March 16, 2021

Dear Governor Scott and Commissioner Levine,

We are writing to you today as community partners who have identified racism as a public health emergency and committed to urgent action. We would like to unite our voices to advocate for a racially equitable roll out of Covid-19 vaccines.

As you know, Covid-19 has affected the state’s most vulnerable populations to an extreme extent. Vermonters who are Black, Indigenous, or a person of color (BIPOC) have two times the rate of Covid-19 infection and a higher rate of hospitalization compared to White Non-Hispanic Vermonters. Additionally, Covid-19 has widened existing racial health disparities related to life expectancy, and is expected to widen racial disparities in wealth, occupation, and other social determinants of health. We now also see disparities opening up related to vaccination rates: in Chittenden County, 24.1 percent of the White Non-Hispanic population is vaccinated compared to 13.9 percent of the BIPOC population. We echo the concerns raised in the February letter from Racial Justice Alliance and believe it is imperative that we take a pro-equity approach to protecting our populations during this crisis and recovery.

We are appreciative that the State has recently expanded access to the Covid-19 vaccines for those who are Black, Indigenous, or a person of color by announcing that the households of BIPOC Vermonters who meet current eligibility criteria can also register to receive the vaccine, even if those household members aren’t otherwise eligible. This is an important step toward a more equitable vaccine roll out.

Today, however, we are writing to urge you to do even more. We advocate for you to open vaccine eligibility to all people in Vermont who are Black, Indigenous, or a person of color and their households regardless of their age, occupation, or health condition. We advocate for this because the disparities that we see related to Covid-19 infections and outcomes, as well as vaccination rates, are present regardless of age, occupation, or underlying condition. Similar prioritization by race, zip code, or other social determinants of health has been implemented in other states, including

4 https://www.healthvermont.gov/covid-19/vaccine/covid-19-vaccine-dashboard
Montana and California.\textsuperscript{6,7} Being BIPOC in the U.S. carries its own risk of morbidity and mortality, and should be treated as a risk factor until the day comes when we see no more health disparities by race.\textsuperscript{8}

We recognize that this request to eliminate other eligibility criteria for BIPOC Vermonters is only treating the symptoms of the effects of our inequitable systems and institutions rather than actually addressing the root causes. We are committed to address those root causes through future and ongoing work together based on the foundational understanding of racism as a public health emergency. At the same time, even as we undertake longer-term work, we are morally obligated to urgently treat the symptoms of our inequitable systems by prioritizing vaccinations for BIPOC Vermonters. We must do both the long-term work of system reform and the urgently needed work of saving lives simultaneously. We need to get all Vermonters vaccinated as quickly as possible while also prioritizing the health and well-being of Vermonters who have been and continue to be marginalized and disempowered.

**BIPOC Vermonters are leading the way in undoing our racially unjust systems and institutions, while at the same time living with a greater risk of infection from Covid-19. We believe the BIPOC Vermonters should be urgently prioritized in vaccine distribution by allowing self-attestation of BIPOC identity as eligibility for vaccination.** We recognize that this is a complex issue, and would be glad to convene a meeting with you and any number of these signatories this week if it would be helpful to discuss this further.

Respectfully,

Mayor Miro Weinberger, City of Burlington
Dr. Stephen Leffler, University of Vermont Medical Center
Mark Hughes, Vermont Racial Justice Alliance

Yacouba Jacob Bogre, Association of Africans Living in Vermont (AALV)

Tanya Benosky, Boys & Girls Club of Burlington

Laura Zeliger, Burlington Housing Authority

Superintendent Tom Flanagan, Burlington School District

President Benjamin Ola. Akande, Champlain College

Michael Monte, Champlain Housing Trust

Charlie Baker, Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission

\textsuperscript{6} https://states.aarp.org/montana/covid-19-vaccine-distribution

\textsuperscript{7} https://www.sacbee.com/news/equity-lab/article249731623.html

\textsuperscript{8} https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/full/10.2105/AJPH.2004.060749
Sarah George, Chittenden County State's Attorney

John Tashiro, City Market, Onion River Co-op

Mayor Kristine Lott, City of Winooski

Rita Markley, Committee on Temporary Shelter (COTS)

Jeff McKee, Community Health Centers of Burlington (CHCB)

Paul Dragon and Virginie Diambou, CVOEO

Nuan Openshaw-Dion, Dealer.com

Nancy Owens, Evernorth

Catherine Z. Davis, Lake Champlain Chamber

Josh Miller, The Family Room

Kyle Dodson, Greater Burlington YMCA

Vicky Smith, King Street Center

Kate Laud, Opportunities Credit Union

Lucy Leriche, Planned Parenthood of Northern New England

Erik Hoekstra, Redstone

Ashley Orgain, Seventh Generation

Mark Redmond, Spectrum Youth & Family Services

Jesse Bridges, United Way of Northwest Vermont

Amila Merdzanovic, U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI-VT)

Adrianne Johnson Ross, UVM Health Network – Home Health & Hospice

Maura Collins, Vermont Housing Finance Agency