

DIMENSIONS

THE EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF
HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
DIVERSITY NEWSLETTER

WINTER 2021

An Interview with
**COMMISSIONER
MARY TRUONG**
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Welcome!

Highlights from the Winter issue of DIMENSIONS include



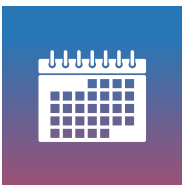
an interview with Mary Truong, executive director of the Office of Refugees (ORI) and Immigrants, who is featured on the cover. The issue also includes an interview with ORI's Chief of Staff and Diversity Officer Falah Hashem.



“Insights from the COVID-19 Pandemic: We Need to Prioritize Our Communities of Color” is the first of a two-part series, which shares relevant data that explains the reasons behind the disproportionate impact of the virus on communities of color.



“What’s Your Vision?” Under the direction of Massachusetts Commission for the Blind (MCB) Commissioner David D’Arcangelo, this public service announcement reflects the agency’s encouraging Commonwealth employers to hire persons with a disability.



Month, among others.

Finally, you’ll find the Diversity Calendar and its many significant observances, including the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr.; National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month; Black History Month; National Women’s History Month; and Irish American Heritage

We hope you find this issue informative.

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AN INTERVIEW WITH Mary Truong

by Dimensions Staff

Mary Truong, executive director of the Massachusetts Office of Immigrants and Refugees (ORI), received her education at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Appointed in 2015 by Governor Baker, Ms. Truong continuously strives to help other refugees and immigrants. Born in Vietnam, Ms. Truong immigrated in the 1970s to the United States as a young teenager with her family. Her career demonstrates the confluence of her passion to link communities and create opportunities for the integration of children, young adults, and families. Before becoming ORI's executive director, Ms. Truong served on the Boston Human Rights Commission, the Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center, and the Greater Boston Habitat for Humanity boards.



Q In May 2015, Governor Baker appointed you to the Massachusetts Office for Refugees and Immigrants (ORI). What has been the significance of this appointment for you?

A In 2015, there was a refugee crisis with millions of people from the Middle East and Africa fleeing their native countries. When Governor Baker and Secretary Sudders appointed me to head ORI, it was a tremendous opportunity for me to help other refugees and immigrants. Having been a former refugee from Vietnam, I could relate to their challenges and offer my own survivor experience to assist them in making a new life in America successfully. This has been my dream job, reminding me that our government and people can do much to help newcomers become self-reliant and productive new Americans.



Q What is ORI's mission, and what are you doing to ensure the agency successfully carries out this mission?

A ORI's mission is to support the effective resettlement of refugees and immigrants in the state and to promote their full participation in the economic, civic, social, and cultural life of the Commonwealth. We achieve these objectives through partnering with nonprofit resettlement agencies and state agencies to help refugees learn English and find housing and jobs so they can become self-sufficient as quickly as possible.

As Governor Baker wants refugees and immigrants to know that Massachusetts is a welcoming state, ORI created welcome kits with essential resources and information in various languages. We publish an annual service provider directory to improve the transparency and collaboration of our contractors. We always reach out to new community-based organizations in cities and towns to establish new collaborative relationships. ORI also holds annual town hall meetings to seek input from refugees and immigrants as part of our general needs assessment.

We constantly search for grant opportunities to support our programs while focusing on the quality of our services. We use social media to promote ORI, and I will seize any opportunities to create new partnerships to expand our programs and services.

Q At the age of 14, you, along with your father, grandmother, and eight siblings, fled Vietnam in 1975 to avoid the Communist takeover. Please share some of the stories of your journey to America as a child refugee. What do you believe others can learn from your experience?

A I will never forget the evening of April 29, 1975. My father and grandmother gathered me and my eight siblings together and told us that we must pack up and leave Vietnam. I was surprised by this news and asked "Where are we going, why,

and what can I bring with me as it's impossible to leave all things behind..." My father explained quickly that we were leaving for America, for freedom, and I could bring only the most essential things. He said, "It is the spiritual life that matters and not material things," and that "the most important thing of all is to have our family together." I chose to bring my English dictionary and my pajamas.

“We were stranded in the open sea for several days with little food and water.”

For a 14-year-old girl, the escape was chaotic and terrifying. I saw dead bodies lying on the road amid pools of blood, and there were shootings everywhere as my father drove us out of Saigon in his station wagon. The communist troops were marching into the city on both sides of the roads. At one checkpoint, they blocked the road and forbade us to leave. With keen instinct, my father offered his watch and their leader let us go. After a full day of driving through chaos, we reached a seaside town about 100 miles south of Saigon. When my dad was able to find a small fishing boat, we quickly made our way from the shore. I can still recall that our boat was fired upon once we were discovered. Fortunately, we were far from the shore, and no one on the boat was harmed. We were stranded in the open sea for several days with little food and water. Finally, a US naval ship rescued us and took us to a refugee camp located in Subic Bay, Philippines. From there we were transferred to a camp in Guam, and then to another camp in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. We were then relocated to Pittsburgh, with the help of my father's friend, an American Army doctor who had been stationed in Vietnam in the late '60s. He and his wife got the parish of a local church to sponsor us, getting us out of the camp to rebuild our life in America.

I always remember back in the refugee camp, a young girl came into the camp to entertain us and



asked me, “Do you eat spiders?” I replied “no.” She continued: “Do you eat tigers?” I repeated “no.” She went on to ask, “Well then, do you eat lions?” I was so upset thinking that this person assumed that Vietnam was all jungle and that we were barbaric, so I left, feeling disappointed. But then I realized that it wasn’t her fault, because the media showed Vietnam with negative images, so that was all she saw. So, I don’t blame her, but I hope that people would keep an open mind and do not assume anything about newcomers. We should take time to know them and listen to them with compassion. They may come from a faraway land and may not speak English, but that does not mean they are uncivilized.

Looking back at this perilous and miraculous journey, I believe that we were able to overcome the dangers because there were my mother’s spirit and God that guided us to safety. Having the family together and living in freedom are most rewarding aspects of our experience. My father risked his life and was willing to leave everything he had created, in exchange for his children’s safety, future, and freedom. We’re forever thankful for the help and the opportunities that the United States government and the American people provided us.

Q In 2016, you were awarded the Get Konnected! Founder’s Choice Award. You received this award for your comprehensive work with the immigrant and refugee community. Highlights of your work included creating and distributing welcome kits for refugees entering Massachusetts, and developing a directory of ORI services. The directory was instrumental in providing users with a one-stop comprehensive resource of services that are available to them. What did this award mean to you? Why was it important to you that ORI provide the welcome kits to newcomers to the U.S.?

A First and foremost, I felt humbled in receiving this Get Konnected! Founder’s Choice Award. I did not think that I deserved to receive it, as what

I had done to help some people was limited in scope. I needed to do more to help people, and felt that there were many others more deserving than I was. However, I was thrilled and honored to be selected.

1975 was a different time when my family and I resettled in Pennsylvania. We did not have a refugee resettlement agency to help with anything. No case management, job training, placement support, or translation and interpretation help were available. We were disconnected from the local and state programs’ resources and services. We felt isolated but thankful for the basic supports from the local church’s members who donated limited rent money, food, and clothes, and helped enrolled seven children into schools.

“Looking back at this perilous and miraculous journey, I believe that we were able to overcome the dangers because there were my mother’s spirit and God that guided us to safety.”

In 2015, while there was an infrastructure to help refugees, the climate was not that welcoming to them. Anti-immigrant sentiment was rising. As a newcomer to the U.S., I’d thought it’d be wonderful to be welcomed by everyone, including the elected officials. So the first thought I had as soon as I started ORI’s work was to create welcome kits. The kits included a welcome message from Governor Baker and Secretary Sudders, assuring refugee newcomers that the governor and secretary care about them. They also conveyed that there are public and local resources that are available to the newcomers as they resettle in Massachusetts. The welcome kits were translated into seven key refugee languages

and were distributed throughout the state by refugee resettlement agencies and refugee advocates. It was rewarding for me to hear from some refugee service providers that the welcome letter from the governor and the secretary helped some refugees feel safe and protected, knowing that these top leaders care for them. We are the only state in the US that offers such kits.

Q ORI is a small agency in terms of the number of its employees, but is responsible for providing very important and necessary services to the thousands of refugees and immigrants who arrive in the Commonwealth yearly, many of whom are fleeing war, persecution, and natural disaster. What are some of the accomplishments or initiatives that highlight the agency's efforts to support these individuals?

A First and foremost, I want to acknowledge the commitment and dedication of ORI's team, EOHHS's leadership, our contracted community partners, funders, and supporters. Together, we have achieved many of our goals to serve refugees of all ages and backgrounds.

Our resettlement has been a national model, because we were so successful in helping refugees become self-sufficient. In fact, last month we were awarded a four-year, \$400,000 per-year grant from the Federal Office for Refugees Resettlement for our new resettlement initiative, the Family Integration Program (FIP). This program focuses on case management and specialized wraparound supports and services, including computer literacy, employment, access to child care and transportation, financial literacy, community supports, and native-language access to information. It will equip refugees with the skills, knowledge, and resources they need to establish successful and independent family units; move out of poverty; and obtain economic stability.

In terms of employment, on average, within four months of arrival, 33% or more of refugees,

many of whom spoke limited English, had found work successfully. In FY20, 85% of refugees were employed 90 days after their first employment start date. Our Financial Literacy for Newcomers (FLN) program was the first and is still the only state-administered initiative of its kind in the country. After launching the program with funding from individuals, businesses, and foundations, FLN garnered state support and funding. Its success as a public-private partnership is exemplary. For the last three years, we have conducted 143 workshops in eight languages, serving 745 individuals from 40 countries.

