



9 April 2020

Commissioner Monica Bharel, MD
MA Department of Public Health
250 Washington Street
Boston, MA 02108

Dear Commissioner Bharel,

We are grateful for all of your efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic and send you our hopes for a speedy recovery and best wishes to you, your loved ones, and staff for good health.

We at the Public Health Institute of Western Massachusetts (PHIWM) write to you to thank you for the action you have taken thus far to collect demographic data from laboratories, including today's Executive Order on data collection during COVID 19. We urge you to expand the demographic data to include numbers about who is receiving COVID-19 testing, and who is receiving life-saving treatment in addition to confirmed cases and deaths. We were grateful to see that the demographic data in the Executive Order includes race, ethnicity, gender, age, county and town of residence (if number of cases is more than 5), and we respectfully request that MDPH **also requires socio-economic status, language, and disability status**. Also, no timeline was mentioned about how often this data would be issued, and having this data released in **weekly county and town surveillance reports** would give healthcare institutions and supportive services in western MA the ability to prioritize their services and resources where they are most needed. Lastly, there could be a need to **provide cultural humility training** for folks that will collect this type of data.

Data in other parts of the country and recent data from Boston hospitals strongly suggest that the pandemic is disproportionately impacting Black and Latinx residents. This is of great concern in western Massachusetts for a variety of reasons. Springfield, the largest city in our region (and the third largest city in Massachusetts) has a majority (63%) of Latinx and Black (44% and 19%, respectively) residents and an area median income that is half that of the state. In all of Hampden County, one in four residents speaks a language other than English at home. In Franklin and Hampden counties, more than 15% of the population has a disability, higher than the state rate of 12%. In Berkshire and Franklin counties, one out of five residents is over age 65.

Our mission at PHIWM is to build measurably healthier communities with equitable opportunities and resources for all. We have been advocating on behalf of people who already experience inequitable access to resources and thus, higher rates of negative health outcomes. However, it is difficult to be effectively supporting our communities without the data. We are in touch with our legislative delegation, who are in support of this request and already requested the same information, as they also struggle to know how to work to advocate for resources to address people who are disproportionately impacted.



PUBLIC HEALTH INSTITUTE OF WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS

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We already know that in general, people of color in western MA experience negative health outcomes at greater rates and at younger ages. Analyses from Community Health Needs Assessments in our region show that Blacks in the Franklin County come into the hospital at a much younger age (average age of 59) for congestive heart failure than Whites (average age of admittance 77). In Hampden County, the Latinx population is hospitalized for cardiovascular disease at over twice the rate of Whites. Also in Hampden County, ER visits for asthma are three times higher for Blacks and 5 times higher for Latinx population than for Whites. Berkshire and Hampshire counties show similar disparities.

As fellow public health professionals, we realize that the task of collecting this data in real time and reporting it out almost immediately is exceptionally challenging. As public health professionals, we also know the incredible value that data has to direct resources. As residents of western MA and advocates for our friends, loved ones, colleagues, and our communities, we are concerned and hampered by the lack of disaggregated and accurate data. Even now as testing sites are being determined without this critical information.

We respectfully submit this request to expand on today's Executive Order, knowing that the Department of Public Health is doing difficult and courageous work right now. If there is anything we as a local public health nonprofit organization with ties to many of the local hospitals and healthcare systems can do to assist you, please let us know.

Sincerely,

Jessica Collins, MPH
Executive Director
Public Health Institute of Western Massachusetts

cc: MA State Representative Mindy Dombs
MA State Representative Natalie Blais
MA State Representative Carlos Gonzalez
MA State Representative Jose Tosado
MA State Senator Jo Comerford
MA State Senator James Welch
MA State Senator Eric Lesser
Commissioner of Health and Human Services Helen Caulton-Harris, City of Springfield