Texas Nurses Association believes that every human life matters. The first provision of the Code of Ethics for Nurses states that nurses must practice with “respect for the inherent dignity, worth, and unique attributes of every person.” However, people of color in the United States have long felt the effects of systemic racism, inequality, and societal biases on health and access to health care.

For many people of color, chronic stress due to inequality compounds health disparities, which are also amplified by implicit bias and a lack of cultural competency and cultural humility among providers. In addition, historical discrimination and segregation in residential, educational, and occupational spaces has created disparities in communities resulting in limited access to health care, healthy foods, or spaces for physical activity, all of which contribute to chronic health conditions.

Nurses have the power to reduce bias and disparities, not just in their work environments, but in their communities as well. Nurses must educate themselves on the structures and processes that create disparities. Nurses must become strong leaders and allies in the fight for health equity and social justice. The concept of social justice holds that every person deserves equal access, equal opportunity, and equal rights in a society. When black women are 3.4 times more likely to die in childbirth than white women, when indigenous people are 4.6 times more likely to die from liver disease, and when Hispanic men are more likely to contract and die from HIV and AIDS than white men, we do not yet live in a just system.

Currently in Texas, the pandemic has revealed stark differences in mortality and morbidity among people of color. While Hispanic Texans are only 40% of the population and account for a similar percent of COVID-19 cases, they make up 55% of the deaths; white Texans, 43% of the population, account for 31% of deaths.

Texas requires social justice reform to reduce health disparities, morbidity, and mortality among communities of color. The Code of Ethics for Nurses, provision 8, describes the nurse’s responsibility in protecting human rights and reducing disparities. Nurses must work to achieve health equity, call out discriminatory behavior by health care practitioners, and establish open dialogue with communities of color, colleagues of color, policy makers, administrators, and industry leaders. The values described here reflect those in the joint statement by the American Academy of Nursing and the American Nurses Association, which calls on nurses to uphold human dignity during the COVID-19 pandemic.