

Massachusetts coalition demands greater response to “Crisis of Inequity”

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State House News Service

A group of medical providers, academics, and concerned citizens is calling on the governor to do more to address the “racial and economic disparities that have become a defining element of the COVID-19 pandemic” in Massachusetts.

In a press release Monday, the group said that the state’s lack of clear racial or ethnicity data for most of its COVID-19 cases has led to a “crisis of inequity in both treatment and in death.” The group, which includes people employed at Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston Children’s Hospital, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Boston Medical Center, Harvard Medical School, and other institutions, is calling itself Massachusetts Healthcare Workers for Equity.

“It has been weeks, and as physicians and healthcare professionals, we have yet to see a comprehensive plan from Governor Baker that we feel meaningfully addresses the stark COVID-19 disparities that are occurring across Massachusetts,” Dr. Lara Jirmanus, a primary care physician in Revere, said. “The Governor cannot lead from behind on this topic, and he cannot avoid the fact that the state’s response thus far has been totally insufficient for Massachusetts’ communities of color.”

Baker’s administration has ordered the collection of race and ethnicity data for COVID-19 patients, but that information remains missing or unknown for more than half of both the state’s cases and deaths. The administration’s initial guidance on COVID-19 crisis care standards was criticized by

lawmakers and others who thought they did not adequately account for health care disparities among communities of color. Those guidelines have been updated, in response to feedback, and several medical experts who helped craft the guidance said it is unlikely the standards will be activated.

While the Massachusetts Healthcare Workers for Equity group acknowledged actions the Baker administration has taken in Chelsea, which emerged as a hotspot for the virus, it also called on the governor to “rapidly increase testing and treatment in working-class communities of color with high rates of infection such as Randolph and Brockton, and to increase funding for community health centers and hospitals in these communities in order to fight COVID19.”

The coalition’s recommendations include “free healthcare for all,” massive production of testing and treatment supplies, a suspension of rent and debt collections to help working-class people to shelter in place, “bailouts for working people, not banks and big businesses,” and “the freeing of all nonviolent prisoners.”