

Pressley: Equity agenda should extend beyond police reform

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American leaders must address not only police violence but also a slew of other social and political issues that stem from centuries of structural racism, Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley told business leaders on Friday.

During a virtual appearance before the New England Council, Pressley described brutality by law enforcement, the COVID-19 pandemic and the national recession prompted by the viral outbreak as a “crisis within a crisis within a crisis,” all linked by systemic inequity oppressing people of color.

Her comments came as Boston Mayor Martin Walsh declared racism a public health crisis in the city.

Driven by outrage over the deaths of several Black Americans at the hands of police, protests have swept the country in recent weeks with tens of thousands of people demanding reforms, including a reallocation of significant portions of police department budgets toward other social services.

Pressley said government officials should take immediate action to curb police brutality, but urged elected officials to broaden their response to include other factors that disproportionately affect people of color, such as the fact that Black mothers are four times as likely to die during childbirth as white mothers.

“It will mean we have to be intentional, deliberate and unapologetic about calling out structural racism for what it

is: white supremacy,” she said. “It will call on us to legislate with an equity lens in everything, not just police reform. It means examining our housing policies, our lending policies, our criminal-legal system top to bottom, our health care system, and on and on.”

Congressional Democrats unveiled legislation this week that would ban chokeholds, encourage racial bias training, limit access to military equipment, and create a national registry of officers found to have committed misconduct, according to news reports.

Pressley introduced legislation in the House that would eliminate the legal protection against lawsuits known as qualified immunity for police and government officials in most cases, and she also filed a resolution in the House of Representatives condemning police brutality and calling for reforms to hold departments accountable.

She said Friday that the resolution, which has almost 200 cosponsors, is the first time since 1999 that a U.S. representative introduced such a proposal.

“Congressional intent is a powerful tool,” Pressley said. “I do believe in this moment that Congress must act as the conscience of our nation and state plainly that this is an issue of care and consequences to our nation, and we must go on record when it comes to racial injustice.”

Although Pressley slammed President Donald Trump for “overtly racist and cruel rhetoric,” she said that structural racism “existed long before Donald Trump descended the escalator at Trump Tower” to start his presidential campaign.

The other two COVID-related crises Pressley described Friday – both public health and economic – have also had a disproportionate impact on nonwhite communities.

Black people account for about 24 percent of deaths where the

victim's race is known, but only 13 percent of the national population, according to figures from the COVID Racial Data Tracker published by the Atlantic and the Antiracist Research and Policy Center.

Pressley said she represents the "hardest-hit district" in Massachusetts, noting that it includes hotspots Boston and Chelsea.

Infections and financial strain appear linked as well. The congresswoman cited a MassINC Polling Group survey released Wednesday that found 29 percent of Massachusetts renters – who are more frequently younger, lower-income and nonwhite than homeowners – had missed at least some rent payment between April and June, compared to just 13 percent of homeowners.

She said the poll showed that the likelihood of a household containing someone who tested positive or displayed COVID symptoms is "directly related to the level of economic stress."

For households that did not list any of six markers for economic distress, 4 percent said someone in the home had symptoms of COVID-19. That rate increased to 30 percent for households in the most economic distress.

The U.S. House approved a \$3 trillion stimulus package last month that would direct \$500 billion to state governments and \$375 billion to local governments, increase funding for personal protective equipment and testing, inject hospitals with \$100 billion in support, and extend a range of other relief.

Pressley touted the \$7.6 billion contained in the bill for community health centers, which often serve lower-income and vulnerable populations.

That bill has been sitting in the Senate, where Republican leaders have not indicated their plan.

“We need to continue to advocate for the Senate to do their job,” Pressley said. “They’re confirming judges, but they’re not leading on getting this bill to the floor for a vote still in the midst of this pandemic.”