

# ALPHA KAPPA ALPHA FOUNDATION

by Suzanne Hanney

As African-Americans are contracting and dying of coronavirus disproportionate to their numbers in the US, AKArara Foundation of Theta Omega Chapter of AKA hosted a recent virtual townhall to answer the question, "Why us?"

Founded in 1908 at Howard University, Alpha Kappa Alpha – (AKA), is the oldest Greek-letter organization established by African-American college-educated women. Its 300,000 college-trained members are committed to advocacy that results in equity. Veletta Bell is AKArara Foundation president; Kimberley I. Egonmwan is vice president. The virtual event was produced by the Foundation's health committee, chaired by Dr. Causandra McClain-Hall. WGN-TV anchor Micah Materre, who is an AKA member, hosted the panel, which included a medical doctor speaking on heart health and two PhDs: one discussing immunology and the other talking about nutrition, food disparity and civil unrest. Two of the panelists are AKA members.

**Iyabo Obasanjo, Ph.D.** opened the townhall with a discussion on immunology: how the body protects itself against infectious diseases caused by microorganisms such as bacteria or viruses. A healthy immune system will help a body fight off infection, but a defective one could fail to protect a body, or even attack it.

By the end of June, there had been 10 million COVID cases (2.5 million in the U.S.) and 500,000 deaths (128,000 in the U.S.) since the first case in November 2019 in China, Dr. Obasanjo said.

Although African Americans are just 12 percent of the population, they are 20 percent of the cases.

The reasons for the disparity, Dr. Obasanjo said, are:

- "where we live": in densely populated urban areas;
- "where we work": overrepresented in occupations where it is difficult to social distance, such as certified nurse assistants and licensed practical nurses, hairdressers, nail techs, tourism and transportation;
- access to health care": a higher percentage of African Americans lack health care than whites because of their jobs. People may be working three or four part-time gigs, none of them offering insurance.

Dr. Obasanjo showed a graphic of uninsured adults age 19-64. Only 8.5 percent of Whites were uninsured compared to 13.8 percent of Blacks and 25.1 percent of Hispanics, which could reflect an immigrant (undocumented) population, she said. The graphic showed a decline in the number of uninsured people since 2014 – the start of the Affordable Care Act or "Obamacare," which has been threatened by the Trump administration.

The virus enters the body through the mucosa of the mouth and nose, replicates there and slowly travels through the respiratory system. The virus destroys lung cells and the body's

immune reaction to the organism does more of the same.

Testing has gone very wrong from a public health perspective, she said. If it had been done in February, infected people and contact persons would have been isolated and "we would be dancing in the streets by the end of summer."

You can get COVID-19 by touching a contaminated surface or breathing in droplets exhaled by someone less than 6 feet away. "Wearing a mask is life-saving," said **Icilma V. Fergus-Rowe, MD**, who discussed clinical reasons for "why us."

The moist surfaces of the nose and mouth are receptive to the virus, and more rarely, so are the eyes. That's why brushing your hands against your trendy, long false eyelashes is a no-no. The doctor said she also wears a cap around her own long hair.

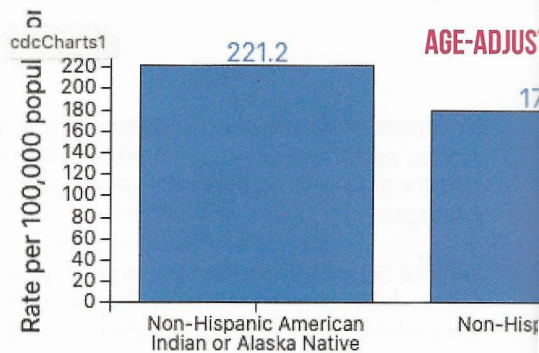
The virus can live for 24 hours on cardboard or hard surfaces, so washing your hands is essential. Soap up for 20 seconds, the time it takes to sing "Happy Birthday" twice.

Although coronavirus goes away, its effects may be lasting. Heart muscles can become inflamed, leading to heart attacks. Clots can break off in major arteries and cause pulmonary emboli, strokes and seizures. Kidneys can also become inflamed, leading to dialysis.

Dr. Fergus-Rowe agreed about Blacks working on the front lines and about them having less access to health care. But she also cited their mistrust based on history, such as the U.S. Public Health Service study of Black men with untreated syphilis from 1932-72 in Tuskegee (Macon County, AL). Penicillin became available in the 1940s, but was not given to them. Much was learned about the disease – at the men's expense. Dr. Fergus-Rowe had a patient who preferred to stay at home with the coronavirus, who came to the hospital too late and who died of multiple organ failure in her 50s.

