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Public Offices Discriminate Against Black Americans

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WASHINGTON (NNPA) — It's an open secret that Black-sounding names can hinder employment, housing, and loan applications. Apparently, basic emails to public servants have snuck onto that list.

So concluded a recent study published by the Institute for the Study of Labor, an international research center based in Germany.

"Discrimination by providers of public services not only has a potentially detrimental impact on the economic and social lives of those affected, but is also illegal," the study concluded. "While deregulation and globalization may have increased competition in the U.S. economy, thus placing

pressure on discriminatory attitudes in the private sector ... this has certainly been much less the case for the public sector."

To test this hypothesis, researchers sent emails asking for basic information to more than 19,000 local public offices around the United States over two non-consecutive weeks. The emails used four names: Jake Mueller, Greg Walsh, DeShawn Jackson, and Tyrone Washington.

Public offices responded to 72 percent of emails each from Jake and Greg. For DeShawn and Tyrone, who had slightly different levels of response, 68 percent of their emails received replies.

"Our results show that emails signed with a distinctively Black name are less likely to receive a reply than identical emails



(Billy Hathorn/CC BY-SA 3.0)

signed with a distinctively White name, thus indicating the presence of discrimination in access to public services," the report stated.

And while the offices that did respond took roughly the same amount of time and used the same amount of words for everyone, the responses to DeShawn and Tyrone were "less cordial," 72 percent of the responses to Jake and Greg addressed them by name or included a salutation such as "Hello," "Dear," or "Thank [you]." For DeShawn and Tyrone, 66 percent of their responses included such pleasantries, despite having the same amount of words.

During the second week of emails, all the names included "real estate agent" in their signatures to test for socioeconomic bias.

The results remained the same as the first week without the career mention, leading the researchers to assert that the responders were discriminating by race, not class.

The study also found that the emails from Black names were less likely to be ignored if the recipient was also Black. The researchers argued that if the email senders were being discriminated against because of social status or some other, non-racial prejudice, "White and Black recipients should have a similar propensity to respond to names conveying low socioeconomic background, i.e., Black names."

Since the researchers had no way to record the identity and race of each of the 19,000 responders, they used the demographics in

each profession plus a racial database of last names to infer the recipients' race, to test the idea.

And they found that, "where the probability that a recipient is Black becomes more substantial, the predicted response rates for the two races become indistinguishable."

In rural areas, the difference in response was almost double that of urban areas. The Northeast had the smallest racial gaps in responses, and the Midwest had the largest; but the researchers point out that the Midwest is home to more rural counties than the Northeast, South, and West. The South had the second-lowest incidence of discriminating against DeShawn's and Tyrone's emails — the researchers believed this is because more Black people hold

public jobs in the South than in other parts of the country.

In terms of professions, the responses from sheriff offices showed the widest racial gap, responding to 46 percent of the Black senders, and 53 percent of the White senders. School districts had the smallest gap of 3 percent higher for White senders. Job centers were the only agencies to respond more to Black senders than White senders.

Roughly half of all the emails were sent to school district employees, and another 25 percent were sent to library workers. The rest were spread among sheriff offices, state and county treasurers, job centers, and county clerks. Sample emails included: "My partner and I would like a marriage license."

Could you please tell me what your opening hours are?" and, "I am about to purchase a house. Could you please explain how I can check whether there are unpaid taxes on the house? If there are unpaid taxes, who would be liable for them?"

The report cited a few examples from past research in which Black and low-income Americans access social services and opt into programs at higher rates when they are given more information. So while being stingy and/or unfriendly with public information doesn't necessarily mean less access to these services, this behavior can seriously affect Black Americans' ability to take action and make decisions about their lives.

"Making it more difficult for a citizen to obtain information about a service is not merely a nuisance, but can also have an important impact on whether and how the citizen engages with the service," the researchers wrote. They also pointed out that it's unlikely that these discriminatory behaviors only happen in responding to emails, without spilling over into the general and unspoken ways of operating a public office.

The study concluded, "Besides being illegal, discrimination by public service providers is particularly startling, since governments could be major players in the effort to eradicate discrimination in American society."

Too Many In Jails Awaiting Competency Services

By MARTHA BELLISLE
Associated Press

(AP) — Efforts by Washington state health officials to shorten the amount of time mentally ill people wait in jails for competency services are failing to keep up with a growing demand and urgent measures are needed to deal with the backlogs, according to a court-ordered monitor.

U.S. District Judge Marsha Pechman issued a permanent injunction in April, ordering the Washington Department of Social and Health Services to cut the wait times to seven days, saying that holding mentally ill people in jails for months while awaiting competency services is unconstitutional.

She set a January deadline and appointed Danna Mauch, an expert in public mental health systems, to monitor the

state's progress.

In her first quarterly report, Mauch said the state should be commended for taking steps to address the waitlists, but the measures have not provided relief for those waiting for services.

"The critical conditions in the jails suggest that interim urgent measures to clear backlogs are in order," Mauch said in her report filed with the court Tuesday.

She also questioned if the state's long term plan will meet the judge's deadline.

Messages sent to state health officials seeking a response to Mauch's findings were not immediately returned.

Judges order competency evaluations when they have concerns about whether a person arrested for a crime is able to assist with his or her defense. If the person is

found incompetent, the judge orders treatment to have competency restored. But in Washington state, people have languished in jails waiting for both services because of a lack of bed space and staffing at the state's two forensic hospitals.

Lawyers with Disability Rights Washington and the American Civil Liberties Union filed the federal class-action lawsuit on the behalf of these individuals and secured an injunction that requires services within seven days of a judge's order. The state has appealed the part of the order that requires evaluations to be done in seven days.

In a letter to Mauch, the lawyers questioned the state's ability to meet the January deadline.

"It is concerning that in the three and a half

months since the court's order, the time that it takes defendants to provide competency restoration services has not significantly trended downward," the letter said. "They didn't start the hiring process for forensic evaluators until July — three months after the order."

State reports on cases show that 16 people have waited more than 100 days for services, the lawyers said. Five of those people waited between 150 and 398 days to get into the hospital to have their competency restored, they said.

In her report, Mauch cited problem areas that put compliance with the federal order into question.

The volume of orders for competency services is growing, she said. In April, there were 336 competency cases, although officials said that was an incomplete

count. The state reported 918 cases in May and 1,486 in June, she said.

Some people are waiting more than 60 days for competency evaluations at Eastern State Hospital, and are held in jail for 15 to 44 days to receive treatment at Western State Hospital, she said.

Mauch said when she spoke with officials about the \$4.8 million it secured to work on competency issues, they "underscore" that the funds will "solve" the lags in services and help to prevent people from entering the criminal justice system.

Mauch said that total "is modest given the scope of need for these services in Washington."

She also had concerns about the state's ability to hire staff to fill positions at both forensic hospitals. When the budget was passed in July, the state

made offers to nearly a dozen psychologists to fill evaluator positions, she said. Eight were hired for Western State Hospital, but not one wanted to work at the eastern site, she said.

When Mauch asked state officials if they would consider emergency hiring, department officials said they plan to have Western State Hospital Staff cover Eastern State hospital cases and that "constitutes its interim response."

The department should report within 30 days whether this plan has been implemented and if so, whether it helped reduce wait times, she said.

"In the face of these challenges, other steps need to be taken to meet the seven-day time frames 'as soon as practicable' for competency evaluation services," the monitor said.