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AAMC Guidance on Peaceful Protests by Medical Students and Residents

The AAMC (Association of American Medical Colleges) has issued the following guidance supporting medical student and resident participation in demonstrations and other forms of peaceful public protest against police brutality and systemic racism.

The AAMC is committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion and has identified increasing the diversity of the physician workforce as a strategic goal. Accomplishing this outcome requires ensuring a diverse pipeline of medical school applicants and critically examining how we recruit, select, prepare, and educate the next generation of physicians.

Our country has witnessed civil, social, and political unrest following the recently publicized killings of unarmed Black men and women. In response, many current and aspiring physicians are peacefully and lawfully protesting against police brutality, structural racism, and other forms of systemic oppression, demonstrating the advocacy for humanity and commitment to equity and inclusion that are essential in our health care providers. Some aspiring physicians have expressed concern that being arrested for protesting will impair their prospects for medical school or residency selection.

To ensure the safety of other students and patients, many medical schools conduct criminal background checks on applicants. Some of these background checks include arrest history. While each medical school and residency program ultimately makes its own decisions about what they consider and value in their selection processes, the AAMC encourages selection committees in undergraduate and graduate medical education to conduct a holistic review of applicants and consider each individual in the context of their attributes and lived experiences and the institution's mission. The AAMC has developed [resources](#) to assist schools and programs in doing so. The AAMC encourages this same holistic outlook for schools that include criminal background checks as part of the admission process. We urge medical schools to evaluate a protest-related arrest or conviction as they would any criminal history — and consider carefully all relevant facts and circumstances.

Automatically screening out an applicant who has been arrested or convicted is problematic for several reasons. First, it presents a risk of unfairness to applicants of color. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) has advised caution in considering an applicant's history of criminal convictions or arrests to avoid policies or practices that may have a disproportionate impact on minorities. While the [EEOC's guidance](#) is targeted to employers, the principles underlying this guidance hold true for higher education as well: Black and Latino Americans have a much higher likelihood of being arrested and convicted than White Americans; thus, policies that exclude applicants with a history of arrests or convictions may be

more likely to result in the inequitable exclusion of Black and Latino applicants. Second, the U.S. justice system was intended to operate from the perspective of a presumption of innocence: an arrest is not a conviction. If the conduct underlying the arrest is an area of concern for an institution, a practice of approaching the candidate and asking for their perspective will give the school a more meaningful understanding of events. Notably, in some states, the consideration of arrest records may be prohibited by law.

Finally, and specifically with regard to public advocacy, an arrest or conviction associated with a peaceful protest must be reviewed with particular caution. This is a significant moment in our nation's history, and we encourage medical schools and residency programs to consider a student's constitutional right to peaceful and lawful protest, the principles and values for which the applicant or student was advocating, and whether the spirit of their advocacy exemplifies the principles and values the medical school or residency program hopes to cultivate in its students and trainees. The same considerations and flexibility should extend to current students whose arrests for protesting may activate your institution's relevant policies on academic progress and promotion.

The AAMC encourages admissions deans, student affairs deans, and program directors to seize this opportunity to engage in conversations with applicants, learners, and your broader communities about systemic racism, its impact on health, and the role and responsibility physicians and other health care providers have in effecting change. Ask questions to elicit how applicants to your program think about the relationship between racism and other forms of oppression and health and health care, as well as their involvement in recent protests, social change efforts, and volunteer or service projects. If your school or program has specific policies that cover student or applicant activism, including protesting while wearing a white coat or representing the institution, ensure that these policies are clearly communicated to current and prospective students.

To aspiring physicians who have engaged in or plan to engage in peaceful protests, the AAMC encourages you to follow [basic safety guidelines](#) and take precautions to prevent becoming infected with or spreading COVID-19. In addition, whether you are a prospective applicant to medical school or a current student, consult with the admissions deans and/or your student affairs dean to understand which institutional policies may apply to protest activities on or off campus. Take this opportunity as a student and aspiring health care professional to learn the implications — positive and negative — of engaging in different types of protest and advocacy, including activities in which you wear your white coat or could be perceived as representing your school. The white coat represents the virtues associated with medicine — humility, compassion, integrity, accountability, ethics, and humanism; if you have the privilege to wear it, you have the responsibility to uphold those virtues in your actions.

As our understanding of drivers of health has evolved from the individual to the community and population at large, so must our support of health professionals' advocacy evolve to include not just advocacy on behalf of individual patients but also advocacy at the community and population level. As articulated in the June 1, 2020, [AAMC Statement on Police Brutality and](#)

[Racism in America and Their Impact on Health](#): “Racism is antithetical to the oaths and moral responsibilities we accepted as health professionals.” The AAMC is committed to leading, joining, and engaging in ongoing honest and open dialogue and action with current and aspiring medical students, residents, faculty members, and leaders at other national medical education and health care organizations to address structural racism and other inequities in medical education, research, and patient care.