



OFFICE OF THE LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR

Vermont State House
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*****PRESS RELEASE*****

**Lt. Governor Molly Gray Hosts “Seat at the Table” on Equity in Public Health
Access**

Montpelier, Vt. — This afternoon, Lt. Governor Gray hosted her second “Seat at the Table” on the topic of equity in public health with a particular focus on Vermont’s former refugee community or individuals with a refugee background in Vermont. A total of 58 community leaders and policymakers joined the “Seat at the Table” to learn more about the ways in which the State must build a more culturally and linguistically competent public health system.

“With the February 4 release of executive orders by President Biden addressing changes to US immigration and refugee policies, we are witnessing a recommitment to increasing refugee admissions. Vermont has a proud tradition of resettling refugees, and to date has resettled roughly 8,000 individuals fleeing conflict and persecution.” Gray said. “This pandemic hit certain communities harder than others and systemic inequities in our healthcare system were laid bare. As we work to recover stronger from COVID-19 and build a more inclusive, welcoming, and diverse Vermont we must address inequities in access to basic human services, healthcare being top among them. I look forward to continuing to amplify the work and expertise of today’s speakers as I work with state and federal partners to build a more equitable system.”

Speakers included, Dr. Maria Mercedes Avila, Associate Professor of Pediatrics at the University of Vermont; Amila Merdzanovic, Director at the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (Vermont); Dr. Jules Wetchi, Public Health Specialist representing Vermont’s New American community; Dr. Pablo Bose, Associate Professor of Geography and Director of Global Studies at the University of Vermont; and Thato Ratsebe the Associate Director and Programs Manager at the Association of Africans Living in Vermont (AALV). Lt. Governor Gray moderated the event.

Speakers highlighted numerous areas where Federal and State leaders could work to address inequity and build on initiatives launched over the last year. Recommendations included sustained Federal and State COVID relief funding to support immediate food and healthcare needs, a state commitment to ensure full language access to all former refugees to government information, the hiring of diverse backgrounds with cultural and linguistic expertise by the State and healthcare providers, the education and training of healthcare providers on historic systemic inequities in access to healthcare, and investments in “cultural brokers” and other initiatives.



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Of the event, Dr. Pablo Bose of UVM said, “It was a timely and important reminder of the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 on a number of our refugee communities and highlighted the lessons learned, resilience and ongoing barriers for many individuals and families in the face of this and other challenges to successful integration.”

Thato Ratsebe of AALV stressed the need for partnership, “Collaboration, collaboration, collaboration. We cannot do this alone.”

Dr. Jules Wetchi stated, “Cultural competence is the foundation to reduce health disparities in Vermont and the intervention in health equity needs to be adapted to the needs of specific groups.”

Nearly all panelists noted that inequities in access to public health were rooted in lack of representation. Dr. Avila stated the imperative need to “...meaningfully and actively engage in dismantling systemic racism.”

A recording of the event is available to view on YouTube here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cK2SCpKIJuI>

Vermonters wishing to attend future sessions, can register, and find additional information here:
<https://ltgov.vermont.gov/seatatthetable>.

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