Our Citizenship for New Americans Program has assisted about 1,800 annually to become US citizens. We distributed more than 1,200 welcome kits to refugee newcomers. In addition, we received the Community Service award by MassHousing for our partnership.

Q You are considered one of Boston's most influential minority leaders. How do you react to others viewing you in this light? What do you see as the responsibilities that come with such a distinction?

A I'm very humbled by this distinction and feel deeply grateful to those who have supported my work. I do not see myself as a leader, as I always wish I could do more to help or inspire others. My parents taught me the values of helping people and leading by example, so I will continue to help anyone regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, or physical impairments whenever I can, with respect and compassion. I am a Vietnamese American; I will do all I can so both Vietnamese and Americans can be proud of me. I will try my best to inspire and motivate others to remember our immigrant heritage so we can continue to welcome newcomers, because they will help America to be better.





Q What are some of your goals for ORI?

A Some of my goals for ORI are to continue to outreach and expand our services by creating new partnerships with more private and public partners and funders in many cities and towns within the state; seeking diverse funding to support, retain, and grow our programs; and continue to enhance and promote ORI’s services via social media.

Q What is one of your most significant achievements outside of work?

A One of my significant achievements outside of work was to help build the nation’s first Vietnamese American Community Center, in Dorchester. In 2001, I, along with other Vietnamese residents in Dorchester and Vietnamese community activists, decided to build a center at the heart of the Vietnamese community in Massachusetts that we could call home. This center would be a brand new complex, with nonprofit tenant groups providing a comprehensive mix of services to meet the needs of Vietnamese refugees and immigrants. The Vietnamese American Community Center (VACC) was a major community project coordinated by VietAID staff and members of Community Center Steering Committee, of which I was the co-founder and a member. We successfully raised \$5.1 million from grassroots, major corporate and foundation supporters, and government agencies to fund the construction project in its entirety.

To this day, the community center remains a safe and welcoming space where Dorchester residents can celebrate, organize, gather, and access needed services. The VACC serves as a place for the community to come together and take part in or learn about programs that can help them improve their health, education, financial well-being, and more.

“The world is made of colors—embrace it, and your world will be beautifully enriched!”

Q If you could share any words of wisdom, on any topic, what would you share?

A When I was a young child growing up in Vietnam, my mother bought me a black doll and a white one. I asked mom if these were just dolls to play with, because their color is either black or white and our skin color is yellow. Mom was happy that I asked because it gave her a perfect opportunity to explain why she bought me these dolls. She said, “There are people that look like this outside of Vietnam and I wanted you to know that although they have different skin color from you, we’re all the same as human beings.” More than ever, I am aware that although we may speak different languages and have different cultures, we all want the same things: happiness, protection, safety, jobs, and the American dream. Therefore, I have to respect and accept people for who they are and not judge them by their skin color or their differences. My mother also introduced us to diverse foreign music, from English to French to Indian to Chinese to Japanese, so that we could appreciate these international cultures and enjoy them. The world is made of colors—embrace it, and your world will be beautifully enriched!■



INSIGHTS FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

We Need to Prioritize Our Communities of Color



by Ekta Saksena, Elizabeth Beatriz, and Glory Song

This two-part series will cover the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on communities of color. This month, we will look at COVID-19 data and begin to understand *why* communities of color have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. You will see that the problem is not rooted in individual choice or behavior, but instead in the systems and environments within which residents of color live and operate.

In the next edition, we will dive deeper into the history of structural racism and how segregation policies have concentrated and continue to concentrate people of color into communities with inadequate protective systems that leave their residents most vulnerable to the adverse impacts of the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted communities of color.

Over the past nine months, we have seen that COVID-19 impacts every individual, every family, and every community differently. While some people don't exhibit any symptoms after contracting the virus, others may have mild symptoms resembling the common cold, and some may be hospitalized due to severe illness. While most people make a full recovery after testing positive for COVID-19, unfortunately some do not. In the United States, over 500,000 lives have been lost due to the virus^a. Many have lost someone dear; many have been infected or know people who have been infected; and many only know what they have seen on the news. Yet again, we see the varied impact of the pandemic. While it's natural for us to accept the ever-increasing number of cases and deaths as our "new normal," let's take a moment to pause and recognize the human life behind each statistic.

It is no secret that **communities of color have been hit hardest by the COVID-19 pandemic**. At this point, you have probably seen at least one of the many headlines, reports, or articles detailing the devastating impact of COVID-19 on these communities. These trends are seen across the United States, and also within the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. **Our data shows clear inequities for COVID-19-**



Fig 1. The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted Massachusetts residents of color.

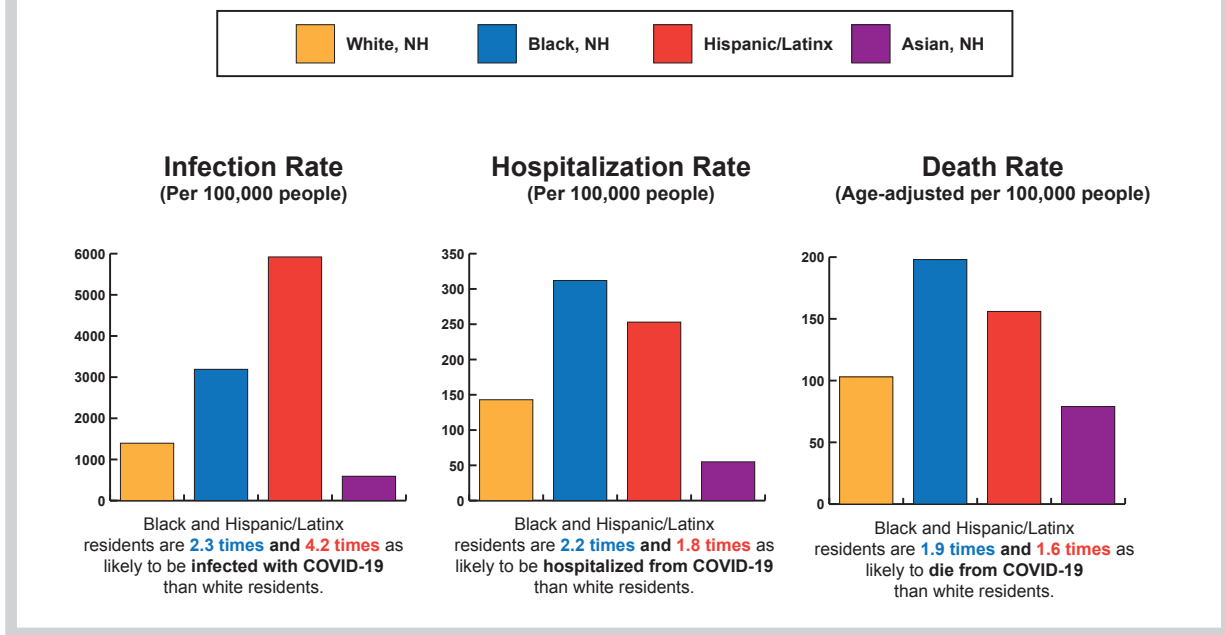
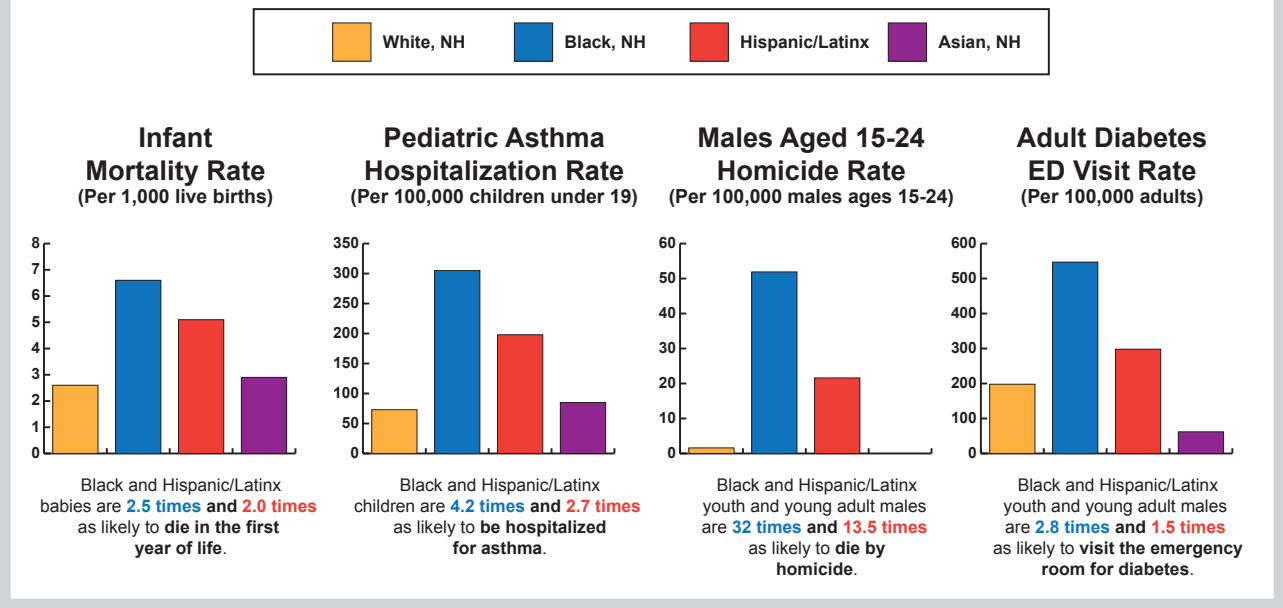
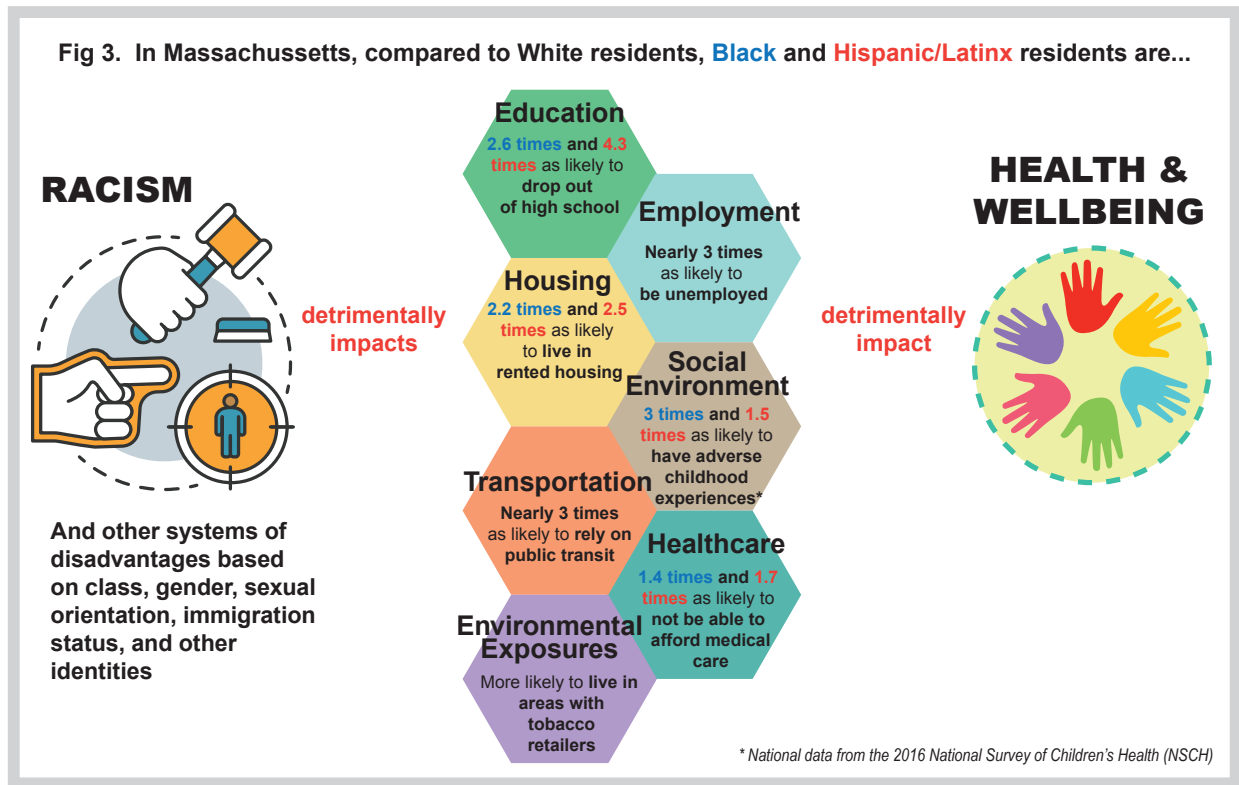


