

To: Wayman Britt, Kent County Administrator and Mandy Bolter, Chair of Kent County
Board of Commission

From: Black Impact Collaborative

Date: May 8, 2020

Regarding: COVID-19 in the Black community within Kent County

Thank you for taking time to read this communication that is being sent on behalf of the Black Impact Collaborative (BIC), a group of organizations with the goal of identifying and illuminating some of the needs of Black people in Kent County in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. BIC was convened and is being powered by the Institute of Ubuntu (IOU), a 501(c)(3) think tank focused on enhancing the lives of people of African descent in Grand Rapids, Michigan, by cultivating community and healing; and promoting intellectual, cultural and thought leadership.

Incorporated almost three years ago, IOU has been in the background, planning to launch on Juneteenth, 2020. COVID19 hit the world, disproportionately impacting the Black community nationally, and in Grand Rapids to such an extent that IOU was catapulted to the fore to galvanize Black leadership in greater Grand Rapids to create a collective response. BIC is a collective of leaders across organizations led by and serving African Americans in greater Grand Rapids. BIC has been meeting daily since April 25th in response to COVID19, working to gather information on what leaders are hearing and seeing; how they are positioned and responding to the crisis; and what are their ongoing, immediate, and long-term needs. Since, they have committed to moving in solidarity and collective support of the African American community and the short- and long-term needs of African Americans in greater Grand Rapids. The vision is to garner the human and financial support to ensure the safety and well-being of African Americans in greater Grand Rapids. BIC is in the process of finalizing a position paper that spans 7 issue areas:

1. Establish a COVID19 Response Fund for Black Greater GR
2. Develop a responsive communications platform
- 3. Ensure the health and well-being of Black people in greater GR.** (immediate focus of this correspondence)
4. Ensure the financial security for Black people in greater GR
5. Ensure the well-being and education of Black children & youth
6. Ensure that Black persons who are incarcerated are protected and have the supports for reintegration
7. Ensure that Black elders of greater GR are cared for, safe and protected

We are all aware that COVID19 did not create the current disparities, but these disparities were illuminated and magnified, mostly by those working in and across systems, and not so much by families and community members experiencing them. The City of Grand Rapids has been lauded as one of the best places to live in the country; one of the safest places to live; the best place to live in Michigan; one of the cheapest places to live; and one of the best places to live for quality of life. However, the data also shows that not everyone has access to that same level of “best.” In a city and region with so much progress, prosperity, and access, that same level of opportunity and outcomes has not been realized for Black Greater Grand Rapids.

The State of Black Greater Grand Rapids has often experienced abysmal conditions. This is no accident. These issues trace back far before the current pandemic. And, in fact, the makings for these conditions were baked into the nation's founding, our DNA, and carry forward today in the form of structural racism. In Grand Rapids, that has been made manifest through the use of managerial racism, which has been crystallized in the governance of Black people and poverty in Grand Rapids. For instance, data from 2017 notes a full 73% of Black Grand Rapidians are not able to afford to meet their basic needs of food, including water, shelter, utilities and clothing well, with 5% of those unable to meet them at all, compared to 52% of whites. 73% of Black Grand Rapidians earn less than \$30,000/year, more than any other group, including whites, based on 2017 data. 39% of Blacks in Grand Rapids have a high school diploma or less, compared to 19% of whites. Sixty-three percent disagree or strongly disagree with having access to enough fruits and vegetables. Twenty-two percent of African Americans feel somewhat or very unsafe in their neighborhoods, compared to 9% of whites.

While the aforementioned data is a snapshot from 2017, more recent data collected by organizational leaders serving the Black community, in response to COVID19 found that of 244 respondents, rent and utilities were named as their top two needs (60.2% and 53.7% respectively). Food is ranked third as a need in the Black community, at almost 42%. Last, cleaning and hygiene supplies ranked fourth at 29.5%. Out of the 244 respondents, only 99 provided their zip codes, with those in most need living in 49507, followed by 49508 and 49503 respectively, and spanning Grand Rapids, Kentwood, and Wyoming. According to the Kent Co. Health Department COVID-19 Dashboard, African Americans represent about 18.5% of COVID19 cases; however, over 50% identify as "other" or "unknown", leaving a wonder about increased cases within the Black community in Greater Grand Rapids.

Hence, the formation and collective work of the Black Impact Collective. BIC is working together to share those needs with one another, legislators, nonprofits, businesses, philanthropic organizations, and others to reduce the negative impact of the pandemic and increase positive outcomes for Black people.

Many members of our group have been in contact with different members of your organization over the past several weeks to share ideas, concerns and suggestions about addressing COVID-19 in the Black community within Kent County. We've also appreciated the targeted Zoom call you hosted to help Black leaders to stay informed of the County's efforts.

It is through your data, statewide data, concerned citizens and businesses that we send this communication; with hopes of sharing our recommendations and seeking your support to address them. We ask that you immediately share this with the Health Department administrators, the countywide health care provider group with whom you are meeting regularly and the newly created COVID Relief Subcommittee established by Commissioner Mandy Bolter. We will also send a similar letter to the Michigan Coronavirus Taskforce on Racial Disparities, established by Governor Whitmer and led by Lt. Governor Gilchrist.

