

## **Final Report from the Black Scientists' Task Force on Vaccine Equity**

March 29, 2023

Chair, City of Toronto Board of Health

Dear Chair Moise,

The Black Scientists' Task Force would like to provide a final report on their recent work with Black communities at the April meeting of the Board of Health (Board of Health). The work of the Black Scientists' Task Force comes to a formal end at the end of March 2023 with some reporting back activities being completed in April. The Task Force has given two prior reports during COVID and did not want to end its tenure without reporting back to the Board of Health on some lessons learnt from the pandemic and the early stages of recovery.

### **Summary overview of Black Scientists' Task Force accomplishments**

- 75 engagement sessions with 10,000+ participants (townhalls, in-person events, fireside chats, keynotes in faith-based communities, roundtable etc.)
- Designed, coordinated and produced a successful Black Health Fair and Summit model – with health expert panels, health services, information sessions, and activities – that demonstrated the value of using a comprehensive approach to health, wellbeing and addressing illnesses including COVID-19
- Over 21,000 people reached through Instagram in January
- Partnered with Black-owned businesses and faith-based groups to share reliable COVID-19 information and promote preventative actions, including vaccination
- Increased education, reduction of vaccine hesitancy and increased vaccine roll-out in Black community

### **Context**

COVID-19 has laid bare the impacts of structural anti-Black racism by exposing the stunning health inequities that are not only unjust but preventable. Toronto's many Black communities experienced a syndemic as a direct consequence of systemic inequities. The synergy of this epidemic and interrelated health conditions was strongly influenced and sustained by a broader set of social, economic, and political factors. This concept of synergistic epidemics, also known as syndemic, is a term coined by a medical anthropologist Merrill Singer in the 1990s, clearly revealed that COVID did not act alone, but rather had accomplices like obesity, diabetes, heart disease, underemployment, food and housing insecurity, family and gender-based violence, childhood development and education, and racism

This concept fit well with emerging evidence on inequalities in vulnerability, susceptibility, exposure, and transmission of the infection that Black Scientists' Task Force came to term with. When considering Black health disparities, the syndemic perspective should be employed to understand how anti-Blackness can amplify health burdens through structural barriers to seeking, accessing, and receiving equitable health care. Over time, it became clear that communities most impacted by new epidemics are often already facing other threats to their health. And to manage COVID-19, that anti-Black racism could not be ignored.

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## Race Equity Works

The City of Toronto, through its various equity initiatives from vaccine ambassadors to wrap around support, reduced COVID-19 infections, hospitalizations, and mortality across its' diverse Black communities. Its an unprecedented accomplishment in Canadian history. Learning from the experience, we must consistently:

- Ensure that future vaccine distribution/health service delivery sites are immediately accessible to high-density Black neighbourhoods, including through mobile clinics, community centers, and partnerships with community organizations. Equity efforts worked to increase vaccine uptake and should be initiated at the outset of crises.
- Target outreach and public education to Black communities for all health disparities. It has been shown to be effective in increasing vaccine confidence and uptake among marginalized communities. Culturally responsive and tailored public health messaging and outreach efforts must be a minimal public health expectation of future health endeavours.
- Equity-focused approaches can mitigate the health harms of anti-Black racism and promote community well-being, not only during the pandemic but in the long term. Prioritizing access for racialized communities for chronic conditions can promote help-seeking and protect those at highest risk for severe illness and death.

## Recommendations

- That the Board of Health encourage the inclusion of community-led research on Black health in epidemiologic reports in order to ensure sustainable community engagement and socio-economic recovery
  - It should also encourage Ontario Health to collaborate/partner with Black communities as stewards in addressing health issues. This approach is essential for ensuring that interventions are culturally appropriate, community-driven, and sustainable over time.
  - The Board of Health should recognize equity-based race data collection as being demonstrably crucial to understanding the pandemic's impact on Black communities, identifying areas of need, and creating targeted interventions and policies. Toronto must continue to exercise leadership in this regard as progress is lost without such data (as noted in the June 2021 report to Board of Health)
- That the Board of Health recommend to Toronto City Council that the City continues to address long-term health outcomes of COVID-19 for Black Toronto communities, especially Long COVID-19, which is having lasting effects on physical and mental health along with impacts on childhood development.
  - Black mental health has historically been overlooked and under-resourced and the City's support services should be continued given the success of wrap around community services during the pandemic
  - Creating a dedicated stream on Black mental health at the proposed national mental health conference summit will help raise awareness, share best practices, and build a community of support for this important issue.

Respectfully,

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Dr. David Burt  
Co-chair of the Black Scientists Task Force

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Dr. Candice Todd  
Co-chair of the Black Scientists Task Force