

THE Skanner

Challenging People to Shape a Better Future Now

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Opinion

OP-ED: A Silent Killer No More

Political provocateurs are determined to stir up controversy over Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's failure to tell President Biden about his treatment for prostate cancer. Yet, his desire to keep the matter private—and out of the public eye—is in line with what many men, particularly men of color, have done for decades. The reticence to share details of a medical condition is understandable, but prostate cancer is a silent killer in the Black community and the time has come to give it a voice.

In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whose son Dexter recently passed from prostate cancer, I ask: How long? How long will Men of color suffer in silence and die alone? How long will too many brothers hide their plight?

When he finally commented publicly about his condition, Austin offered regrets about keeping silent and then made an important pledge. He said that by not initially disclosing his diagnosis, he “missed an opportunity to send a message on an important public health issue,” while noting the prevalence of prostate cancer, particularly among Black men. Encouraging all men to get screened, Austin promised, “You can count on me to



Hamil R. Harris

Guest Columnist

set a better example on this issue today and for the rest of my life.”

Any cancer diagnosis is a private matter. But men like Dexter King and Austin can help so many others who

“Black men have a 70 percent higher rate of developing prostate cancer than White men

are prone to prostate cancer. Keeping the surgery and treatment a secret would only have continued to add to the stigma surrounding prostate cancer. That would have been a disservice to the thousands of men of color diagnosed annually.

Indeed, data from Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York City shows that more than 13 percent of African American men between the ages 45 and 79 will develop prostate cancer in their lifetimes. And Black men have a 70 percent higher rate of developing prostate cancer than White men. The American

Cancer Society also shockingly predicts that Black men are more than twice as likely to die from prostate cancer than their White counterparts.

These figures are appalling when considering that prostate cancer is one of the most treatable forms of the disease with the five-year survival rate for men diagnosed with it being greater than 99 percent if the cancer is detected during the early stage.

While there are numerous reasons for why this dispar-

ity between Black and white men exists – decades of structural racism, environmental issues, certain comorbidities, different molecular pathways in the body of Black men – a great deal of the reason comes down to the fact that Black men are disproportionately not being screened for prostate cancer as early or as regularly as White men.

A recent study published in JAMA Oncology by a team at the University of Michigan Rogel Cancer Center found that Black men get fewer PSA (prostate specific antigen) screenings; they are more likely to be diagnosed with

later stage cancer; they are less likely to have health insurance; and they have less access to high-quality care and other disparities that can be linked to a lower overall socioeconomic status.

Given his platform as Secretary of Defense, I am happy that Austin recognized his duty to be open and honest about his battle with this disease. And in doing so, he now joins groups and individuals who are already working on spreading awareness for prostate screenings who can act as guideposts.

For example, Mount Sinai Medical Center recently unveiled the Robert F. Smith Mobile Prostate Cancer Screening Unit, which will visit New York City neighborhoods where men could be at a higher risk of developing prostate cancer. The mobile home sized bus is named after the African American philanthropist and venture capitalist who donated almost \$4 million to launch the program.

Thankfully there are individuals like Smith and now Austin to use their platforms to spread awareness for this deadly – yet very treatable – form of cancer and ensure that more people don't die needlessly.

Highway Robbery in Alabama

Imagine the neighborhood your family has lived in for more than 150 years being turned into a deteriorating flood zone. Now imagine the flooding was caused by the state. That is what is happening to the people of Elba, Alabama's historic Black Shiloh community.

Thanks to the construction of an elevated highway through the community in 2018, residents are watching their homes be destroyed by flooding caused by the highway project.

“My house has already sunk two feet into the mud. I see my inheritance and my childrens' American Dream being washed away and stolen,” says Pastor Timothy Williams.

Pastor Williams is a reverend and the owner of a restaurant and cleaning business. Like many other Shiloh residents, his family has been on this land dating back to Reconstruction. Now he and others in the community see their generational wealth disappearing before their eyes from property devaluation as well as the physical destruction of their homes.

Just eight feet away from Pastor Williams' home, in the direction it is sinking, is a Southeast Gas Company natural gas pipeline. He has been told there is a possibility the sinking house could hit the gas line and blow the house up.



Ben Jealous

Executive Director of the Sierra Club

Pastor Williams' story offers but a glimpse into the nightmare Shiloh residents are facing.

Part of the highway project – one of the earliest phases – involved directing stormwater drainage pipes into the community. Now, picture the

“I see my inheritance and my childrens' American Dream being washed away

elevated highway essentially placing the neighborhood in a bowl. There did not used to be flooding. Now it is rampant. And the state will not even own up to its highway expansion being the cause.

In addition to causing floods, the highway also cut off access to the neighborhood's only fire hydrant. In 2020, there was a fire. Someone burned to death in their home. Residents believe their neighbor's death would have

been preventable with access to the hydrant.

This is not merely an example of poorly executed urban planning. It is reckless environmental racism. The same kind that has been responsible for creating so-called “sacrifice zones” across the country. Sacrifice zones are populated areas that bear a disproportionate brunt of health and environmental hazards due to their close proximity to sources of pollution and development. They are most often communities of color and low-income communities.

Residents of the Shiloh community are educated ... they are business owners ... many of them are veterans. They have advantages that people in some other neighborhoods sacrificed to development do not have. But simply by speaking up and advocating for themselves, Shiloh residents have become targets of racist hate. There have been incidents of racial harassment ever since the community started receiving news coverage of their plight. A chilling reminder of what white supremacy looks like in the deep South.

Pastor Williams has seen it firsthand. His restaurant's clientele is mostly white. One customer told him that he and others had been told to boycott the eatery because Wil-

liams had been vocal about the crisis facing the Shiloh community.

Elba, Alabama also happens to be the hometown of Dr. Robert Bullard. Dr. Bullard is known as the “Father of Environmental Justice.” He literally wrote the book – actually many books, including one titled “Highway Robbery” – on environmental racism. And his extensive scholarship has earned him a spot on the White House Environmental Justice Advisory Council.

Now, Elba has become a textbook example of the environmental harm of racist zoning and transportation policies Dr. Bullard has taught so many of us about. More than a mere twist of cosmic irony, it shows how pervasive the problem of environmental racism is – that the hometown of our nation's great warrior for Environmental Justice, who has helped countless people and communities, is still vulnerable to its impacts.

Ultimately, the Alabama Department of Transportation and Governor Kay Ivey are the ones who have the ability and responsibility to fix it and compensate the community's residents for all they have lost. So far all they have done is deny wrongdoing and dupe Shiloh residents into signing away their rights.

Read the rest of this commentary at TheSkanner.com