the needs of minority communities, and collaborating with trusted organizations of minority communities to share culturally competent messages including NAACP, Urban League, Ohio Legislative Black Caucus, and faith communities.

We need a comprehensive plan with dedicated staff to increase testing, deploy contact tracing, implement commonsense workplace protections, improve communication, and to collect and report racial data in real time—to improve our response and ultimately save lives.



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The slogan “in this together Ohio” evokes a sense of shared struggle, of sacrifice and of commitment to one another. But the reality is that since the onset of this pandemic—and for the greater part of a generation or more—Black and Brown families have seen the worst of it. Black Ohioans represent just 13 percent of the population, but account for more than 26 percent of known coronavirus cases, 30 percent of hospitalizations, and 17 percent of deaths. It is likely we do not even know the full scope of the disparity due to Ohio’s lack of testing and uneven reporting of racial data.

In addition, continuing to reopen Ohio before recommended testing levels are in place will disproportionately affect Black Ohioans, who are more likely to work in the service industry relative to their white counterparts—exacerbating deficits in health, access to care and economic status. Further, your administration’s decision to back down from mandating face coverings after pressure from far-right groups will put more retail workers at risk. Adequately addressing racial health disparities with concrete and well-resourced plans could save many Black Ohioans from unnecessary illness or death, however due to the strike force’s lack of mobilization, the lives of these Ohioans will be left to chance, and predictable waves of illness and death that could have been prevented will not be. Unfortunately, Governor I fear it is too late. And Ohioans will suffer.

The social determinants of health, from access to care and reliable transportation to limited economic mobility and implicit bias within the medical community, continue to play a role in the ability of Black Ohioans to access the testing and critical care they need amid the worst global pandemic in more than a century. Racial equity must be more than a talking point. It needs to be an action point for your administration.

Other populations have been given special consideration, such as the elderly, and so should Ohio’s Black and Brown communities.

I look forward to working together to address racial disparities and make this a fight for all Ohioans, not just some of us.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Emilia Strong Sykes".

Emilia Strong Sykes
State Representative
Ohio House District 34
Ohio House Minority Leader