

Senator and Chairman Sanders, I come to you today as a fellow American born and raised in New York City. I grew up in the Bronx, NY, born to two loving parents who instilled in me a passion and need to serve my surrounding community at all costs. On my father's side of the family, I was the first Cook to graduate from college. While attending the Johns Hopkins University, I quickly began volunteering at a sliding-scale medical clinic in a low-income area of Baltimore, aimed solely at providing low-cost to free medical care for families who had limited access to it. However, I struggled to get my foot in the door of more established medical institutions, even with my academic pedigree, because I lacked the familial connections to medicine that so many of my white counterparts had in spades. Nevertheless, I moved forward. I served as a Community Resource Coordinator in East Baltimore, specifically addressing the social determinants of health we so readily take for granted: access to food, shelter, water, electricity, and employment – all necessary components of health; recognizing that true health is not the mere absence of disease, but a total state of physical, mental, and spiritual well-being.

After being told by my undergraduate advisor that my 3.42 GPA at one of the top-10 universities in the nation was not strong enough to support a medical school application, I listened and took a delayed route to my medical education, eventually matriculating to the Drexel University College of Medicine in Philadelphia, PA, where I won academic awards and published my medical research. I dove even deeper into medically-centered service work and mentorship of young, Black STEM students across the country. Ensuring that they would never have to face a lack of supportive guidance or feet in the doors of credible medical institutions.

We are here today for a great purpose. We ultimately want more Black Americans in white coats. So how do we do this? I believe the right approach is, "What barriers to entry do we have to dismantle?"

How is it right that I am tasked with providing our community high quality health care while struggling to provide for my own family? Why am I struggling financially as a resident physician, when I could make a greater hourly wage as a line cook (and I know, because I have)? And why am I hundreds of thousands of dollars in student loan debt, when my parents scratched and saved to fully cover my undergraduate tuition?

It is because our system is broken, and we, as resident physicians, are not fairly compensated for our time spent saving lives while sacrificing our own well-being. For far too long, we have fallen through the cracks of a healthcare system that blatantly, and openly, abuses our binding investments into this field, and it is high time that our plight is heard, appreciated, and acted upon. Today, I submit to you that the greatest barrier to entry for burgeoning Black physicians is the immense, and seemingly insurmountable, financial risk waiting to shackle all those who pass through the gate of medical education. These costs are equally present for all, but the burden they pose is not. It is inequitably distributed as one, of many, sequelae of generational and institutional wealth inequity.

When the Covid pandemic hit, we physicians of color were asked to run head-first into a largely unknown crisis, putting our lives, our livelihoods, and the health of our families in the path of imminent dangers. As always, we delivered upon our Hippocratic oath. I am here today to advocate for my fellow physicians of color, those with less than half the generational wealth of our white counterparts. We, the resident physicians of color, who have no financial safety nets should a career in medicine not pan out for any reason. We, the physicians of color, who have been historically underrepresented, underestimated, and underpaid. It is time, Chairman Sanders, for us to get our due so the aspiring physicians in our country may see that they will be fairly treated and protected should they choose a career in medicine.

It should not be such a financially perilous journey to want to save the lives of others. It should be a decision that is celebrated; not with words, but with actions and support: from the community level all the way up to our US government. We are not asking for a silver spoon. We are certainly not seeking handouts. We are simply demanding medical school loan cancellation, free medical tuition for the next generation, and the fair wages that we are due.

Samuel D. Cook, M.D.

Resident Physician

Morehouse School of Medicine

Atlanta, GA