

Tulane Public Health Dean Leads Health Equity Task Force

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School of Public Health Dean Thomas LaVeist, PhD is lending his vast expertise to the Louisiana COVID-19 Health Equity Task Force as co-chair.

Gov. John Bel Edwards announced the creation of the task force in April saying, “We know that right now 70 percent of our deaths in Louisiana from coronavirus are African Americans. This is a disturbing trend and one that deserves our attention, which is why we are engaging a group of leaders right now while the crisis is still ongoing.”

The task force is broken into a series of groups focused on delivering information on how health inequities are affecting communities that are most impacted by the coronavirus. In addition to co-chairing the entire task force, LaVeist, a nationally recognized expert in health equity, is leading the COVID-19 Communication and Messaging group within the task force.

“I’m happy the governor has demonstrated bold leadership in the midst of the pandemic to recognize and address the hard truth that COVID-19 is hitting black communities much harder and with more deadly consequences,” said LaVeist. “By addressing this disparity while the crisis is ongoing, I hope we have an opportunity to make a significant difference.”

As a template for their work, the group will use “The Skin You’re In,” a documentary, book and social media campaign that LaVeist designed to illuminate the health disparities African Americans face and to provide a space for discussing and implementing practical solutions.

“I’ve spent my career trying to understand why African Americans live sicker and have shorter life spans compared to white Americans,” said

LaVeist. “Unfortunately, the situation with COVID-19 is nothing new, and the reasons behind the data have everything to do with a lack of access to reliable, high-quality healthcare, the lack of a social safety net for workers in the service industry and the gig economy, and an understandable mistrust of a medical community that has at times taken advantage of the black community.”

The group aims to develop a Health Equity Task Force website with a social media platform that includes COVID-19 safety and prevention, employs culturally relevant messaging and works to de-stigmatize the disease and clarify misperceptions surrounding coronavirus.

“We want to reach African Americans where they are both in their communities and online with messaging that resonates and can be trusted. Because of physical distancing, this effort could be more challenging than it would be otherwise, but the widespread use of social media and the internet in general may help us bridge that gap. This is why we have established an educational campaign titled “The Skin You’re In.” We have a website (TSYI.org) and we are on all social media platforms.” he said.

The task force will endeavor to find ways to reach all areas of the community through their work, including incorporating measures to reach the elderly and rural communities who may have limited or no access to broadband internet. To reach more tech-savvy young people, the group will incorporate measures such as geofencing that can deploy information based on the users’ location.

“The great thing is that the findings and recommendations made by this task force will help everyone better access quality care and improve health outcomes. It will also leverage our research capabilities and intellectual brainpower in a collective manner to tackle this daunting issue. I am asking our universities and research institutions to lead this effort,” Edwards added.

“I’m hopeful that the work of the Health Equity Task Force will have lasting impact well beyond COVID-19. I’d like to see Louisiana be a model for other southern states and a path to improved health outcomes for all Americans well beyond this current crisis,” the dean concluded.