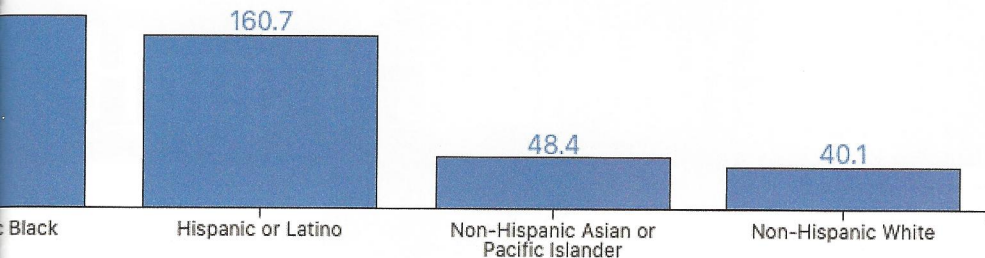
Eighty percent of corona patients will have only mild symptoms two to 14 days after contact, but some symptoms demand immediate hospitalization: shortness of breath, persistent pain in the chest, sudden confusion, inability to wake up or to stay awake, bluish lips or face.

Just the same, she said eating the right foods – fresh, green vegetables and fruit – are good measures, along with vitamins: B for blood pressure, C to build the immune system, Vitamin D, and zinc. "Get rest, exercise. If you do get the virus

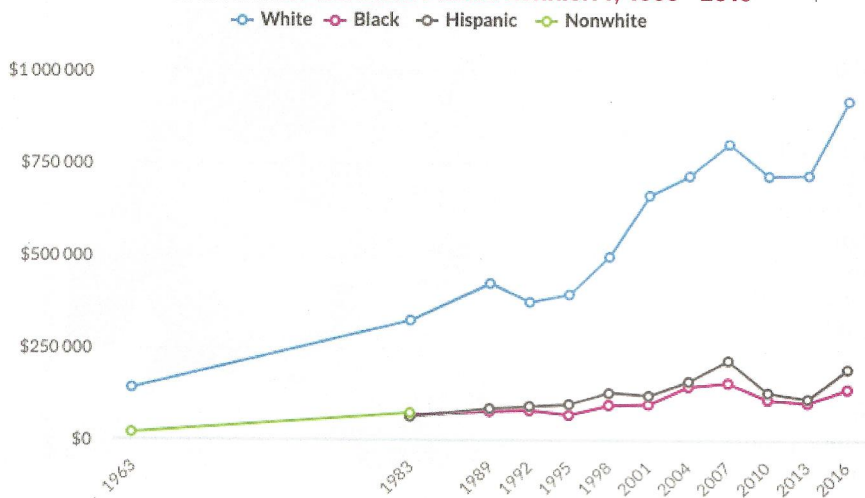


# ATION TOWNHALL: WHY US?

COVID-19-ASSOCIATED HOSPITALIZATION RATES BY RACE AND ETHNICITY, MARCH - JUNE 13



AVERAGE FAMILY WEALTH BY RACE/ETHNICITY, 1963 - 2016



Income is connected with where you live, which is connected to education, (because of property taxes) which in turn affects the health equity you are able to achieve.

when the body is strong, you will fight it off.”

The slavery of 400 years ago has had lasting structural determinants that undermine health equity, said **Angela Odoms-Young Ph.D.**, as she cited a study of Chicago ZIP codes that showed people in Lincoln Park and the Loop reaching the ages of 81 and 85, respectively, but those in Washington Park and East Garfield Park only 69 and 72.

Health equity is a matter of everyone in society having the opportunity to gain their full potential, she said. But there are layers of inequities that get in the way, such as lack of access to quality education, health care, and other resources like car seats for children and grocery stores with healthy food.

Microaggressions from outsiders – intentional racism or not – can cause physical stress in an individual. Internalized racism – beliefs about inferiority – can erode the sense of self and physically impact the immune system, which leaves it more prone to disease.

Government has the power to decide, to act, and to control resources. Obamacare provides health care for low-income people of color, and the previous administration also invested in neighborhoods, Dr. Odoms-Young said. First Lady Michelle Obama also stressed the importance of healthy school lunches.

A decade from now, there may be yet another virus on top of chronic disease already in the community. “If we don’t look at the structural factors, we will be in the same position we are in now.”

## OUR EXPERTS



**IYABO OBASANJO, PH.D.** is an epidemiologist who teaches public health at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. Dr. Obasanjo earned a Ph.D. in epidemiology with a minor in immunology from Cornell University. In 2012 and 2013, she was an advanced leadership fellow at Harvard University, where she focused on how women’s empowerment and leadership can improve health outcomes for countries.



**ICILMA V. FERGUS-ROWE, MD** is associate professor of medicine and director of cardiovascular disparities at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York City, and board-certified in internal medicine and cardiology. Dr. Fergus Rowe focuses on areas related to preventative cardiology, women’s heart disease, hypertension and cardiovascular health advocacy. Dr. Fergus is a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated.



**ANGELA ODOMS-YOUNG, PH.D.**, promotes healthy lifestyles in underserved communities and community-driven solutions that promote health and economic development. Dr. Odoms-Young is an associate professor in the Department of Kinesiology and Nutrition in the College of Applied Health Sciences at University of Illinois Health. She is also associate director for research and education in the U of I Health Office of Community Engagement and Neighborhood Health Partnerships. She is a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated.