



COVID-19 RACIAL JUSTICE POLICY AGENDA FOR ILLINOIS

The Fight for Liberation Amidst a Pandemic

This past month, as people across the globe confronted the uncharted reality of the COVID-19 pandemic, the [Workers Center for Racial Justice](#) (WCRJ) assessed the grave challenges that lie ahead, and mounted a bold, community centered response strategy. Against the sobering backdrop of this unprecedented health disaster, we are forging ahead in the fight for racial justice, by reimagining how our society cares for its people and leveraging collective power to achieve a common vision of equity, opportunity, and liberation.

This historic global crisis will test the mettle of our country, and lay bare not only the faulty underpinnings of its unjust institutions, but also the true source of its enduring resilience and strength, which is rooted in our communities. In a moment when the national government has failed to exhibit the judgement, resolve, and humanity warranted by this deadly pandemic, it is incumbent upon grassroots activists to assume the mantle of leadership.

WCRJ has put forth an assertive COVID-19 response plan that addresses the most urgent policy priorities of Black Illinoisans in the wake of this public health crisis. In the weeks and months to come, we will work to amplify these demands to the Governor and state legislature by unifying local community members behind a collective vision of racial justice.

The Imperative of a Racial Justice Policy Response

As public health officials release preliminary details on statewide COVID-19 death rates, a harrowing, yet all too familiar trend has become abundantly evident: In communities across Illinois, deep seated systems of racialized inequality have disproportionately exposed people of color to the fatal consequences of this historic pandemic. Staggering racial divides in generational wealth, employment opportunity, homeownership rates, and healthcare access account for the fivefold disparity in death rates between Black and White Illinoisans. Similarly, early economic indicators confirm that the COVID-19 crisis will only further exacerbate the abiding structural barriers to financial opportunity that the Illinois' Black workers, business owners, and households have endured for generations.

And yet, despite the projected magnitude of this unprecedented catastrophe and its astoundingly racialized impacts, initial government relief measures have proven to be, not only overly restrained, but also distressingly “color blind.” Over the course of the past century, communities of color have witnessed how purportedly “race neutral” national recovery mobilizations have, in fact, expressly served to advance white prosperity to the exclusion of Black opportunity. Time and again, from the New Deal, to the post-war G.I. bill, to the 2008

financial crisis bailouts, U.S. domestic recovery policies have served to exacerbate racial inequality in every aspect of American society.

The preliminary government response to the COVID-19 pandemic forecasts a comparable trajectory. At the national level, the momentous CARES Act falls disastrously short in providing sufficient economic relief to American households, and leaves large populations of disproportionately Black individuals behind altogether. Moreover, by failing to account for the overwhelming institutional barriers Black business owners face in accessing financial credit, the bill's small business recovery program will only serve to further amplify the nation's alarming racial wealth gap.

Similarly, Illinois has failed to mount an adequate racial justice response to address the statewide health and economic disaster. Months into the pandemic, Illinois has yet to enact effective emergency COVID-19 labor protections, leaving Black workers, who are overrepresented in essential industries, particularly exposed to the deadly virus. The state has also abdicated its responsibility to safeguard the healthcare and human rights of individuals detained in Illinois' racially targeted prison system. And while Governor Pritzker has implemented timely measures to shore up Illinois businesses in the midst of the economic shutdowns, racial equity provisions are glaringly absent from his commercial relief package.

Voicing Our Demands

In order to counter the devastating racialized toll that the COVID-19 pandemic will have on the health and economic stability of Black communities across Illinois, WCRJ will champion a sweeping agenda of racial justice response policies at the state level. The core issue areas of our plan, which include economic relief, workers rights, justice reform, and equitable democracy, reflect the policy priorities of WCRJ's membership. In the coming weeks, we will direct the following legislative demands to key decision makers in state government, including Governor J.B. Pritzker, Lieutenant Governor Juliana Stratton, and members of the Illinois General Assembly.

Economic Security Demands

Invest in emergency and long term financial assistance for low and middle income households

Direct emergency cash assistance to Illinoisans who are left behind by the CARES Act, including formerly incarcerated people, students, undocumented workers, and members of the untaxed and uncompensated economy. Ensure continuous payments are made throughout the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic and related economic crisis.

Implement an immediate and permanent increase in the state EITC from 18% to 36% of the federal credit for all filers, and disburse payments on a bimonthly, rather than annual basis.

Permanently expand the universe of state EITC recipients to include undocumented earners and young people, and extend the maximum credit to uncompensated workers - such as family caregivers and students - in low income households.

Restore the basic needs safety net for the Illinois' most vulnerable households

Indefinitely extend the [COVID-19 emergency increase](#) to Illinois' Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

Enact an immediate and permanent increase in Illinois' Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) grant amount to 60% of the annually adjusted federal poverty guidelines. Abolish the state ban on TANF for households with members who have been convicted of a drug-related felony.

