Dear Board Members,

Thank you for your thoughtful and thorough policy recommendation, “Declaring Systemic and Structural Racism as a Public Health Crisis: Toward Eliminating Racial, Economic, Social, Health and Other Systemic Injustices.” We deeply appreciate your investment in the success of our department and our staff as together we work toward the attainment of the highest level of health for all people, value every person equally, and focus on addressing inequalities and injustices.

The Denver Department of Public Health & Environment (DDPHE) agrees that reforming policies, practices, and operations to advance racial and social justice across the department is an absolute priority. DDPHE recognizes the powerful platform we have as Denver’s local public health agency to effect change and lead by example, and we take that responsibility seriously. A goal of our department, as outlined in our strategic plan, is to equip staff with the skills needed to address racism, implement policies to reduce the impact of structural oppression, and strengthen collaborations with communities throughout Denver. While all DDPHE divisions can point to efforts they make to engage and serve all populations, we must continue to build on this work.

We believe intentional and substantive actions are an absolute necessity to making meaningful change. DDPHE is actively engaged with the Mayor’s Office of Equity and Social Innovation (OESI) to identify and implement culturally responsive strategies and leadership for social justice. This work will foster an organizational environment that embraces inclusive ideas, information, and organizational structures that promote racial equity, diversity, and inclusion. Our shared goal of increasing efforts within DDPHE to recruit, retain, develop, and advance employees and Board members from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds is emblematic of this commitment.

Specifically, as a department, DDPHE has committed to promoting a culture of diversity and inclusion as reflected in our Strategic Plan. When revised in 2018, DDPHE added two metrics to measure gender balance and generational diversity. DDPHE now tracks six diversity and inclusion metrics in its Strategic Plan: gender balance, ethnic diversity, generational diversity, employee engagement index, employee involvement in decisions, and leadership’s support of inclusion.

DDPHE’s Workforce Engagement and Development Team (WEDT) analyzed Employee Engagement survey results and identified different focus areas on which to work as a means to support diversity and inclusion metrics/initiatives. The committee then came up with action items to address two different focus areas from the survey: (1) My department/agency does a good job in creating opportunities that take advantage
of the diverse talents and abilities of all employees; and (2) In my organization, employees of every race, ethnic background, gender, religion, disability, sexual orientation, and family status are able to contribute. Citywide, Denver’s Office of Human Resources (OHR) has determined that its goals for the remainder of 2020 and 2021 include educating leaders and employees in this area to serve as a foundation for proactive initiatives to follow. We expect much more to come from OHR in 2021, including: recruiters emphasizing a broader candidate pool overall, which we believe will result in a more diverse candidate pool; diverse interview panels; and targeted social media advertising.

Additionally, DDPHE will organize an internal, cross-divisional health and racial equity team to develop and operationalize racial equity and social justice work plans at the division level. Because our five divisions are unique in their missions and distinct in the work they do for the community, each division must customize their approach in developing and deploying their racial equity and social justice work plans. The division work plans will provide the foundation for the overall DDPHE plan. OESI will provide guidance and support for all these efforts.

As Denver’s public health agency, DDPHE is one of the departments leading the city’s response to COVID-19. Because of this, the majority of our workforce continues to be deployed to assignments critical to managing the pandemic. This situation is impacting our ability to meet the “normal” demands associated with our work, as well as our ability to advance our racial equity efforts in the short term. Despite this, divisions continue to use available capacity and staff to take action and make progress in the area of equity and social justice. For example, Denver Animal Protection, in partnership with OESI, has organized a working group of employees to assess divisional policies and practices for barriers to inclusion.

Despite the chilling effect of the massive redeployment of personnel to COVID-19 and the crippling stranglehold on resources/funding that the economic situation has had on our department, DDPHE is making progress in our efforts to ensure that everyone has equitable access and opportunity to thrive in Denver, regardless of who they are or where they come from. These efforts are based in our robust health equity program.

Currently, work underway in this area includes:

- Conducting focused trainings to develop a common understanding among staff across DDPHE about how the department defines health equity and applies this approach to DDPHE programs.

- Developing a health equity impact assessment and planning tool to improve the planning and integration of meaningful health equity strategies in DDPHE policies, programs, projects, and investments.

- Developing a “community involvement checklist” to improve integration of authentic and intentional community involvement in DDPHE projects and programs. The checklist has been reviewed by community engagement staff in other agencies, and outside experts, and the Division of Environmental Quality’s air and water staff have expressed interest in piloting the checklist in the immediate future.
- Revising our Responsive Services Inventory to better understand how communities’ access DDPHE programs (e.g., 311, service access phone numbers, interactions with staff, etc.), determine how access may have changed due to COVID-19 or other factors, and improve accessibility and responsiveness.

- Complete a department-wide community engagement survey to identify efforts to engage and involve communities in DDPHE programs and improve the quality of service to constituents.

As public health professionals, we are profoundly aware that the pandemic has revealed the disproportionate impacts of systemic racism, bias, and discrimination perpetuated against communities of color, those with varying abilities, those living in extreme poverty, and those who are unhoused or underhoused. Your recommendations are timely, and we acknowledge that transformative changes require bold leadership. However, as a charter department of the City of Denver, to truly undertake that process in a meaningful manner we must also consider the current stark realities imposed by deep budget cuts and reductions in services, programming, and personnel. We also must consider that DDPHE is part of a larger context that includes all City departments, agencies, and operations. Because of this, some changes in policy, procedure, and operations are outside our discretion as a department.

As part of the City, we look to OESI and the Office of Human Resources to lay the groundwork for all departments to incorporate development opportunities and tools related to racial equity for every city employee. This foundation is necessary to engage our employees in the design and adoption of equitable city policies, initiatives, budgets, and programs, and to become social justice change agents. As OESI itself has stated, the first step in this process is providing employees with an understanding of how implicit and explicit bias, systemic racism, and historical discriminatory policies have influenced present inequity for communities of color, First Nations people, and historically marginalized groups.

DDPHE will continue to work with OESI to create tailored plans and strategies specific to each of our divisions. Furthermore, we will include in that work the recommendations put forward by the Board. Divisional teams will incorporate applicable and appropriate strategies based on your recommendations. Together we will strive to build an equitable and just city. Your recommendations will serve as the cornerstone of our work. We thank you for your input and will continue to update the Board often as this work progresses.

Sincerely,

Robert M. McDonald
Executive Director and Public Health Administrator,
Denver Department of Public Health & Environment