Fig 2. In Massachusetts, compared to White residents, Black and Hispanic/Latinx residents consistently experience much poorer health outcomes at all life stages, from infancy to adulthood.



related disease burden, severity, and death. In Massachusetts, nine out of the 10 communities with the highest infection rates are communities where over 50% of residents (and in some places, nearly 90%) are people of color^b. Furthermore, across the Commonwealth, Black residents are twice as likely to be infected with, hospitalized for, and die from COVID-19 compared to White, non-Hispanic residents.

Hispanic/Latinx residents are more than 4 times as likely to be infected with COVID-19 and almost twice as likely to be hospitalized and die from COVID-19. While often left out of the conversation about racial inequities, other communities of color, including Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, and multiracial residents, are also disproportionately impacted in Massachusetts. **[Figure 1]**³



In Massachusetts, communities of color are not disproportionately burdened just by COVID-19. Black and Hispanic/Latinx residents consistently experience much poorer outcomes for almost all of the major causes of disease and death across the lifespan, including conditions like diabetes and obesity, which lead to increased risk of complications from COVID-19.

Compared to Whites, Black and Hispanic/Latinx babies born in Massachusetts are more likely to be born preterm and are more likely to die before their first birthday. In childhood, Black and Hispanic/Latinx children are more likely to experience poorly controlled chronic conditions, such as asthma and obesity. As youth and young adults, Blacks and Hispanics/Latinx are more likely to experience violence and die by homicide. Later in life, Black and Hispanic/Latinx adults are more likely to have chronic diseases, like diabetes, and their experiences with these diseases are more severe. [Figure 2]

Individual behaviors or biological differences cannot explain these repeated trends across outcomes. These trends point to problems with the systems in which people live and operate.

Often, poor health outcomes are attributed to individual behavior, leading us to develop solutions targeted toward individual behavior change. While individual interventions are necessary and encourage people to make healthy decisions, they do not address root causes. By moving upstream and focusing on the **physical, economic, and social systems that significantly impact health**, we can create sustainable, long-term, population-level impact.

These systems include, but are not limited to, health care, education, housing, employment, transportation, social environment, and the built environment, and are collectively called the social determinants of health (SDoH). When we examine ability to access adequate and quality resources and opportunities within each of these critical systems, we see that, once again, residents of color consistently fare far worse than White residents. [Figure 3]

“**We have long understood that racism is a public health issue that demands action, and the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 on communities of color and other priority populations is the latest indicator change is necessary. We have put equity at the center of our COVID-19 response, and we intend to use this moment in time to redouble our efforts to address inequities in health. I know that building more equitable communities is grounded in patience, determination, and grit, and that no community should be denied the attention, care, and support that all communities deserve.**”

MA Public Health Commissioner Monica Bharel MD, MPH

We look to these same systems to understand why communities of color have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. While we all know how important it is to wear a mask, wash our hands, and use physical distancing, we, as public health professionals, also know that these recommendations are much harder if you live in crowded spaces, work in a job where you are near others, or depend on public transit as your main method of transportation. We also know how important it is to get tested and receive treatment after getting sick from COVID-19. However, it is much harder to take advantage of these resources if you struggle with reading, don't speak English, don't have affordable health insurance, or don't have access to health care facilities where testing and treatment are available.

The inequities we see are two-fold: Communities of color are more exposed to the virus, while also having less access to quality health care. Black and Hispanic/Latinx residents in Massachusetts are much more likely to live in more crowded multi-unit rented housing; work jobs in heavy-traffic settings like grocery stores; and rely on public transit, where physical distancing is much more challenging. Black and Hispanic/Latinx residents are also more likely to experience language barriers and are less able to access affordable and appropriate health care. While we have learned so much in the past nine months about preventing the spread of and treating COVID-19, we must acknowledge that these recommendations are not easy for everyone to put into practice.

The consistent racial inequities that we see across COVID-19, other health outcomes, and the different systems that impact health are deeply rooted in the widespread impacts of structural racism.

Dr. Camara Phyllis Jones, physician, epidemiologist, and former president of the American Public Health Association, makes a critical distinction⁶:

“**Race doesn't put you at higher risk [for a severe outcome from COVID-19]. Racism puts you at a higher risk.**”

When we use racism in this context, we are explicitly referring to **structural racism**, as opposed to internalized, interpersonal, or institutional racism. In *Portraits of White Racism*, David Wellman defines racism as “a system of advantage based on race.” Race is a social construct, and the system that we live and operate within was created to sustain a social, political, and economic hierarchy. Structural racism describes oppression and discrimination on the societal level. By keeping our analysis structural, we are able to critique systems, rather than blame individuals.



The Groundwater Approach can help us understand that racial inequities are caused by **systems**, regardless of people's individual culture or behavior.

Let's imagine you are spending a sunny Saturday sitting by a lake near your house. You are staring out onto the water, when you see a dead fish floating nearby. Naturally, you think to yourself, "I wonder what happened to **this fish**."

Sunday comes around, and you come back out to the same spot, only to see that 50 percent of the lake's fish are now dead and floating. Now you might think to yourself, "The water in **this lake** must be contaminated."

A few days later, you wake up to the news that 50 percent of the fish in the lakes surrounding your home are dead. At this point, we must dig deeper and analyze **the groundwater**, which reveals that these lakes are more connected than they appear to be. This framework is essential, particularly when identifying problems and developing solutions at the systems level. Changing individual behavior is not a long-term solution if it means the individual is still functioning in a broken system.

“**Structural racism is not new; it is ingrained in our society through history, and it has a generational effect. Racism, with its deep roots, will not be defeated overnight—it requires sustained recognition, commitment, and action to ensure that the progress we are making lasts and that the new normal is not the old normal.**”

Daniel Tsai, Assistant Secretary for MassHealth, Executive Office of Health & Human Services

When referring to differences in people's health status, mortality rates, and ability to access protective systems, the choice to use "inequities" over the commonly used term "disparities" is intentional, as we are acknowledging that these differences are **systemic, avoidable, unfair, and unjust**. The inequities that racism cultivates in housing, the environment, our educational system, and health care have been felt across generations, most acutely in communities of color, and have been further magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Systems of cultural oppression must first be acknowledged before they can be repaired.

