A RESOLUTION declaring racism a public health crisis.

WHEREAS, racism has deep and harmful impacts that unfairly disadvantages Black, Indigenous and People of Color (“BIPOC”) and unfairly advantages people who identify as white;

WHEREAS, racism harms every person in our society and is a root cause of poverty, economic inequality, and health inequities;

WHEREAS, Harris County is a growing and diverse community with continually shifting demographics;

WHEREAS, systematic racism and injustice has direct impacts on disproportionate and poor health outcomes across minority communities;

WHEREAS, enslaved Black people were bought and sold at auction on the land where our County Attorney’s Office sits today, contributing to the violent, forceful, and uncompensated labor of thousands of people in Harris County;

WHEREAS, the Texas Rangers furthered White settlement in our state by killing indigenous groups, chasing enslaved Black people, and carrying out extralegal killings of residents of Mexican descent, furthering their own interests by oppressing communities of color;

WHEREAS, in 1846 the Texas Legislature charged county courts with forming local committees to act as slave patrols to search for and arrest enslaved African-Americans, using law enforcement to punish people of color for trying to be free;

WHEREAS, the Texas articles of secession declared that the “African race . . . were rightly held and regarded as an inferior and dependent race,” institutionalizing structures of white supremacy in government;

WHEREAS, under the Homestead Act the federal government gave land to more than 1.5 million White families, while depriving African Americans of those opportunities to accrue generational wealth;

WHEREAS, Black codes during Reconstruction restricted African Americans to work as farmers or domestic servants, relegating people of color to lower-wage industries;

WHEREAS, the Wagner Act and the Fair Labor Standards Act excluded farmers and domestic workers from participation in collective bargaining and improved wages and working conditions, preventing people of color from accessing higher incomes and safer workplaces;

WHEREAS, Home Owners Loan Corporation maps redlined the predominantly Black Third Ward and Fifth Ward neighborhoods as “hazardous” areas where it would not guarantee loans, shutting out families of color from accessing secure credit;
WHEREAS, even after the Fair Housing Act banned racial discrimination in lending, mortgage lenders have continued to disproportionately deny home loans to borrowers of color and make subprime loans to minority homeowners;

WHEREAS, the War on Drugs has been called the New Jim Crow, ten times as many people are incarcerated because of drug charges than were in 1980, more than 60% of people in prison are people of color, and felony disenfranchisement prevents Black Americans from voting at a rate four times that of all other racial groups combined;

WHEREAS, half of Houston’s superfund sites are located in historically minority neighborhoods and 84% of Houston’s facilities that emit carcinogens are in majority-minority census blocks, disproportionately exposing people of color to environmental toxins;

WHEREAS, 80% of Houston’s publicly subsidized housing is located in minority and disproportionately poor neighborhoods, preventing low-income residents from accessing higher-opportunity areas;

WHEREAS, modern public health emergencies such as 9/11, Ebola, Zika, and COVID-19 have resulted in increased racial tension and discrimination across different communities;

WHEREAS, the spread and impact of COVID-19 has unearthed longstanding systemic inequities in communities of color and at its onset presented with widespread discrimination against Asian-American residents and businesses;

WHEREAS, this cumulative legacy of racial oppression and discriminatory practices has deprived communities of color of wealth, voting rights, access to educational opportunities, access to quality healthcare, access to housing, fair and equal justice, and the full freedom to live, and has led to pervasive health disparities and inequities among different racial and ethnic groups in Harris County today;

WHEREAS, today there are cancer clusters and higher risks of cancer in our Black and Latinx communities, including but not limited to the Fifth Ward, Manchester, Galena Park, and Pasadena;

WHEREAS, Black residents have a lower life expectancy than other races in Harris County, and Black men have the lowest life expectancy at 72.3 years compared to the Harris County average of 78.7 years;

WHEREAS, only 8.6% of White residents are uninsured, while 17% of Black and 33.3% of Latinx Harris County residents do not have health insurance;

WHEREAS, Black residents are more likely to have asthma (19.%) compared to White (11.7%) and Latinx (5.3) residents;

WHEREAS, heart disease mortality rates are higher for Black residents (229 per 100,000) compared to White (181) and Latinx (118) residents;
WHEREAS, older Black residents are twice as likely, and Latinx 1.5 as likely to have dementia compared to White residents;

WHEREAS, Black mothers and infants die at twice the rate of their White counterparts;

WHEREAS, Black people make up half of those locked up at the Harris County Jail but less than a quarter of the total county population;

WHEREAS, a Black resident of Harris County is almost five times as likely as a White resident to be sent to a Texas state prison;

WHEREAS, 98% of the young people who are detained while awaiting adjudication are black or Latinx;

WHEREAS, the median income of White households in Harris County is almost double that of Black and Latinx households;

WHEREAS, for every one dollar in wealth held by White households with children, Black households have one cent and Latinx households have eight cents;

WHEREAS, Harris County invests only 0.5% of its contract dollars in Black-owned businesses and 90.9% in businesses owned by White men;

WHEREAS, the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 on our BIPOC communities is a present-day demonstration of the systemic racism in institutions and systems that have not valued and supported human life equitably;

WHEREAS, whether intended or not, racism is ingrained in institutional policies and practices, a fraction of which are described herein, and creates differential access to opportunities and resources, and causes disparate outcomes in all aspects of life affecting health;

WHEREAS, Harris County must address racism, racial and ethnic inequities, and health disparities in all forms and at all levels, which are the individual, institutional, and systemic levels across the county;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED by the Harris County Commissioners Court:

1. The Court declares racism a public health crisis.
2. Harris County will develop policies, programs, and services that work to dismantle the systemic racism that creates barriers to strong public health.
3. Harris County government commits to developing stronger and better-resourced partnerships with community organizations, leaders and residents impacted by racism to disrupt and dismantle racism and protect the health and well-being of our residents who are Black, indigenous and people of color.
4. Harris County will ensure complete and regular availability of specific race and ethnicity data that documents the racial and ethnic inequities, and use quantitative data and community knowledge to reach solutions that work and that are sustainable.
5. Harris County commits to ongoing work around race and equity by engaging in a process to assess racial equity in our county’s decisions, actions, and investments.