



Confronting Health Inequity: Let's Get Comfortable with Being Uncomfortable

In partnership with [New York Association of Psychiatric Rehabilitation Services, Inc. \(NYAPRS\)](#) and [McSilver Institute For Poverty Policy and Research](#), [Lenora Reid-Rose](#), Director of Cultural Competence and Diversity Initiatives, and [Nancy Sung Shelton](#), Senior Consultant from CCSI's Cultural Competence Team, were instrumental in shaping the **"Confronting Health Inequity: Let's Get Comfortable with Being Uncomfortable"** conference held in Albany on July 18, 2018.

The harsh realities of racism are:

Racism defined! *Prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against someone of a different race based on the belief that one's own race is superior.*

Racism kills! *Racism is action and inaction, intentional and unintentional, overt and covert. Racism is killing, but it is also letting people die.*

Racism oppresses! *"Racism oppresses its victims, but also binds the oppressors, who sear their consciences with more and more lies until they become prisoners of those lies. They cannot face the truth of human equality because it reveals the horror of the injustices they commit." Alveda King*

Racism costs! *"Eliminating health disparities for minorities would have reduced direct medical care expenditures by \$229.4 billion for the years 2003-2006" in the US. Thomas LaVeist, PhD, The Economic Burden of Health Inequalities in the United States*

Serving as the conference's keynote speaker and setting the tone for the day, [Dr. Ruth Shim](#), Luke & Grace Kim Professor in Cultural Psychiatry, Associate Professor, Department of Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences, University of California, Davis, focused on racism as a social determinant of health, including mental health, as it greatly engenders systemic inequities and disparities that impact quality of life and mortality. Dr. Shim advised that disparities in mental health, "have everything to do with the distribution of money, power, and resources which are determined by policy decisions." The results of these decisions often result in racism, oppression, health disparities and inequities.

While at the conference, a distinguished panel shared their personal experiences and perspectives regarding racism, illuminating how they got into this work and why they are so passionate about it. Panelists included: Melanie Funchess, Director of Community Engagement, Mental Health Association of Rochester; Pablo Sadler, MD, Mental Health Medical Director, Bureau of Mental Health at New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene; and Raul Vazquez, M.D. F.A.A.F.P., Chief Executive Officer, G-Health Enterprises, Urban Family Practice.

After listening to compelling content, the conversation around racism and health inequity continued during small breakout groups. Groups were asked to focus on the challenges, within and outside of control, to address racism and inequities, and identify next-steps that one can take as we move towards eliminating racism and improving health equity. Prominent feedback and strategies coming from the small groups were, anti-racism efforts must:

1. Be supported by policies and formal practices
2. Remain focused on the impact of personal implicit bias and include intentional behavior change
3. Acknowledge and resist diminishing and/or ignoring the pain felt by those who experience racism
4. Identify situations where you may be complicit in displaying oppression, racial microaggressions and micro assaults, white privilege and white fragility
5. Include the learning and work of the white ally

Racism is personified through our beliefs, biases, prejudices, and stereotypes. Racism is in everything, and so deeply entrenched in our social systems and structures at many different levels: internalized, interpersonal/individual, and systemic. To fight racism and discrimination, we all need to recognize, name, and understand the attitudes and actions that are manifested at the different levels of racism. The call for action to address racism is for all of us - whether we are funders, users or deliverers of service.

James Baldwin sums it up nicely in this quote, *“I’m not interested in anybody’s guilt. Guilt is a luxury that we can no longer afford. I know you didn’t do it, and I didn’t do it either, but I am responsible for it because I am a man and a citizen of this country and you are responsible for it, too, for the very same reason... Anyone who is trying to be conscious must begin to dismiss the vocabulary which we’ve used so long to cover it up, to lie about the way things are.”*

To learn more:

- [Guidelines for Being Strong White Allies](#)
- [Examples of Racial Microaggressions](#)
- [Anti-Oppressive Practice](#)
- [Harvard Implicit Association Test](#) (Implicit Bias Test)
- [White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack](#)
- [Five Faces of Oppression](#)