As we move forward, let's focus our efforts on developing solutions, both short term and long term, that move us toward the equitable Commonwealth that we *all* deserve. Let's use this opportunity to acknowledge and begin to repair the harm that has been created and perpetuated over time. Let's be the change-makers and think critically about our own roles in dismantling structural racism. We have been given an opportunity to step out of our comfort zones and rethink the way we live, work, and interact with one another. While it is important to take care of ourselves during this pandemic, it is just as important to take care of our family, friends, neighbors, and peers during these unprecedented times. Centering equity and justice will help us create healthier, more resilient communities across the Commonwealth. ■

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DATA SOURCES AND CITATIONS

In Text

- a. US COVID-19 death toll updated as of February 24, 2021. Latest national COVID-19 available online at https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#cases_casesper100klast7days
- b. Top 10 Massachusetts communities with the highest cumulative rate (per 100,000) of confirmed COVID-19 cases January 1 - November 25, 2020, are Chelsea, Lawrence, Everett, Lynn, Revere, Brockton, Lowell, Fall River, Shirley, and Worcester. Almost all of these communities have over 50% people of color residing there.
- c. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/why-racism-not-race-is-a-risk-factor-for-dying-of-covid-19/>

Figure 1

1. **COVID-19 Infection Rate:** Crude rate per 100,000 using data updated as of November 25, 2020.
2. **COVID-19 Hospitalization Rate:** Crude rate per 100,000 using data updated as of November 25, 2020.
3. **COVID-19 Death Rate:** Age-adjusted rate per 100,000 using data updated as of November 20, 2020. Age-adjusted death rates are used for comparisons among race groups given differences in the underlying age distribution of the MA population by race/ethnicity and differences in COVID-19 death trends by age. Calculated rates per 100,000 population using denominators estimated by the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute using a modified Hamilton-Perry model (*Strate S, et al. Small Area Population Estimates for 2011 through 2020, report published Oct 2016*).

Figure 2

4. **Infant Mortality Rate:** Deaths per 1,000 live births. Data from 2017 *Death Data Report*.
5. **Pediatric Asthma Hospitalizations Rate:** Age-adjusted rate per 100,000 among children under Age 19. Data from 2016-2017 Massachusetts Hospitalization Discharge Database provided by Massachusetts Center for Health Information and Analysis (CHIA).
6. **Males Aged 15-24 Homicide Rate:** Average annual homicide rates among males ages 15-24. Data from the 2011-2015 Massachusetts Violent Death Reporting System (MAVDRS). Homicide rate for Asians was not reportable due to small sample size.
7. **Adult Diabetes Emergency Department Visits Rate:** Age-adjusted rate per 100,000 among adults. Data from 2016-2017 Massachusetts ED Visits Discharge Database provided by Massachusetts Center for Health Information and Analysis (CHIA).

Figure 3

8. **Education - High school dropout rate:** Percentage of Massachusetts public high school students who drop out of high school (all grades). Data from the 2018-2019 Student Dropout Rate Report available online at <https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/dropout/default.aspx?orgcode=00000000&orgtypecode=0&leftNavId=15627&>.
9. **Employment - Unemployment rate:** Unemployment rate by race/ethnicity in Massachusetts. Data from the U.S. Census American Community Survey (ACS), 5-year estimates, 2016

10. **Social environment - Adverse childhood experiences (ACES):** Prevalence of one or more ACES among children from birth through age 17, as reported by a parent or guardian. National data from the 2016 National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH). Data available online at <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/prevalence-adverse-childhood-experiences-nationally-state-race-ethnicity>.
11. **Healthcare - Afford healthcare:** Massachusetts adults reporting that they were unable to see a doctor at any time in the past year due to cost. Data from the 2018 Massachusetts Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS). Prevalence by race available online at <https://www.mass.gov/doc/a-profile-of-health-among-massachusetts-adults-2018/download>.
12. **Environmental exposures - Tobacco retail density:** Based on positive correlation identified between municipal-level % residents of color and municipal-level tobacco retail density (defined as the number of tobacco retailers per 1,000 residents). Tobacco retailer data from the Massachusetts Tobacco Cessation & Prevention Program. Percent residents of color from ACS 2018 5-Year Estimates.
13. **Transportation - Public transit use:** Percent of households without a vehicle by race/ethnicity: Massachusetts. Data from 2017 IPUMS USA. Data available online at https://nationalequityatlas.org/indicators/Car_access#/?geo=02000000000025000.
14. **Housing - Living in rented housing:** Percent of renters by race/ethnicity in Massachusetts. Data from the U.S. Census American Community Survey (ACS), 5-year estimates, 2016

Employee Spotlight: Falah Hashem

by Dimensions Staff

Dr. Falah Hashem, chief of staff at the Massachusetts Office of Immigrants and Refugees (ORI), received his education at the Medical College—Baghdad University. Coming from a diverse professional background, Hashem practiced medicine in Iraq for several years and later worked for the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. Appointed to his position in 2015, Dr. Hashem also serves as ORI's diversity officer. He is committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion, and to helping to oversee the implementation of long-term, high-impact ORI services.

Q **Your professional experience has been very diverse. For several years you practiced medicine in Iraq, your birth country. Later you served as an English/Arabic/Turkish Interpreter in Turkey. More recently you were a research assistant at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, and then you worked for the Department of Health, where you oversaw a state-wide program with a portfolio of two million dollars. How has your background prepared you for your roles of chief of staff and diversity officer at the MA Office for Refugees and Immigrants?**



A Growing up in a big city like Baghdad with a population of more than 7.5 million offered me a unique opportunity to interact with people from all walks of life. Socioeconomic factors played an important role in transforming communities over there. I saw how changes took different forms over time, influenced by the staggering forces of wars, terror, and politics. To some extent this had affected communities at their deepest core, but the sound of wisdom prevailed by adopting the message of considering others as ourselves.

I do believe in people, and this was my drive to be a physician in the first place. However, I have been intrigued by how people choose to present themselves and the ways they use to

interact with each other. That's what drove me to dig deeper into my people's personality; and I found by chance an amazing book written by the father of social Studies in Iraq, Dr. Ali Alwardi's *The Personality of the Iraqi Individual*. That book gave me important clues to interpret people's behavior in light of the competing factors of different community components throughout their lives. I do have a great reverence and hope for people and I am glad that I got the chance through my role as a diversity officer to ensure that people are respected for who they are; their contributions get recognized; and they have an equal opportunity to reach their full potential.

Serving as chief of staff for the Office for Refugees and Immigrants (ORI) is an honor for me. Looking back, I couldn't have imagined that I would serve in this role because medicine had been my sole passion. I grew up with seven siblings and my mother after we lost our father to war, when I was just 12. I worked to support myself and my family and studied very hard to graduate from Medical College—University of Baghdad. Since my graduation in 2000, I have worked in many hospitals and health centers in big cities, rural areas, an airport, a field medical unit, and even in a prison. I was privileged to have assumed leadership positions, including chief resident, deputy medical director, and program manager for a couple of health programs.

When I was forced to flee Iraq, I had to experience a refugee's journey firsthand. After two uneasy years living as an alien in Turkey, I found hope through the U.S. Refugee Admission Program. It is a great second-chance program that allows people to start a new life. I remember sharing a car ride from Providence to Worcester with two other refugees from Burundi when I came to the U.S. I saw how their family celebrated their arrival by dancing in the street. What a joyous moment to see all that happiness! The second day of my arrival I started volunteering with Ascentria Care Alliance, known at that time as Lutheran Social Services; the agency served thousands of newcomers. I eventually moved to the Department of Public Health, serving newcomers in a different capacity for six

years, and finally ended up working at ORI as their chief of staff. My experience and training have prepared me very well to take on the many responsibilities of this position, including 20-plus roles of direct work, overseeing three programs directly in partnership with a program coordinator, and overseeing the rest of ORI programs indirectly in partnership with an ORI manager.

Q ORI provides services to a broad range of immigrants and refugees who arrive in Massachusetts from all corners of the world. As the agency's diversity officer, how do you approach the provision of services to individuals whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds are so varied?

A The U.S. Refugee Admission Program is supported by a strong network of stakeholders nationwide. There are plenty of resources available for service providers, volunteers, and advocates to learn about the unique background of each refugee group—their strengths and challenges, and best practices for serving them. For example, there are many technical assistance providers that did a very good job in addressing these areas, including [switchboard](#), [The Center for Victims of Torture](#), [The Cultural Orientation Resource Exchange \(CORE\)](#), and the [Cultural Orientation Resource \(COR\) Center](#). ORI ensures that all service providers are aware of these resources to help them address newcomers based on an individual's needs and concerns.

Serving many roles for ORI, besides being the agency's diversity officer, allows me to do more for diversity, equity, and inclusion. For example, overseeing programs allowed me to ensure that contracts have language necessary to support small and woman-owned businesses; apply Director Truong's vision to sustain strong partnerships with ethnic-based and refugee- and immigrant-led organizations; translate many forms into targeted refugee languages; and include diversity topics in trainings designed and delivered to ORI's network of service providers. For policy work, I drafted a



nondiscrimination policy that mandates service providers to have a policy in place to serve refugees based on their gender-identification needs. I worked on ORI's website to include important information for newcomers and service providers; highlighted ORI's work and refugees' and immigrants' contributions through ORI's social media account; and participated in hiring and onboarding new staff who speak some of the refugees' languages and represent their own minority groups to better serve our newcomers.

Q How have global events including COVID and broader-scale communication about race and power impacted ORI? How has this affected you in your roles in diversity and management?

A 2020 has been an unusual year for sure—it certainly brought along many challenges, and at the same time opportunities for change and action. The pandemic affected refugee arrivals, as the refugee resettlement program was temporarily suspended. Only emergency cases were allowed to travel to the U.S. during the suspension period. The types and levels of benefits and services for newcomers weren't reduced; instead, the eligibility period for certain benefits and services have increased in response to the pandemic. Further, some federal funds became available to cover additional, immediate, and emergency services—for example, utility payments, emergency housing, etc.

Due to the pandemic, many of our service providers' staff started to work from home and provide services to newcomers on a remote or limited in-person basis to ensure social distancing, such as meeting refugees outside their homes. Telework has been working very well for our staff, especially those with children or parents that need care. The only service that ORI delivers directly to clients is financial literacy training. All other in-person training workshops had to be suspended and later transitioned successfully to be conducted through zoom.

