A Call for Action: A Letter to SUNY Downstate Administration by Students of Color

Respectfully to the leaders, administrators and faculty of SUNY Downstate Health Sciences University,

With the recent spotlight on SUNY Downstate we have been given a new platform and therefore a unique responsibility. The whole world is watching and listening, so, what do we have to say? This responsibility does not only extend within our hospital’s walls; it requires widespread aggressive action. It requires acknowledgement and rebuttal of the systemic causes of death that plague our community. The pandemic magnified the health disparities that minority communities and the disenfranchised in this country have endured for decades. Most recently, the nationally publicized deaths of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd demonstrate the sobering reality that Black people continue to be brutalized and killed by our government. Unfortunately, these men only represent a minute fraction of the growing number of Black men, women, and children who have died as a result of racist policies.

As medical students of color, we are angry, we are tired, we are disheartened and ultimately disappointed. Not only because of the lack of respect that this country has for minorities, (more specifically Black men and women) but also because of the lack of acknowledgement of these atrocities by the Downstate administration, ESPECIALLY given the constituents we predominantly serve. If we as the Downstate community want to be leaders and the agents of change that this country so desperately needs, we cannot be afraid to speak up and speak out against such injustice. It is not simply the responsibility of Black organizations, or the minority students to have to bring these truths to light. All of Downstate should be willing to take a stand, because at its core, we as current and future healthcare providers aim to save lives, not overlook them.

- We want to commend President Riley for his recent center-wide message of empathy, outrage, and understanding. This came at a time when many students were feeling helpless and in despair due to the silence from our institution. We thank President Riley for this act of recognition, and we want to join him in decrying the recent and frequent acts of violent prejudice at the hands of those who are most entrusted with the preservation of peace and justice.
- We, medical students of color, have ratified the following statement and recommendations:
  - We encourage our faculty, who often email the entire campus to promote their projects, to use their platform to express outrage and solidarity in the face of the health disparities that have become so glaring in light of the ongoing pandemic.
  - We encourage our faculty to use their platform to express outrage and solidarity in the face of the ongoing policing crisis that has affected communities of color from our doorsteps and across the country.
  - We declare that increasing representation within the institution, both faculty and student body, is both just and necessary to address the local and national policies that propagate
and reinforce health disparities in our own neighborhoods. We urge the administration to implement policies that will diversify the student body and the academic faculty, to quantitatively mirror the brilliant diversity of this city and state.

- We assert that the disparity in COVID-19 outcomes reflect structural policy issues including access to health care, wage policy, housing policy, etc.
- We would like to use these recent unfortunate events as an educational opportunity to discuss, unpack and challenge the current racist injustices and policies that exist both on a micro and macro level. As such, we request a large-scale zoom meeting to include the WHOLE Downstate student body and faculty to facilitate these tough but necessary discussions.

In the end, we as the students of color at Downstate need to know our administration supports us. Not simply because we have a “diverse” student body, but by showing us that in moments like these when we are rightfully hurting, saddened, fearful and disheartened that you are willing to rally around us and demonstrate that you care and support us. So, we challenge you to take a stand, show support and get the WHOLE Downstate community involved. It’s time to practice what you preach. We’re waiting and we’re listening. Until then.

Sincerely and Respectfully,


With loving support of Downstate Medical Students: