

The Columbus Dispatch

Coalition offers steps to counter institutional racism

By Rita Price

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As protests continue in Columbus and cities across the United States, a group of black leaders in central Ohio put out a statement outlining steps to begin addressing racism and police reform.

A coalition of African-American government, nonprofit and religious leaders put forth a plan Tuesday to reform practices that they say reinforce systemic racism in central Ohio.

During a news conference at the Columbus Urban League, the leaders — three of whom were part of demonstrations on Saturday in Downtown Columbus during which police officers used pepper spray — outlined initial steps for local change in the wake of protests sweeping the nation.

“Just as is true with COVID-19, recent events demand that our community face down the evil that is racism,” the group said in a release. “We stand at a critical juncture. Our choices today determine the collective legacy we leave for tomorrow.”

They said many of the ideas are not new but have “languished for years because of a lack of will to remain steadfast in a sustained effort to overcome opposition and inertia.”

As they gathered at the Urban League in the city’s King-Lincoln neighborhood, the coalition discussed a series of actions, including:

The collective statement was put forth by U.S. Rep. Joyce Beatty, D-Columbus; Franklin County Commissioner Kevin Boyce; Columbus City Council President Shannon G. Hardin; former Columbus Mayor Michael B. Coleman; Christie Angel, CEO of YWCA Columbus; Stephanie Hightower, president and CEO of the Columbus Urban League; Nana Watson, president of the NAACP Columbus chapter; Bishop Timothy Clark of the First Church of God; and Pastor Victor Davis, Trinity Baptist Church.

Beatty and Hardin had already declared their support for a civilian review commission to review the use of force by police officers instead of allowing local law enforcement agencies to investigate their own officers.

Along with Boyce, the three elected officials were hit by a wave of pepper spray near the intersection of Broad and High streets during weekend protests. The unrest, triggered by the death of a black man, George Floyd, at the hands of Minneapolis police, have continued for several days.

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- Seeking partnerships with the Fraternal Order of Police Lodge 9, the union representing most law-enforcement personnel in central Ohio, and with other law enforcement, government, business and nonprofit leaders.
- Implementing the recommendations of recent reports on Columbus Police Division reform, with a focus on revising and updating crowd-dispersal techniques, improving racial-equity training for all public-serving agencies, and designating an independent investigatory authority to review police use of force.
- Advocating for Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine, Ohio Senate President Larry Obhof, and Ohio House Speaker Larry Householder to follow the city and county in declaring racism a public health crisis.



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- Joining with city and county leaders to address health disparities stemming from racial inequities.

The group also said more needs to be done to “directly communicate with people of color,” to build public support, and to cultivate and respond to ideas and concerns of young leaders.