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## Why Business Owners of Color Are More Impacted By Covid-19

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Credit: Kim Nguyen Photography

Mari Watanabe, executive director of Partners In Diversity, speaks at 'Say Hey' event at the Multnomah Athletic Club in Portland

## The executive director of Partners in Diversity explains why the virus disproportionately impacts communities of color and how businesses can address the problem.

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A recent **study** by the Kaiser Foundation found that communities of color are disproportionately affected by the Covid-19 outbreak.

African Americans are infected at twice the rate as Whites, according to the **Oregon Health Authority**. The rate of infection is even higher in the Hispanic population: they make up 26.4% of cases overall, while accounting for 13.3% of the state's population.

Pacific Islanders also face high rates of infection, accounting for 13.1 cases per 10,000. The rate of infection for Whites is 3.4 cases per 10,000.

Mari Watanabe, executive director of **Partners in Diversity**, an affiliate of the Portland Business Alliance Charitable Institute, says that communities of color face lopsided economic challenges and less access to care, which make them more vulnerable to the disease.

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*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

## What specific challenges do communities of color face during a pandemic?

This recent study from Kaiser confirms much of what we have been hearing: Communities of color are hit harder during this crisis. The Covid-19 outbreak and resulting economic downturn have exacerbated the health divide that already exists.

Discrimination, access to resources and information, including information translated into appropriate languages, are some of the challenges faced by underserved communities. Underlying health conditions as well as social and economic factors pose additional risks for communities of color.



## What underlying health-risk factors translate into higher rates of infection for certain groups?

On a cultural level, many families of color live in multi-generational homes, which often means living in closer quarters with each other, posing a greater risk of exposure. A

generational households, of which 29% are Asian, 27% are Hispanic, 26% are Black, and 16% are White.

### **How does a pandemic affect businesses owned by people of color more negatively?**

It really comes down to lack of access to resources for businesses owned by people of color. These barriers may include everything from relationships with bank executives, access to bank loans, access to technical assistance and language barriers.

Asian and Pacific Islander businesses have been struggling since January due to Covid-related racism and xenophobia, as well as the irrational fear that Covid-19 can be contracted just by being in an Asian-owned business or that all Asians have the coronavirus.

Stories of micro-aggressions, macro-aggressions and hate crimes have increased in Oregon and across the country against Asians.



Watanabe speaks at 'Say Hey' event for Portland General Electric. Credit: Naim Hasan Photography

## **What steps has your organization taken to confront coronavirus-related challenges?**

In early March Partners in Diversity made the difficult decision to cancel or postpone much of our regularly scheduled programming and redefined how we connect with our community.

Our popular programs, such as Breakfast for Champions and Equity Conversations, are now online webinars. In some ways it has allowed us to reach more people. We are refocusing our discussions on topics that help our members navigate diversity, equity and inclusion during this crisis.





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**Your organization is focused on hiring practices. Without much hiring going on at the moment, what is your organization focused on?**

Keeping diversity, equity and inclusion work in the forefront for all employers is even more important now. People of color are often the last ones that have been hired, so in many cases they are the first ones to be laid off.

They also tend to get paid less, so often they do not have emergency funds to sustain themselves with housing, food or health care. Many have underlying health issues due to lack of healthcare access, which can put them in a position to be more susceptible to the coronavirus.

Our programming has pivoted to give our members a better understanding of these factors and provide employers with the tools needed to keep equity front and center in strategic planning, policies and actions.

We are hosting a number of online opportunities for employees to discuss equity-related issues and share their experiences in a safe and affirming environment.

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**How can government agencies and the business community address these underlying issues? Is there anyone who needs to be stepping up more?**

It is important for public health agencies to keep comprehensive data on the number of people affected by Covid-19 based on race, ethnicity and other socio-economic factors. The data and subsequent analysis will be key to understanding the extent to which disparities impacted communities of color.

Employers can flatten the equity curve by strengthening public-private partnerships that will help make sure no one is left behind. For some this is a chance to change long-held institutional bias and create a workplace environment that is inclusive.

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## Once the virus has run its course, what sort of opportunities will there be to address some of these underlying issues?

When it's time to rebuild, employers should redefine the status quo. By updating recruiting policies and practices now, employers will be ready when recovery begins. We suggest businesses be intentional when hiring staff and connect with the broad communities of color with job opportunities.

Employers will have an unprecedented opportunity to insert an equity lens into the rebuilding process. People of color have been hit the hardest during this pandemic and will need the most help in getting back on their feet.

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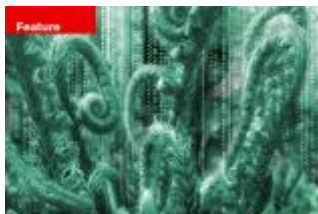
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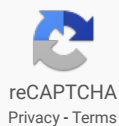
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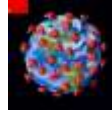
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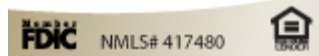


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