

Black History Month | February 2022

Every February, we come together to recognize, honor, and celebrate Black history. Established by the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, the theme of Black History month this year is focused on health and wellness — an important and relevant topic as we enter the third year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The theme acknowledges the legacy of Black Americans who have made significant contributions in the medical field and have furthered our understanding of wellness both physically and mentally.

Amongst these important figures are local leaders like former Dignity Health CEO, Lloyd Dean, and former Kaiser Permanente CEO, Bernard Tyson, visionaries who recognized homelessness as a healthcare issue and a public health epidemic and transformed the policy landscape regarding how we approach services to vulnerable members of our community. San Francisco's very own Mayor Breed has also been a leader at the forefront of addressing the systemic gap in the COVID-19 response and BIPOC communities. While we take this opportunity to uplift the accomplishments made by those who have been overlooked for too long, we also reflect on the socio-economic health landscape to identify health disparities that continue to exist within the Black community and are exacerbated by the global health crisis.

Black Americans have contributed so much towards advancing health and wellness in this country, yet the unfortunate reality remains that the Black community is disproportionately harmed by inequitable social determinants of health, chief among them access to safe, stable, and affordable housing. Despite San Francisco's progressive laurels and commitment to equity, Black San Franciscans experience poverty at nearly three times the average rate compared to the general population. We know that poverty increases the risk for a host of societal ills including homelessness, mental health and substance use, and systems involvement. Black residents are 37% of the city's homeless despite making up less than 5% of its total population. Native or long-time residents of the city displaced due to a severe lack of affordable housing are also disproportionately African American.

Equity is at the heart of ECS' approach to addressing extreme poverty and homelessness. Across all corners of society we must acknowledge the structural barriers that have generated great disparities in housing, healthcare, employment, and more, and we must work with intentionality to uproot systemic racism and remove these barriers. It is with utmost humility that we recognize the work that still needs to be done even within our own organizational borders when it comes to diversity, equity, and inclusion, and it is our fervent hope that as we challenge our own assumptions, we are able to learn and grow with trust from the community around us.

Since the arrival of the first slave ship on the colonial shores in 1619, Black history has been one with American history. Just as slavery was a founding scar on the moral fabric of this nation, the movements for freedom and equality for Black Americans have been synonymous with American capacity for redemption and justice.

That is why, though we have a long way to go, we are committed to being part of the journey forward to building a society in which all of us are not only created equal but have equitable access to the core necessities to thrive: housing, health care, and opportunity.

In solidarity,

Beth Stokes