

January 10, 2023

Representative Kelly Moller
Chair, Public Safety Finance and Policy Committee
Minnesota House of Representatives
Via Electronic Delivery

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RE: House File 55 (Office of Missing and Murdered Black Women and Girls)

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Chair Moller and Members of the Public Safety Committee:

The Center for Antiracism Research for Health Equity (CARHE) at the University of Minnesota, writes to share evidence relevant to your consideration of House File 55, which seeks to establish an Office of Missing and Murdered Black Women and Girls. Our expertise comes from years of research centered on critical and complex determinants of health inequity. CARHE's research contributes to the body of knowledge that 1) links structural racism to health in tangible ways, 2) identifies opportunities for intervention, and 3) dismantles the systems, structures, and institutions that allow inequities to persist. **Structural racism is a public health crisis, but it is also a fixable problem.** We seek to conduct and disseminate research that policymakers can utilize to address this crisis.

Racial inequities pervade almost every aspect of Minnesota's society and systems; unfortunately, violence is no exception. **In Minnesota, Black women are nearly three times more likely to die of homicide than white women.**² Nationally, it is estimated that between 64,000-75,000 Black women and girls are currently missing, and their loved ones endure disproportionately long waits to receive closure; Black women's cases stay open four times longer than other women's.¹

The Minnesota Task Force on Missing and Murdered African American Women (MMAAW), which we applaud for centering the voices of those closest to the pain of this unacceptable problem, recommended that the legislature establish an Office of Missing and Murdered Black Women and Girls. The task force's findings were developed using the Equity in Action process model, which involved extensive interviews with Black women and girls who have experienced violence as well as with many other experts working in the fields of law, victim services, and law enforcement throughout Minnesota. **The MMAAW Task Force findings appear to be derived from a rigorous antiracist research methodology.**

The MMAAW Task Force report linked the role of historical racist narratives and contemporary cultural beliefs to the disproportionately low level of coverage the media provides when Black women and girls go missing. Notably, after the task force published its report, the Columbia Journalism Review released an online "Are You Press Worthy?" tool, which draws from thousands of news articles to estimate the "press value" of a person who goes missing based on their demographics. Unsurprisingly, those who are not young white women receive significantly less

coverage than those who are.³ This inequity has life-or-death consequences: media coverage in the immediate hours after a person going missing has real implications for the likelihood they will be found alive. A Minnesota Office of MMAAW could play an important role in changing the narratives and norms that underlie disproportionate media coverage as well as the currently inadequate law enforcement resources needed to achieve justice for Black women and girls.

To conclude, creating an Office of Missing and Murdered Black Women and Girls presents an opportunity to establish a state entity dedicated to understanding the root causes of this public health and public safety epidemic. Understanding these root causes will enable the office to provide concrete recommendations to lawmakers about how to address and prevent the disappearance and murder of Black women and girls across Minnesota. Such an office will address accessibility, accountability, and uniformity of data collection and data sharing in our state; **accurate and complete data is critical to the narrative and policy changes that we hope would ultimately save lives.**

Sincerely,



Rachel R. Hardeman, PhD, MPH
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References

1. *Missing African American women and children in the United States of America*. NAACP. (2022, June 13). Retrieved January 11, 2023, from <https://naacp.org/resources/missing-african-american-women-and-children-united-states-america>
2. *Dps.mn.gov*. (n.d.). Retrieved January 11, 2023, from <https://dps.mn.gov/divisions/ojp/Documents/MMAAW%20full%20report%20final.pdf>
3. Cjr. (n.d.). *How much coverage are you worth?* Columbia Journalism Review. Retrieved January 11, 2023, from <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/how-much-coverage-are-you-worth.php>

The proposed office would help assess the scope of Missing and Murdered Black Women and Girls and expand efforts to identify vulnerable and at-risk women and children through consultation with the individuals and organizations that make up and serve the most impacted communities.

To conclude, The cause of these disparities is *racism*, not *race*.¹ A growing coalition of researchers, health practitioners, and policy makers are calling for confronting structural racism, the

¹ Taylor JK. Structural racism and maternal health among Black women. *J Law Med Eth.* 2020;48(3):506-517. DOI: 10.1177/1073110520958875