For many refugees, their living and work conditions may put them at a greater risk for infection and make it hard for them to access health care. There are many reasons for this: housing arrangements or a lack of personal transportation; working in critical jobs, not having leave benefits, or having underlying medical or behavioral conditions or a language barrier. We put together a document to address main COVID-19-related questions, and have shared it with our service providers and posted it on our website.

The racial-injustice movement during the summer had a large-scale impact on almost everyone in the U.S. Offering a free space for employees and encouraging open dialogue was the least we could do. ORI invited in employees a couple of times to express their feelings and thoughts about what has affected minorities during the tragic events that resulted in mobilizing civil right activists, and brought the discussion of what else needs to be done to ensure safe, equal, and prosperous life for all. We also encouraged employees to participate in all trainings and discussions offered by the EOHHS Center for Staff Development. Switchboard, a technical assistance provider, offered helpful tips for service providers to start a conversation with refugees about race and racism. Some of our service providers invited refugee youth for a focus group discussion, where they shared information, provided guidance, and encouraged youth to voice their concerns and fears and ask questions.

Q What are some of the ways you would like to have a long-term impact on the services ORI provides?

A Refugee resettlement in our state is a successful public-private partnership. Together, we built programs and provided services that are efficient and effective and meet most of the needs of newcomers. At all levels of the service network, you see employees, interns, and volunteers who are skilled, experienced, reflective of the population served, and passionate in supporting



newcomers to integrate into their host societies. We have created opportunities for newcomers, through our Refugee Town Hall meetings, to share their input about our services and what else we can do to help them better. We have been looking for ways to streamline processes and reporting to ensure efficient operations for our programs. Long-term impact on our services will be through advancing these elements and practices, diversifying funding, creating additional support programs, widening access, and expanding partnerships.

Q What would be your recommendation to persons who are interested in working in your field?

A This is a very rewarding field to work in—you know for sure that you are making a difference in people’s life. You will enjoy working with a group of volunteers and professionals, inside and outside the state government, who are very dedicated in serving and advocating for refugees and immigrants. Most of the work we do at the agency offers very few interactions with refugee and immigrant clients. If personal interactions are something you enjoy and are important to you, then you’d better work for one of our service providers that offers tons of opportunities to work directly with clients. You will have the advantage of learning a lot and developing skills to help you grow professionally—but you will also have to be ready to take on additional responsibilities, be flexible, and understand that you are joining a field that offers opportunities beyond pay.

Q What has been your most memorable accomplishment during your tenure at ORI?

A I have more than a couple of accomplishments that I am proud of during my tenure at ORI, but for the most memorable, I would say taking on the project of inventorying and shredding our physical records. For the first time in ORI, I was able to pull our team together to go over our old dusty records stored in the basement; inventory them; put them in properly labeled boxes; and

submit a list of shredding-ready documents to the Records Conservation Board. It took more than a couple of years, some persuasion, shifting strategies, and the involvement of interns, but finally the project was done. We were able to shred 117 boxes out of the 151, and we ended up having a records-management process in place. The next step is to examine our electronic records management and retention. I already have a plan in place for a new shared drive, and rolled out a new naming convention that ensures better version control; secures records that contain Personally Identifiable Information; and increases the findability of records for audits and public record requests.

Q Who have been your role models in your personal or professional development?

A My first role model was my father. He was an amazing, caring, and responsible man who earned the love and respect of everyone who knew him. My second role model was [Professor İhsan Doğramacı](#). He was such an extraordinary person, and I had the chance to meet him in Ankara, Turkey. He was so smart, knowledgeable, humble, and giving; he spoke six languages fluently; he was a great pediatrician and politician. He earned people’s love, and left behind an incredible legacy. I will never forget how he helped me and my two friends, who also are doctors, during our difficult refugee journey.

Q What is something unique that others would find surprising to learn about you?

A I like to repair things by myself. Last year I purchased a Masport Home Gardener (tiller, edger, etc.) with a dead engine that was more than 25 years old. I was able to rebuild it so that it ran smoothly. I used it to redo part of my front lawn, and then I was ready for my next new projects! ■



The Bay State Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.

by Mary Cresse

As the racial tumult of 2020 unfolded across the nation, it could not extinguish the messages of hope and healing that arose amid the rhetoric of hate. One of those messages was right here in Massachusetts—a planned construction of a memorial to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his wife, Coretta Scott King.

Due for completion in 2022, the memorial will occupy a site on the Boston Common. At its center is “The Embrace,” a 22-foot-sculpture inspired by a photo of the Kings reacting to the news that King had won the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize. Created by artist Hank Willis and the MASS Design Group, the piece focuses on a pair of



arms and hands entwined in an embrace. Visitors to the site will be able to walk under and around the sculpture.

The memorial is fueled by The King Boston Fund. The fund was established at the Boston Foundation with an inaugural gift of one million dollars from local entrepreneur Paul English.

King had strong ties to Boston. In 1951, he enrolled in Boston University's School of Theology. He took an apartment at 397 Massachusetts Avenue, which was not only close to the university, but also just down the street from The New England Conservatory of Music, where a young Coretta Scott was studying voice on a fellowship. In 1953, the couple married.

While at university, King Jr.—who'd been ordained in 1948—became an assistant minister at the Twelfth Baptist Church in Roxbury. In so doing, he joined the Twelfth's steely legacy of African American advocacy, furthered by such abolitionists as Lewis Hayden, a former slave who'd led others through the Underground Railroad; Rev. Leonard Grimes, who helped free a fugitive slave from prosecution under the Fugitive Slave Act; and Rev. Matthew A. N. Shaw, the president of the National Equal Rights League of Boston and organizer of the 1924 Negro Sanhedrin conference.

At the Twelfth Church, King served alongside Rev. William Hunter Hester. Hester was an old friend of King's father, who was also a

Baptist minister. In *The Voice of Conscience: The Church in the Mind of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, author and historian Lewis Baldwin identifies Hester as “a constant and enduring influence on King's thinking regarding the church during his Boston years.” He and other King mentors “helped assure that the black church would remain a significant frame of reference for King's understanding of what the church as a whole should be.”

Another influence was Howard Thurman, the dean of Marsh Chapel at BU during King's last year in residence. Baldwin noted that Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited*—a 1949 theological treatise addressing how the gospel may be read as a manual of resistance for the poor and disenfranchised—“was perhaps as important for King as any other intellectual source he studied at Boston.”

After his departure in the early Fifties, King kept close ties with his Boston community. In 1965, as tension ramped up over the de facto segregation in the Boston Public Schools, King led a march from Roxbury to the State House.

And as we wind into 2021, the King sculpture has earned new attention—and a new raft of donations. According to the *Boston Globe*, of the nearly \$12 million the project has raised, more than half has come in since June, including million-dollar gifts that arrived late last year from the Barr Foundation and the Wagner Foundation.

Remarking upon the memorial, King Boston's Executive Director, Imari Paris Jeffries, told the *Globe*, “When King came here in '65, they marched for poverty, racial equity, housing, and education,” Paris Jeffries said. “And today those are still the issues. Instead of poverty, we're talking about black wealth, brown wealth. We're still talking about housing, we're still talking about racial equity, and we're still talking about education.”

It wasn't long after King's assassination in 1968 that the Commonwealth sought to honor him. In March 1971, Massachusetts established the following, in Chapter 6 section 15S of the general laws, in act Chapter 69 of the Acts and resolves of 1971: “The governor shall annually issue a proclamation setting apart the fifteenth day of January as Martin Luther King, Jr. Day and recommending that said day be observed by the people in an appropriate manner.” The first record of an executive order appears on January 8, 1991, by Governor William Weld. The holiday for the memory and work of Martin Luther King Jr. became a federal holiday in 1983, and was first observed on January 20, 1986.



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SIDEBAR

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NOTE: The Negro Sanhedrin was a short-lived organization established in 1924 with the purpose, according to its founder, Kelly Miller (1863–1939), of fostering cooperation and coordination between black organizations and forming one unified voice for black America.

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Black History Month

by Mary Cresse



On February 18, 2016, in celebration of Black History Month, 106-year-old Virginia McLaurin danced at the White House. McLaurin, the daughter of sharecroppers, was there to receive the President’s Volunteer Service Award, in honor of her work with schoolchildren. She greeted her hosts ebulliently and as family, with hugs all around. Remarking that she had never expected to visit the White House, or to see an African American president, she shouted, “I am here to celebrate black history!”

In 2021, Black History Month opens upon a very different tableau. In a year marked by riots, an unyielding global pandemic, and scarring racial tension, a desperately wounded nation tries to heal, to understand, and to move forward—as much to recapture lost ground as to gain ground, in the struggle to further the civil rights of African Americans.

The origin of Black History Month, also known as African American History Month, began in 1925. Carter Woodson, a Harvard-trained historian and the

founder of the Association for the Study of Negro Life, announced the creation of Negro History Week. Its goal was to create awareness of the role of African American contributions to civilization. Its observance, set in the second week of February, was meant to coincide with the birth dates of Abraham Lincoln (February 12, 1809) and Frederick Douglas (1818). It also honors the founding of the NAACP on February 12, 1909.

By the late 1960s, and furthered by the momentum of the Civil Rights Movement, Negro History Week became Black History Month. President Gerald Ford declared Black History Month a national observance in 1976. From the start, there was the question as to why the history of a people should be honored in one month only. Actor Morgan Freeman told *60 Minutes* in 2005, “I don’t want a Black History Month. Black history is American history....You’re going to relegate my history to a month?”

As this year’s Black History Month unfolds, there are more messages of hope. The US has sworn in Joe Biden, a president who pledges a platform of unity.