1. **TESTING SITES EXPANSION** – We are seeking immediate expansion of testing sites throughout the community, but especially in 49507 and 49508 zip codes, where incidents of positive COVID-19 cases are of the highest in the County. There are existing clinical facilities in 49507 and 49508 that we would recommend expanding their services to include testing:
 - a. Browning Claytor Health Center, 1246 Madison Ave. SE
 - b. Exalta, 2060 Division Ave.
 - c. South Clinic WIC, 4700 Kalamazoo Ave., Kentwood
 - d. Family and Pediatric Medicine of GR, 4130 Breton Ave. SE
 - e. Additionally, there are nearby facilities at Baxter Community Center, 935 Baxter St. SE, 49506 and Clinica Santa Maria, 730 Grandville Ave. SW, 49503 that we would recommend as

alternative sites for testing. We recognize that the Health Department has been doing their testing off-site and have the tools to set up testing in remote locations. With these facilities already providing health care, it is our hope that the set up would be minimal.

Also, as it pertains to testing it is our understanding that the newly formed Kent County Back to Work initiative includes collecting data from employees as they return to the workplace. We would like to recommend for those who test positive for COVID-19 that their positive status be counted as part of their residential zip code and not only their workplace zip code. We believe this further disaggregation is critical in the ongoing collection of data and the potential impacts of COVID-19 on African American county residents.

2. **TESTING DAY** – We are seeking a testing day, held across multiple sites in the County that would allow anyone who is at risk to have access to a test. The sites could be existing testing sites, after the expansion recommended in #1, in addition to the Health Department. We agree to direct targeted promotion to reach the Black community for this testing day, in order to get the turn out needed. It will assist you in getting to the 1-2% of the population testing goal that the state is aiming to reach. It will also provide an opportunity to test, with lowered barriers, those who have been turned away and at higher risk.
3. **PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT** – We support the Michigan Executive order that requires all operable businesses to provide PPE for their employees. We also support the Center for Disease Control’s (CDC) guidelines for businesses and employers. However, we are finding that many businesses are not fulfilling this requirement, which ultimately puts the employees, their families and the customers who may frequent their establishments or utilize their products, at risk. We want the County to blanket the business and employer community with a notification about this executive order, learn more about the needs of businesses and employers, and enforce the order consistently. This includes Kent County Correctional Facilities. We are strongly recommending that employers implement reporting protocols on the incidences of COVID19 cases and on returning employees post a COVID19 event. Reporting to County authorities, other employees, and the community-at-large is the recommendation. The GR Area Chamber of Commerce recently conducted a survey asking about the needs of businesses; perhaps they can provide you with data on the question about PPE. We are in favor of our economy returning, but not at the risk of losing any more lives. We also would like the County to consider purchasing the PPE, in larger quantities, that would then allow the business community to purchase from your stockpile, which may reduce costs. Additionally, you may want to reduce the cost further for small businesses of a pre-determined size who may be struggling financially during this time.
4. **CONTACT TRACING** – We know that there is a need to conduct contact tracing inquiries to help reduce the spread of the virus. With that, we recommend the County contract with organizations who can coordinate this effort. This will provide the County with the support they need, while allowing meaningful work to take place in the community. We have a variety of organizations that would be willing to serve in this capacity.
5. **PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENTS** – In light of the risks and outcomes of COVID-19, it is important to diversify means for communicating public service announcements. On our own, many of our

organizations have put together communications for the broader community. We would like to expand these communications with your help. There are groups, such as young adults and teens, which we would like to target with peer-to-peer outreach.

6. **RESOURCE HUB** - The BIC is developing a website that will serve as a central resource hub that will target the Black population in Kent County. This website will be one of the ways that our partner organizations will share their individual initiatives as well as our collective action. And, it will allow us to share resources from the County such as testing and contract tracing opportunities.

You should know that many of the co-signers of this letter have worked tirelessly to provide direct services in the community:

- Spreading positive messaging and public support of the Stay Home, Stay Safe order.
- Providing financial resources directly to residents and businesses.
- Distributing care packages that includes PPE.
- Hosting food drives.
- Using our respective platforms to inform, educate, and assess needs.

Based on organizational survey results, we recognize the needs of the Black residents and businesses in Kent County are vast. It is our hope, with some of the proposed recommendations, along with the support federally, that the blow to our community will be lessened. As you are considering options for how to allocate the \$114.6 million CARES dollars, we request you implement these recommendations. A sub-committee of the BIC would welcome the opportunity to meet with the two of you to explain these recommendations in more detail and to share cost estimates of the recommendations.

Black Impact Collaborative

NAME	ORGANIZATION
Angela Nelson	Experience GR. Proactive
Alvin & Tanell Hills, IV	Endless Opportunities
Attah Obande	Spring GR
Cle Jackson Ja’Von Fields	Greater Grand Rapids Branch NAACP
Rob S. Womack	WYGR Kent County Black Elected Officials
Dallas Lenear	Institute of Ubuntu
Darel Ross	Start Garden/Forty Acres Enterprises
Dr. Walter Brame	Concerned Citizen
Rev. Eula Gaddis	Baptist Fellowship
Garrett & Regis Fox	Institute of Ubuntu
Jamiel Robinson	GRABB
Jimmy Taylor	Prince Hall Masons
Jessie Jones	Institute of Ubuntu

Joe Jones	Grand Rapids Urban League
Kenisha Dorsey	Greater Grand Rapids National Panhellenic Council
Nadia Brigham	Brigham Consulting, LLC
Senita Lenear	Kent Co. Black Elected Officials
Shatawn Brigham	Institute of Ubuntu
Sonja Forte	Baxter Community Center
Sultan Zayd Muhammad	Muhammad Study Group of Grand Rapids-Nation of Islam
Tasha Blackmon	Cherry Health
Teresa Weatherall Neal	Lead 616
Veneese Chandler	Family Outreach Center