

# The Columbus Dispatch

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Opinion

## **COVID-19 hits hardest in communities of color**

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Imagine: A single mom, furloughed from her job, finds an eviction notice on her front door. She panics at the thought that she and her children will be homeless. A young man is granted early release from jail. It's 1 a.m. and he has no family, money, ID or anywhere to go.

A couple, who spent their lives running their own restaurant, close their doors. They have no idea how to access financial help and no real banking relationship.

You've probably heard or read that COVID-19 disproportionately impacts the health and economic well-being of African Americans. People of color are requiring hospitalization at twice the rate of other groups and more are dying. Black-owned businesses, most with fewer than 10 days of cash reserves, are disappearing.

As the real stories above illustrate, statistics fail to convey the whole story. Everyone struggles to live in a COVID-19 reality. We're all in the same storm, but we're not in the same boat.

As an economic first responders, the Columbus Urban League's team of coaches and mentors are working with each of the people and families mentioned above, and literally hundreds more. We are stabilizing families even though our staff is operating remotely, juggling a crush of phone calls and their own children's needs.

And we've been blessed with additional resources to address these crises from Franklin County, the city of Columbus and the Columbus Foundation. These investments are keeping people in their homes, offering resources to keep people moving forward rather than back to jail and shoring up faltering businesses. Within just a few days of opening a housing stabilization fund, our staff fielded more than 400 applications.

The investments we are earning come to us because we're relevant, effective and accepted by those we serve. Not every organization is poised to serve under-resourced communities. With more than a century's experience as a trusted, effective advocate and service provider, the Columbus Urban League uniquely connects and lifts up people of color.

Even as we fill urgent essential needs, our team keeps wrestling with a different question. Could COVID-19 create change for the better?

As an associate of Brookings Institute stated, "Plagues drive change." History confirms this axiom. After the devastation of the Black Death, the wages of farmers and craftsmen rose dramatically, narrowing the economic chasm between the wealthy and the serfs.

We're already seeing promising evolutions catalyzed by this pandemic. After years of resistance, federal and state decision-makers suddenly embraced telehealth to make care more accessible. Likewise, advocates have long argued that homeless youth need treatment even if parental approval is impossible. Now that can happen.

Innovations and fresh thinking are creating new opportunities and overcoming self-imposed limitations.

Walls are coming down and more could fall soon. Do we have the will to take this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to push past racial and economic inequities for good?

As reported by The Dispatch and reflected in the April 19 editorial "COVID-19 doesn't pick losers, but we can create winners," today's wealth disparities are extreme. With African Americans accounting for 40% of poor families, we know all too well what it means to be shut out from even something as simple as internet access. Almost a third of black households lack broadband.

Without online access, how do you file an online unemployment claim? How do your kids keep up with school assignments?

We could not — and should not — sustain a world that was as inequitable as the one we lived in. Let's embrace the chance to change. Now is the time to ensure we tap the talents of everyone and ensure all of us can fully participate in our economy.

The turmoil of the Black Plague contributed to the rise of a healthy middle class and, eventually, the Renaissance. Many of these changes were lost when the entrenched autocracy reasserted its stranglehold on wealth and power. We can do better.

Let's see what we can do together if we all drive the same boat.

*Stephanie Hightower is president & CEO of the Columbus Urban League.*