The debate continues today, in apt reflection, perhaps, of the 2021 theme, “The Black Family: Representation, Identity and Diversity.” For example, the Center for Racial Justice in Education (CRJE) publishes a [Black History Month Resource Guide for Educators and Families](#), which offers an acknowledgement of the complexity of the debate. According to the CRJE, curriculum must be designed carefully, to avoid an “othering” of Black Lives and Black students, and to avoid the risk of manifesting anti-blackness. “Ensuring the ongoing integration of Black history and experiences throughout all curriculum is imperative as educators continue to uplift every student and reinforce that Black Lives Matter every day.”

Growing observance of Black History Month now incorporates social media. In 2018, the first-ever Black History Month [Instagram](#) program appeared. One can track such programs as a #BlackGirlMagic partnership with [Spotify](#). Its #CelebrateBlackCreatives program reached more than 19 million followers.

As this year’s Black History Month unfolds, there are more messages of hope. The US has sworn in Joe Biden, a president who pledges a platform of unity. In *Lift Every Voice: The Biden Plan for Black America*, the Biden administration pledges to repair entrenched disparities and to root out “systemic racism from our laws, our policies, our institutions, and our hearts.” Our vice president, Kamala Harris, who identifies as Black, attended Howard University, a traditionally Black college. She is the daughter of a Jamaican father and an Indian mother, both immigrants. As such, she will step into the White House having represented many “firsts” for a VP, among them the first woman, the first African American, and the first Indian American to hold the office.

The day Virginia McLaurin received her award, President Obama addressed the crowd, summing up his feelings about Black History Month. “It’s about the lived, shared experience of all African Americans, high and low, famous and obscure, and how those experiences have shaped and challenged and ultimately strengthened America. It’s about taking an unvarnished look at the past so we can create a better future. It’s a reminder of where we as a country have been so that we know where we need to go.”

Perhaps there is no better embodiment of this sentiment than Virginia McLaurin. Mrs. McLaurin was born in 1909, just after sweeping legislation in Southern states blocked black voter registration. And she wouldn’t see the end of segregation until 1964.

Ms. McLaurin is due to celebrate her 111th birthday on March 12. ■



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Women's History Month 2021

by James S. Vitale

Women's History Month takes place annually during the month of March. As a nation, we dedicate this time to reflect on the often overlooked and underappreciated contributions of women to United States history, culture, and society. This tradition has taken place in the U.S. every year since it was established by Congress.



Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton at work (credit: [americaslibrary.gov](https://www.americaslibrary.gov))

in 1987. In the years between 1988 and 1994, Congress passed additional resolutions requesting and authorizing the sitting president to declare every March thereafter as “Women’s History Month.” The journey to this commemoration was not without struggles and adversity. Many strong, intelligent, and inspirational women fought for their and others’ suffrage rights. Their efforts, accomplishments, and selflessness are the reasons we celebrate them today.

In 2021, the focus for National Women’s History month is “Valiant Women of the Vote: Refusing to be Silenced.” The National Women’s History Alliance selects and publishes the yearly theme, which highlights and honors topics relating to women’s contributions and accomplishments. Last year’s focus was also on the same topic, but many of the women’s events were canceled due to COVID-19. Throughout March, there are celebrations of women’s historic achievement in securing the 19th Amendment.

In 1869, the first two national suffrage organizations were established. Led by Susan B. Anthony and Elisabeth Cady Stanton, the National Woman Suffrage Association was formed. Together, the two women made a dynamic team. Before their 1869 collaboration, the two had already worked together. From 1868 to 1870, they edited and published a New York City women’s newspaper, *The Revolution*. Published weekly, the newspaper’s principal focus was women’s rights, particularly on women’s right to vote. Covering an array of political topics to finance the newspaper served as an outlet for Stanton’s and Anthony’s voices to be heard. With *The Revolution*, the pair were able to extend their influence, preparing one of the first national suffrage organizations for the movement to come. Traveling across the nation and overseas, the two devoted themselves to promoting women’s rights.

The second of the first two national suffrage organizations was formed in Boston in 1869, Anthony and Stanton established the American Woman Suffrage Association, which campaigned for state governments to enact laws granting or expanding a woman’s right to vote in the U.S. Two key founders of the group were Lucy Stone and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. Stone was the first woman from Massachusetts to earn a college degree. She was a formidable abolitionist and public speaker on behalf of women’s rights. In 1870, she began publishing the Boston periodical *Woman’s Journal* in partnership with her husband. The newspaper primarily focused on the rights of women.

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was an equally formidable abolitionist, suffragist, and reformer. Harper had become a household name in the 19th century due to her popular poems,



Frances Ellen Watkins Harper
(credit: poetryfoundation.org)



Lucy Stone (credit: womenofthehall.org)

Michelle Obama (credit: [harpersbazaar.com](https://www.harpersbazaar.com))

novels, short stories, and lectures. Harper's novel, *Iola Laroy*, was among the first works published by an African American woman, and tackled race, class, and temperance. Harper ultimately separated herself from the AWSA to cofound the National Association of Colored Women's Club.

In 2021, we honor and celebrate the powerful women who faced a deadly virus and a war while campaigning to win suffrage for women, gaining adoption of the amendment by the key state of New York in 1917. The dedication, courage, and perseverance in pursuit of justice of our foremothers is what has continued to open the door for powerful women to continue to make their voices heard; institute change; and fight for justice. We can look to, and up to, women such as Maya Angelou, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Tarana Burke, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Michelle Obama, and countless others both famous and largely unknown—women who continue to advocate for women, fight for the voting rights of others, and inspire the next generation of leaders. ■



Maya Angelou (credit: [harpersbazaar.com](https://www.harpersbazaar.com))



Ruth Bader Ginsburg (credit: [harpersbazaar.com](https://www.harpersbazaar.com))

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Tarana Burke (credit: harpersbazaar.com)



Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (credit: harpersbazaar.com)

Arab American Heritage Month

by James S. Vitale

Arab American Heritage month occurs in the month of April throughout all fifty U.S. States. With more than 3.5 million Arab Americans in the U.S., we take this time as an opportunity to enrich our understanding on the differences and diverse aspects of Arab-American culture and customs. In mainstream media, the representation of Arab Americans tends to be finite. Unfortunately, Arab Americans are misrepresented in the media when Islam terrorism or hate crimes are the focal point of discussion. This bias against Arab Americans skews the viewpoint of many Americans to be one that is negative. U.S. military heroes, entertainers, politicians, and scientists hail from Arab cultures and backgrounds. These underappreciated heroes are the reason we celebrate Arab American Heritage Month.

Throughout the month of April, the history of Arab immigration to America; geographic understanding of the Arab World; Arab American diversity in faith and language; interesting customs and traditions; and achievements in business, politics, education, and more are recognized. The Arab World, formally the Arab Homeland, consists of 22 countries. These 22 Middle Eastern and African nations, members of the Arab League, are Algeria, Bahrain, the Comoros Islands, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.



Map of the Arab World (Credit: [Canadians.org](https://www.canadians.org/))

There are over 300 million Arabs in the world today. The cultures that make up these 22 nations consist of communities richly diverse in ethnic groups, linguistics, and religious beliefs. Often confused with individuals in the group known as Middle Eastern Americans, Arab Americans should not be referred to as such. The term Middle Eastern refers to a region of the world that is linked geographically but not necessarily through a common culture.

Arab immigration to the United States first began in the late 1800s into the early 1920s. Referred to as the First Wave, this period of mass migration saw more than 20 million immigrants entering the U.S. Of these 20-plus million immigrants, 95,000 of them originated from Greater Syria (present-day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and Israel). The vast majority of Arab nations at this time were colonized by the Ottoman Empire, which ruled the Arab World from 1500-1917. Many Arabs



sought refuge in the U.S. after experiencing political repression, economic instability, and war. Arabs immigrating to America then were Lebanese/Syrian Christians. New York City, Detroit, and Boston were where many settled, seeking employment opportunities in the automotive and textile industries.

The Second Wave of Arab immigration to the U.S. took place from the late 1940s into the 1960s. No longer under the oppression of the Ottoman Empire, the second wave included a much more diverse group of immigrants. More Christians immigrated into the U.S., as well as a larger number of Muslims. The First Wave consisted primarily of Arab men immigrating to the U.S. in order to reach financial stability. Once this had happened, they'd send for their families to arrive and settle into the established immigrant communities.

During the Second Wave, Arab immigrants were highly educated and saw no reason to return to their homeland. This occurrence is referred to as "brain drain." Brain drain often results in a serious diminution of workers in their native countries. What follows is damage to civil, social, and economic development in those countries.

From the 1970s to the 1990s, the Third Wave came to the United States. Due to the war between the U.S. and Iraq; civil war in Syria; and conflicts in Egypt, Lebanon, Israel, and Palestine, displacement of Arabs led to large-scale immigration to the U.S. Atrocities of war experienced by this generation of Arab-Americans contributed not only to the large numbers making up the Third Wave, but also to the heightened sense of Arab American identity within this wave, compared to of the First and Second Waves.

Beginning in the 2000s, the Fourth Wave of Arab immigrants entering the U.S. continues. A greater debate on immigration reform has taken place in recent times. Due to the misconceptions of Arab

American culture, much of the debate revolves around security concerns and whether an influx of Arab-world immigrants should be permitted. The fearful and often-generalized view of Arab American immigration is why in the month of April we take time to notice the beautiful and diverse culture of the Arab World.

