

## **Remarks as Prepared for Delivery – Launch of the CBC Emergency Taskforce on Black Youth Suicide and Mental Health**

*Congresswoman Bonnie Watson Coleman*

*April 30, 2019*

Good Afternoon, and welcome to the first forum of the Congressional Black Caucus's Emergency Taskforce on Black Youth Suicide and Mental Health.

I want to start by thanking my colleagues for joining me today for this critical discussion. This is the first of many events I hope to see this taskforce accomplish, but it is our first opportunity to set the foundation for where we want to go.

I also want to thank today's panelists for sharing their time and their expertise.

This is not the first group setting out to support Black youth — I'm proud to co-chair the Caucus on Black Women and Girls, and my colleague Danny Davis is a cochair of the Congressional Caucus on Black Men and Boys.

But this is the first and only group whose mission is so specific and critical.

The crisis of youth suicide across all ages has been in the headlines lately, but the situation among Black children and young adults is especially acute. Last year the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) Pediatrics published a report that found that for the first time in the history of such research, the rate of suicides for Black children between the ages of five and 12 has exceeded that of White children.

The same report found that more than a third of elementary school-aged suicides involved Black children.

High profile cases, like the deaths of McKenzie Nicole Adams and more recently Nigil Shelby, demonstrate how difficult it is to categorize the circumstances that are taking our children's lives — there are elements of race, of trauma, of socioeconomic status, of sexual orientation and gender identity and many more issues at play.

For any solution to be effective, it will need to be wholistic. Today, we begin the work of identifying the causes for this crisis, and how to formulate those solutions.

This Taskforce is both urgent and mission driven — I hope that it will complete its work no later than early next year, and dissolve thereafter. It is an "emergency" taskforce dedicated to bringing public awareness to the status of mental health and mental health care among black youth and developing concrete solutions to halt and lower rising suicide rates for this population.

Over the next several months, in addition to events like this in Washington, DC, we hope to bring what we learn to communities across the country, connecting parents and other community leaders to the knowledge and tools to be the "first responders" that identify students at risk and get them the help they need.

With the help of a newly assembled working group, including the individuals joining us today, we will also work to assemble a report, hopefully by the end of this year, detailing concrete, Congressional steps that will prevent more tragic deaths.

The urgency and importance of this discussion can't be understated — we have to act, and we have to act now. With that, I want to get to work and introduce today's panelists.

Dr. Michael Lindsey currently serves as the Executive Director of the McSilver Institute for Poverty Policy and Research and Constance and Martin Silver Professor of Poverty Studies at New York University. His expertise includes: child and adolescent mental health services research, adolescent depression, adolescent risk behaviors,

and school mental health, with a special interest in the factors that prevent adolescents from receiving the mental health care that they need. Dr. Lindsey is a standing member of the National Advisory Council, Center for Substance Abuse Prevention at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the Mental Health Education Integration Consortium, and is a board member for the Society for Social Work and Research.

Dr. Alfiie Breland-Noble serves as the Project Director of the AAKOMA Project (African American Knowledge Optimized for Mindfully-Healthy Adolescents). She is an expert in the field of adolescent depression disparities and has been appointed to the American Psychological Association Board to Develop Depression Treatment Guidelines, the PCORI National Advisory Panel on Addressing Disparities, and to the Research Division of the Department of Psychiatry at Georgetown University Medical Center.

Dr. William B. Lawson is a consultant for the Institute for Reducing Disparities Through Research, Education, and Access to Care, an Adjunct Professor at the University of Maryland School of Medicine and Professor Emeritus and former Associate Dean for Disparities at Dell Medical School at the University of Texas Austin. He has a longstanding research and clinical interest in addressing racial and ethnic disparities in care, and has supported innovative treatments for the underserved, mentally ill, and substance abusers.

Dr. Sherry Davis Molock is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at The George Washington University, conducting research on the prevention of suicide and HIV in African American adolescents and young adults. She was recently awarded a pilot grant from the DC Center for AIDS Research (DC-CFAR) to develop a HIV/AIDS testing and mental health intervention for youth in African American churches. She currently serves on the Steering Committee for the Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC), as well as a grant reviewer for NIMH, NIDA, CDC, and SAMHSA.

Finally, we have with us David Johns, Executive Director of the National Black Justice Coalition and doctoral student at Teachers College, Columbia University. The mission of the National Black Justice Coalition (NBJC)—a civil rights organization dedicated to the empowerment of LGBTQ people, including people living with HIV/AIDS—is to end racism, homophobia, and LGBTQ bias and stigma. A recognized thought leader and social justice champion, David's career has focused on improving life outcomes and opportunities for Black people.

I'll now turn it over to each of our panelists to give some opening remarks, beginning with Dr. Lindsey.