

## Prepared Remarks

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*My research career began with a vision, “to ameliorate the difficulties faced by Black, African American and other youth of color who disproportionately suffer from the effects of unequal opportunities to achieve the healthiest versions of themselves.”* Envision, if you will, two children, one African American and the other White, each born into loving and economically stable families. From the time they are conceived and through the emerging stages of adulthood, they are exposed to different levels of health risk with differing impacts. For example, across socioeconomic strata, disparities persist related to infant birth-weight, mortality and maternal stress. After birth and into childhood, disparities emerge and persist related to compulsory K-12 education and social services. For example, African American children are as much as 5 times more likely to be expelled from school for a minor infraction as their white peers and as much as 25-50% less likely to receive adequate mental health services (evidence based or not) when faced with a diagnosable mental illness. Researchers, clinicians and policy makers describe these differences as disparities and identify Black and African American youth as members of an underserved, disparities population. As a Black woman and mother, I am all too aware of these realities and as an academic researcher, I address these realities by asserting that such disparities should not exist in a country with the bounty of resources, knowledge and technological advances such as we have in the U.S. I have therefore dedicated my academic career of the last 20 years to illuminating the factors that contribute to mental health disparities for African Americans and to collaborating with this community (and people of color overall) to create solutions building on the strengths and resilience inherent to our communities.

It is my distinct honor to participate on this working group supporting Congresswoman Bonnie Watson Coleman and the Congressional Black Caucus Task Force, a group comprised of luminaries of public service working side by side with Black/African American luminaries of the biomedical research, policy and educational spheres. I am here to validate the dire mental needs of African American youth and witness to the incredible resilience of Black people, our children, families and communities. One of my main goals for our work is to center the voices of Black teens themselves and my call is for us to convene Black teens of varied backgrounds to share their perspectives and lived experience as I have done with my AAKOMA Project research lab since 1999. In closing, I wish to also amplify the grave need for more research conducted (in the words of Daymond John from the famous clothing company FUBU) to support the Black and African American clinical investigators in securing the levels of funding needed from our tax supported federal funding agencies. In achieving these goals, my aim is to build and fortify the pipeline to optimal mental health for ALL Black, African American and youth of color and to ensure that this work includes investigations done For Us By Us.

Thank You