

Vice Chancellor's Letter

AMY CONRAD WARNER

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND PEACE IN THE TIME OF COVID

The impact of a global pandemic rattles through a community like an earthquake; tremors spiking from the epicenter for months, years and perhaps decades. Early U.S. reports of COVID-19 in metropolitan areas described a non-discriminating villain suddenly sweeping like a plague through neighborhoods regardless of income, nationality, ethnicity, or gender. As we collected data, observed early death rates, and identified epicenters of infection, is this truly a non-discriminating virus? The COVID-19 positivity rate in our county was nearly twice as high for Blacks as for whites. The Surgeon General said that people of color are not “biologically or genetically pre-disposed to get COVID-19, but they are socially predisposed to coronavirus exposure.” Among Black residents, 34% are employed in essential jobs sectors at risk of exposure to the virus, compared to 26% of white workers. In our city, Black residents live in denser neighborhoods than white residents, with crowding of the space per person leading to a higher prevalence of COVID-19. The health disparities continue into hospitalizations and death rates as a result of COVID-19 at a higher rate for people of color than whites. As of October, the Centers for Disease Control’s weighted national average of coronavirus death rates for Latinos was 32.4%. This inequity will continue to spike without consideration of equitable actions. (SAVI-The inequalities behind COVID-19 Disparities for African Americans in Indianapolis)

To reduce the concentration and spread of COVID, educational institutions transformed learning to an online environment to reach learners at home. Corporate headquarters sent employees home to work remotely. Restaurants and bars closed, health care visits were reserved for emergency care rather than

routine wellness visits, and minor colds and flu visits. Sounds equal on the surface; we all simply learn and work from home doesn’t it? Is this really equitable?

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 8 out of 10 Black workers in the United States cannot work from home due to their job functionality. In addition, 31% of Black residents are without computers or the internet at home, compared to 16% of white residents, creating access to work and learning inequity which may impede future success. (SAVI-The inequalities behind COVID-19 Disparities for African Americans in Indianapolis)

A nation of families responding to stay at home orders, social distancing and wearing protective gear followed news headlines and social media observing first-hand the abuse of force and racial inequities experienced by people of color like Breonna Taylor and George Floyd in cities across the country. Yet still nearly 25% of America’s families are Black or Hispanic and repeat “The TALK” to their sons and daughters and pray for safety. (US Census Data 12.4% Black and 12.5% Hispanic) Is our justice system equitable? Are all citizens treated fairly and equally? What actions will be forthcoming to extend the American dream equitably to us all?

Peace and restorative justice are a pathway toward equity. I applaud the contributors to this issue of *ENGAGE!*. The stories unite bridge builders from the university with the community to address common issues and seek mutually beneficial outcomes. These co-creators of knowledge bring their lived experience, quantitative and qualitative data, policy advocacy and humanity to the table together to seek social justice and racial equity in the communities in which we live.