In Arab American culture, faith plays a significant role in daily life. Specific faith traditions vary, as there is no one version of Arab culture. Arab Americans can encompass all religious faiths, but are represented primarily by three: the Abrahamic traditions of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Along with faith, Arab Americans deeply value their community and families. These pillars serve as a source of support as well as an anchor for identity. Community is an extension of faith and family in Arab culture.

| | | | | | | |
|------|-------|-------|------|------|------|------|
| خ | ح | ج | ث | ت | ب | أ |
| khah | hah | jeem | theh | teh | beh | alef |
| ص | ش | س | ز | ر | ذ | د |
| sad | sheen | seen | zain | reh | thal | dal |
| ق | ف | غ | ع | ظ | ط | ض |
| qaf | feh | ghain | ain | zah | tah | dad |
| ي | و | ه | ن | م | ل | ك |
| yeh | waw | heh | noon | meem | lam | kaf |

The Arabic alphabet (Credit: [researchgate.net](https://www.researchgate.net))

The language Arab Americans traditionally speak is Arabic. Comprising 28 letters, the Arabic alphabet is used by 422 million people globally, making it the world's fifth most-spoken language.

Most Arab Americans maintain a bilingual household. U.S. census data suggests that three- fourths of Arab Americans speak English "very well." Depending on the country of origin, an Arab American family may also speak additional languages, such a French.



Image of Ma'amoul, a pastry filled with dates and nuts. It is typically enjoyed during holidays like Easter and Ramadan. (Credit: nandyala.org)

In Arab American culture, hospitality is an important aspect of life. When visiting a home or business, it is typical to bring food and drink—typically, coffee or tea—to the host. The rejection of these gifts can be taken as a sign of disrespect. Among close friends in Arab culture, it is customary to

greet one another with a kiss on the cheek. Many Arab American holidays are based on religious events and national holidays. Events such as a Mahrajan (festival) take place to celebrate ancestral heritage, reunite with family, and remember Arab Americans' homelands. These special occasions are

commemorated with special food.

Arab American migration to the U.S. was often in pursuit of a better life for future generations. Many Arab American youths became doctors, lawyers, and engineers to fulfill their parents' hope that their children could attain healthy income, stability, and social status—the fabled American Dream.

Here are just a few notable Arab Americans who have greatly impacted American culture, history, and advancements.

Steve Jobs was the co-founder, chairman, and CEO of Apple Inc. One of the most recognizable brands in the world, Apple currently employs over 100,000 Americans.

Danny Thomas was a famous comedian who later went on to found St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

Donna Shalala was a U.S. representative and the U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services.

Image of Steve Jobs (Credit: Wikipedia)



Image of Danny Thomas (Credit: stjude.org)



Shalala also served as the president of the University of Miami for eight years.

A popular Lebanese Mexican actress, Salma Hayek was nominated for the prestigious Academy Award for Best Actress for her role in the 2002 film *Frida*. She also co-produced the film. ■

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Image of Donna Shalala pictured with 43rd U.S. President George W. Bush (Credit: Wikipedia)

Image of Salma Hayek at the 2003 Academy Awards (Credit: people.com)



What's Your Vision?

by David D'Arcangelo, Commissioner,
Massachusetts Commission for the Blind

Originally featured in October 2020 on the [U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services blog](#).

As part of National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM) in October, the [Massachusetts Commission for the Blind \(MCB\)](#) launched a new campaign emphasizing the importance of ensuring that all Massachusetts residents, including those who are blind or visually impaired, have the opportunity to put their skills and talents to work—for the benefit of both themselves and the Commonwealth's employers and economy.

The centerpiece of the campaign—a public service announcement (PSA) titled “*What's Your Vision?*”—features three individuals served by MCB and other agency stakeholders sharing their vision for the future as it relates to employment.

These include:

- Richard Phipps, a financial and real estate advisor;
- Yewellyn Sanchez, an aspiring journalist;
- Charlie Richards, a student, as well as Charlie's mother, Laura Richards;
- Colleen Moran, Director of Workforce Programs at Spaulding Rehabilitation Network;



- Laurie Cremen, an educator with Brockton Public Schools; and
- Dr. Nicole Ross, an optometrist with the New England College of Optometry.

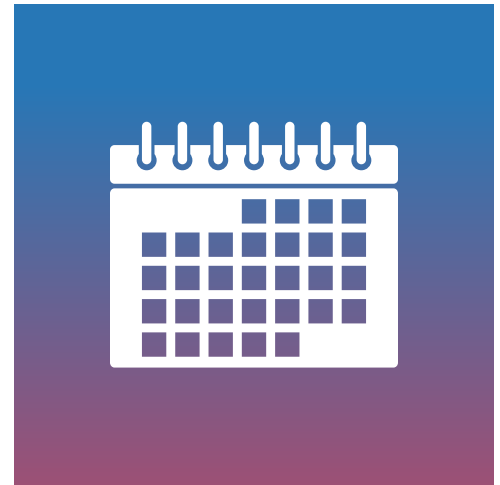
To complement the PSA, MCB also developed a series of print materials and partnered with the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) to highlight the campaign via digital billboards and other outdoor advertising channels throughout October.

Massachusetts has a long and rich history of advancing employment for people with disabilities, and MCB, founded in 1906, is one of the oldest state blindness agencies in the U.S. It provides both vocational and social rehabilitation services, along with additional supporting programs to promote independence and full community participation.

2020 marked the nation's 75th National Disability Employment Month (NDEAM) observance. Its origins trace to 1945, when Congress declared the first week in October each year “National Employ the Physically Handicapped Week.” NDEAM 2020 also included the yearlong commemoration of the 30th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act and the 100th anniversary of the nation's public vocational rehabilitation program. ■

DIVERSITY CALENDAR

The 2021 Dimensions/EOHHS Calendar, which covers February through June for this issue, highlights observances celebrated by various cultures, ethnicities, and segments of society.



If you would like to learn more about one of the observances listed below, please visit the Anti-Defamation League website at <https://www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/calendar-of-observances> or the Diversity Best Practices website at <https://www.diversitybestpractices.com/2021-diversity-holidays>.

EOHHS is committed to fostering an inclusive workforce. We encourage you to learn more about the observances listed below, share your knowledge, and celebrate holidays that may be new to you.

▶ FEBRUARY 2021

February is *Black History Month | Youth Leadership Month | National Cancer Prevention Month | National Teen Dating Violence Awareness and Prevention Month*

If we accept and acquiesce in the face of discrimination, we accept the responsibility ourselves and allow those responsible to salve their conscience by believing that they have our acceptance and concurrence. We should, therefore, protest openly everything...that smacks of discrimination or slander. — Mary McLeod Bethune, educator

In the United States and Canada, February is **BLACK HISTORY MONTH**, also known as African American History Month. The event grew out of “Negro History Week,” the brainchild of noted historian Carter G. Woodson and other prominent African Americans. Since 1976, the month has been designated to remember the contributions of people of the African diaspora. The theme for Black History Month in 2021 is *The Black Family: Representation, Identity, and Diversity*.

February is **YOUTH LEADERSHIP MONTH**. This month is dedicated to celebrating young people who take on leadership roles in their lives. In addition, it is also for anyone who hasn’t been involved in a leadership role to start now.

February is **NATIONAL CANCER PREVENTION MONTH**. February 2 is National Cancer Prevention Day, and February 4 is World Cancer Day

February is also **NATIONAL TEEN DATING VIOLENCE AWARENESS AND PREVENTION MONTH (TDVAM)**. This is an issue that impacts everyone—not just teens, but also their parents, teachers, friends, and communities as well. Together, we can raise the nation’s awareness about teen dating violence and promote safe, healthy relationships.

- 1 NATIONAL FREEDOM DAY:** Commemorates the signing of the 13th Amendment, which abolished slavery in 1865.



- 3 FOUR CHAPLAINS DAY:** Day of remembrance which is celebrated across the country to honor four military chaplains who sacrificed their own lives to save the lives of their fellow service members during WWII.
- 4 WORLD CANCER DAY:** A global observance that helps raise people’s awareness of cancer and how to prevent, detect, or treat it. This event is held on February 4 each year.
- 12 CHINESE NEW YEAR/ LUNAR NEW YEAR 2021:** Year of the Ox.
Also known as the Spring Festival, an important festival celebrated at the turn of the traditional lunisolar Chinese calendar. The Lunar New Year is also celebrated at this time in Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and Mongolia.
- 14 VALENTINE’S DAY:** International: Celebrates the day of romantic love.
RACE RELATIONS DAY: The National Council of Churches in recognition of the importance of interracial relations and learning.
- 15 PRESIDENTS’ DAY:** Federally recognized celebration of George Washington birthday; it honors all past presidents of the United States of America.
- 20 WORLD DAY OF SOCIAL JUSTICE:** Day to recognize efforts to achieve fair outcomes for all through employment, social protection, social dialogue, and fundamental principles and rights at work.

▶ MARCH 2021

March is *Women’s History Month | Irish American History Month | Greek American Heritage Month*

“Preservation of one’s own culture does not require contempt or disrespect for other cultures.”
— Cesar Chavez

March is **NATIONAL WOMEN’S HISTORY MONTH**. *National Women’s History Month recognizes all women for their valuable contributions to history and society. The theme for National Women’s History Month (“Valiant Women of the Vote: Refusing to Be Silenced”) is extended to 2021, as most 2020 women’s suffrage centennial celebrations did not take place because of the pandemic.*

During **IRISH AMERICAN HERITAGE MONTH**, *we celebrate the countless achievements of Irish Americans and recognize the remarkable contributions they have made to our nation’s character, culture, and prosperity. From America’s earliest days, some of the qualities that can be found among Irish Americans that they are confident, faithful, and never give up. Irish Americans embody the indomitable spirit that drives us as a people and during this month, we recognize their efforts to help build a stronger, prouder America, and we acknowledge the steadfast relationship American has with the Emerald Isle, Ireland.*

Did you know March is **GREEK AMERICAN HERITAGE MONTH**? *According to the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau estimation, there are approximately 1,315,775 people of Greek ancestry in the United States. New York has the largest number of Greek Americans. The Greek American community maintains particularly close ties with its homeland, with some immigrants trying to replicate the closeness of their own villages in the U.S. For*



generations of Greek Americans, preserving their culture, religion, and language has been a cherished goal.¹

March is **NATIONAL DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES AWARENESS MONTH**, which was established to increase awareness and understanding of issues affecting people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

March is also **NATIONAL MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS EDUCATION AND AWARENESS MONTH**. It was established to raise public awareness of the autoimmune disease that affects the brain and spinal cord, and assist those with multiple sclerosis in making informed decisions about their health care.