Expand eligibility and funding to the Child Care Assistance Program

Indefinitely extend [COVID-19 emergency child care measures](#) to ensure continuous funding to state licensed child care providers who are forced to close, increased reimbursement rates to daycare centers that remain open during the pandemic, and offer child care to all essential workers at a \$1 monthly rate throughout the entirety of the pandemic shutdowns.

As the Illinois labor force returns to work, ensure the affordability of child care for all households by permanently raising the CCAP eligibility threshold to 400% of the federal poverty line and eliminating all copays.

Direct small business relief to Black-owned enterprises

For all forthcoming state level business relief packages related to COVID-19 shutdowns, establish 33% set-asides specifically for Black owned enterprises and nonprofits.

Implement a statewide economic relief package explicitly aimed at stabilizing local POC owned enterprises through grants, loan forgiveness, and employee targeted tax credit measures.

Increase state revenue through progressive taxation

In order to fund both emergency and long term COVID-19 economic relief measures, establish new progressive revenue streams, including a statewide high end real estate transfer tax.

Anticipate passage of the Fair Tax Amendment by preparing an assertive progressive income tax structure, through which Illinois' wealthiest households and corporations equitably contribute to state resources.

Workers Rights Demands

Ensure adequate protections to all essential workers on the frontlines of the pandemic

Mandate that employers provide essential workers with personal protective equipment at no personal cost, as well as two additional weeks of paid sick leave. Throughout the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic, all full and part time workers must also receive time-and-a-half hazard pay increases, which, for small and lower revenue businesses, will be subsidized by the state.

Mandate that employers extend presumptive eligibility for COVID-19 to all essential workers to ensure that employees are entitled to workers compensation if they contract the disease.

Invest in longer term growth of high-quality jobs for Illinois workers

Establish a statewide economic relief package for employers that exclusively funds staff retention or expansion through grants and employee targeted tax credit measures. Make such funding contingent upon critical worker protections, including 80 hours of sick leave and living wage compensation.

Require all Illinois employers to offer full time workers 80 hours of paid sick leave annually, and commensurate paid sick leave to part time employees.

Protect employment opportunities for workers who were laid off during the pandemic shutdown, by implementing statewide Right to Recall mandates, under which employers must first offer any re-opened positions to previously terminated or laid off workers, before taking on new hires.

Justice Reform Demands

Undertake emergency decarceration measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19 in Illinois prisons

Grant early release or medical furlough to all individuals detained in Illinois prisons who are over the age of 50 and medically vulnerable.

Commute the sentences of individuals who have served more than 50% of their prison terms.

Support immediate and long term stability of individuals who are released from incarceration

Implement a statewide emergency response plan to ensure that the immediate housing, health, and economic needs of individuals released from incarceration are met during the coronavirus

pandemic. Work with localities to make vacant hotels rooms available to house individuals released from Illinois prisons at no personal cost.

Pass the SAFER Communities Act (HB 5394), which would reinvest public dollars saved through decarceration into a jobs creation program that promotes the hiring of workers with conviction histories.

Amend the Illinois Human Rights Act to include anti-discrimination protections in employment and housing for people with conviction records.

Implement immediate measures to protect the health and human rights of individuals who remain behind bars during the pandemic

Direct IDOC to issue and effect a comprehensive plan, approved and overseen by public health officials, for treating and preventing the spread of COVID-19 within prison facilities. Allow for regular access to sanitation and hygiene facilities, as well as widespread availability of soap, hand sanitizer, and personal protective gear for incarcerated individuals, free of charge.

Ensure that inmates infected by COVID-19 are quarantined in hospital or residential settings, not in prison facilities.

Order IDOC to immediately suspend ongoing prison lockdowns. The continuous confinement of an individual to a prison cell over the course of multiple days constitutes torture, and poses grave threats to the mental health and social wellbeing of the 36,000 of people currently held in state facilities.

Require IDOC to lift the visitation bans. In order to safeguard the legal rights and social wellbeing of individuals held in Illinois prisons, it is imperative that IDOC allow community and legal visitation. Facilities must ensure access to hygiene facilities, and provide soap, hand sanitizer, and personal protective gear before and after visits. Expand access to telephone calls at no cost to incarcerated individuals.

Equitable Democracy Demands

Implement a rapid response plan to ensure equitable ballot access throughout the pandemic

Establish statewide universal vote-by-mail procedures, expand early and absentee voting, increase polling sites to prevent lines and crowding, and equip voting locations with essential sanitation and personal protective equipment.

Ensure continuity of legislative representation throughout the COVID-19 crisis

Throughout the ongoing suspension of the legislative term, hold remote lawmaker deliberations to ensure swift passage of COVID-19 relief measures. Designate a specific emergency working group to address the adverse racialized impact of COVID-19 on Illinois communities.

After social distancing orders are lifted, call for an immediate resumption of the 101st General Assembly, and schedule additional emergency session time explicitly dedicated to a statewide racial justice COVID-19 response.