- 1 ZERO DISCRIMINATION DAY:** Discrimination is often based on misinformation or fear of the unknown. By reflecting on people in everyday situations, on Zero Discrimination Day UNAIDS is challenging people to recognize where everyday discrimination takes place and to take action to stop it.
- 8 INTERNATIONAL WOMEN’S DAY:** First observed in 1911 in Germany, it is a celebration of the economic, political, and social achievements of women worldwide.
- 17 ST. PATRICK’S DAY:** Feast day of the patron saint of Ireland. In the U.S., a secular version is celebrated by people of all faiths through appreciation of all things Irish.
- 20 VERNAL EQUINOX:** The date when night and day are nearly the same length. It marks the first day of spring.
- 21 INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR THE ELIMINATION OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION/RACE RELATIONS DAY:** Observed annually in the wake of the 1960 killing of 69 people at a demonstration against apartheid laws in South Africa. The United Nations proclaimed the day in 1966 and called on the international community to redouble its efforts to eliminate all forms of racial discrimination.
- WORLD DOWN SYNDROME DAY:** A global awareness day that has been officially observed by the United Nations since 2012. The date was selected to signify the uniqueness of the triplication (trisomy) of the 21st chromosome, which causes Down syndrome.
- 25 INTERNATIONAL DAY OF REMEMBRANCE OF THE VICTIMS OF SLAVERY AND THE TRANSATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE:** A United Nations international observation that offers the opportunity to honor and remember those who suffered and died at the hands of the brutal slavery system. First observed in 2008, the international day also aims to raise awareness about the dangers of racism and prejudice today.
- 31 CESAR CHAVEZ DAY:** Honors Mexican American farm worker, labor leader and activist Cesar Chavez (1927–1993), who was a nationally respected voice for social justice.
- INTERNATIONAL TRANSGENDER DAY OF VISIBILITY:** Celebrated to bring awareness to transgender people and their identities as well as recognize those who helped fight for rights for transgender people.

¹ “March 2018 Greek-American Heritage Month, Hudson Valley” - <https://www.aromathymbistro.com/greek-american-heritage-month.html>

▶ APRIL 2021

April is Celebrate Diversity Month | Autism Awareness Month | Genocide Awareness Month | Arab American Heritage Month

“Genocide is the responsibility of the entire world.” – Ann Clwyd

April is **CELEBRATE DIVERSITY MONTH**, started in 2004 to recognize and honor the diversity surrounding us all. Organizers hope that celebrating this month will give people will get a deeper understanding of each other while celebrating differences and similarities during this month,

April is **AUTISM AWARENESS MONTH**, established to raise awareness about the developmental disorder that affects children’s normal development of social and communication skills.

April is **GENOCIDE AWARENESS MONTH** is a month that marks important anniversaries for past and contemporary genocides. Throughout the month, individuals, communities and organizations join together to commemorate and honor victims and survivors of mass atrocities.

April 1, 2019 – During the month of April, **NATIONAL ARAB AMERICAN HERITAGE MONTH** (NAAHM) celebrates the Arab American heritage and culture and pays tribute to the contributions of [Arab Americans](#).²

2 WORLD AUTISM AWARENESS DAY: Created to raise awareness of the developmental disorder around the globe.

8–9 YOM HASHOAH: “Holocaust Remembrance Day” observed as Israel’s day of commemoration for the approximately six million Jews who perished in the [Holocaust](#) as a result of the actions carried out by [Nazi Germany](#) and its collaborators, and for the [Jewish resistance](#) in that period.

9 DAY OF SILENCE is a day on which students take a daylong vow of silence to protest the actual silencing of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students and their straight allies due to bias and harassment.

22 EARTH DAY: Promotes peace and sustainability of the earth. Worldwide events are held to show support of environmental protection of the earth.

23 NATIVE AMERICAN GATHERING OF NATIONS: Over 500 tribes gather for three days to honor their culture.

24 ARMENIAN MARTYRS’ DAY: Armenian Martyrs’ Day recognizes the genocide of some 1.5 million Armenians between 1915 and 1923 in Turkey.

² Arab American Heritage Month - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arab_American_Heritage_Month



▶ MAY 2021

May is Asian American and Pacific Islander Month | Older Americans Month | Jewish American Heritage Month

“Diversity is the mix. Inclusion is making the mix work” – Andrés Tapia

May is **ASIAN AMERICAN and PACIFIC ISLANDER MONTH** in the United States. The month of May was chosen to commemorate the immigration of the first Japanese to the United States on May 7, 1843, and to mark the anniversary of the completion of the transcontinental railroad on May 10, 1869. The majority of the workers who laid the tracks on the project were Chinese immigrants.

May is also **OLDER AMERICANS MONTH**, established in 1963 to honor the legacies and contributions of older Americans and to support them as they enter their next stage of life.

In addition, May is **JEWISH AMERICAN MONTH**, which recognizes the diverse contributions of the Jewish people to American culture.

- 1 INTERNATIONAL WORKERS’ DAY:** Also known as May Day, it celebrates the social and economic achievements of workers worldwide. The day commemorates the Haymarket Riot of 1886 in Chicago, in which police and protesters clashed following a workers’ strike for an eight-hour work day.
- 3 WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY:** Serves as an occasion to inform the public of violations of the right to freedom of expression and as a reminder that many journalists brave death or jail to bring people daily news.
- 5 CINCO DE MAYO:** In 1862, Mexican forces defeated French occupational forces in the Battle of Puebla. Cinco de Mayo commemorates the Mexican army’s victory over France. It celebrates the Mexican culture and heritage with parades and mariachi music performances.
- 12 MOTHER’S DAY:** Children of all ages show appreciation for their mothers.
- 17 INTERNATIONAL DAY AGAINST HOMOPHOBIA, TRANSPHOBIA, AND BIPHOBIA:** A global celebration of sexual and gender diversities.
- 21 WORLD DAY FOR CULTURAL DIVERSITY FOR DIALOGUE AND DEVELOPMENT:** Recognizes cultural diversity as a source of innovation, exchange, and creativity, as well as the obligation to create a more peaceful and equitable society based on mutual respect.
- 31 MEMORIAL DAY:** A federal holiday in the United States for remembering the people who died while serving in the country’s armed forces.



▶ JUNE 2021

June is *LGBT Pride Month | Caribbean American Heritage Month*

“Race, gender, religion, sexuality, we are all people and that’s it. We’re all people. We’re all equal.” – Connor Franta

June is **LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDER (LGBT) PRIDE MONTH**. It was established to recognize the impact that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals have had on the world. The last Sunday in June is Gay Pride Day. It commemorates the anniversary of the June 28, 1969, Stonewall riot in New York City, the incident that initiated the modern gay rights movement in the United States. LGBT Pride Day is the last Sunday in June.

In June 2005, the House of Representatives unanimously adopted H. Con. Res. 71, sponsored by Congresswoman Barbara Lee, recognizing the significance of Caribbean people and their descendants in the history and culture of the United States. On February 14, 2006, the resolution similarly passed the Senate, culminating a two-year, bipartisan and bicameral effort. The Proclamation was issued by President George Bush on June 6, 2006. Since the declaration, the White House has issued an annual proclamation recognizing June as **CARIBBEAN AMERICAN HERITAGE MONTH**.

5 WORLD ENVIRONMENT DAY: The United Nations’ most important day for encouraging worldwide awareness and action for the protection of our environment.

12 ANNE FRANK DAY: The birthday of young Jewish girl whose diary describes her family’s experiences hiding from the Nazis through the assistance of gentile friends.

LOVING DAY: Observes the anniversary of the 1967 United States Supreme Court decision, *Loving v. Virginia*, which struck down the miscegenation laws remaining in 16 states that barred interracial marriage.

13 RACE UNITY DAY: Also known as Race Amity Day, is observed the second Sunday in June. The day was started by the Bahá’í National Spiritual Assembly in the United States in 1957, but it was known as Race Amity Day until 1965. The goal is to raise awareness to the importance of racial harmony and understanding.³

14 FLAG DAY • United States: Anniversary of the adoption of the United States flag by Congress in 1777. This day is observed to celebrate the history and symbolism of the American flag.

15 NATIVE AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP DAY: This observance commemorates June 2, 1924, when President Calvin Coolidge signed into law the Indian Citizenship Act, which marked the end of a long debate and struggle, at a federal level, over full birthright citizenship for American Indian.

3 Race Unity Day - <https://www.holidaysmart.com/holidays/daily/race-unity-day>



- 16 FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST • Eastern Christian:** Observed on the First Sunday after Pentecost in Orthodox churches, it commemorates all known and unknown Christian saints.
- FATHER’S DAY:** Children of all ages show appreciation for their fathers.
- 19 JUNETEENTH:** Originally commemorating the announcement of the abolition of slavery in Texas in 1865, it is now celebrated throughout the U.S. to honor African American freedom and achievement.
- 20 WORLD REFUGEE DAY:** Raises awareness about the plight of refugees and displaced persons.
- 21 SUMMER SOLSTICE:** In the northern hemisphere, the longest day of the year. It marks the first day of summer.
- 26 ANNIVERSARY OF LEGALIZATION OF SAME-SEX MARRIAGE IN THE U.S.:** On June 26, 2015, in the case of Obergefell v. Hodges, the Supreme Court ruled that the fundamental right to marry is guaranteed to same-sex couples. ■



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