

BY: M. of A. Dickens

HONORING the Black Angels for their dedicated service and contributions to the field of healthcare

WHEREAS, In 1929, during the pre-antibiotic era when tuberculosis killed one in seven people, many nurses at Seaview, New York's largest municipal hospital, began quitting en masse; desperate to avert a public health crisis, city officials summoned southern Black nurses, luring them with promises of good pay, a career, and an escape from the strictures of Jim Crow; and

WHEREAS, Upon their arrival to the remote borough of Staten Island, New York, these Black nurses found themselves on an isolated hilltop, yet again confronting racism and consigned to a woefully understaffed sanatorium, dubbed "the pest house," where it was said that "no one left alive"; and

WHEREAS, Even though they were faced with racial discrimination, deplorable working conditions, and the risk of contracting tuberculosis, these Black nurses forged ahead and treated afflicted patients during the Great Depression and World War II; and

WHEREAS, While there, the nurses endured five-hour commutes, fourteen-hour days, and verbal and physical abuse from some patients who were angry, depressed, and who often turned violent-some patients even tried to kill the nurses; and

WHEREAS, They tolerated sexism, redlining, workplace inequities and racism (what we call today systemic and institutional racism) from city officials and from their white supervisor who spied on them, refused to let them wear masks, and berated and humiliated them daily; and

WHEREAS, In addition to their work in the hospital, these nurses were activists and active members of the NAACP, neighborhood churches, and community groups; they became founding members of the Lincoln Hospital Alumni Association, the Urban League Guild, and the Women's Civic and Political Union; and

WHEREAS, These nurses, later deemed as Black Angels, were also fierce advocates for the integration of Black nurses into the military and the American Nurses Association, and in New York City they worked with the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses to desegregate the New York City hospital system; when they arrived, only four of the 26 municipal hospitals allowed Black nurses to work on the wards; and

WHEREAS, But mostly their labor and years of expertise in tuberculosis played a significant role in the first ever human trials of isoniazid, the first drug to cure tuberculosis, and since its discovery in 1952, tens of millions of lives have been saved; Dr. Robitzek, who oversaw the trials said, "had it not been for the Black nurses none of this would have been possible"; and

WHEREAS, These courageous undertakings have undoubtedly contributed to the success and progress of not just American society, but the entire world, and their work with tuberculosis and isoniazid has indeed enhanced the humanity among us all; and

WHEREAS, For their struggles and unrelenting determination to save the lives of dying tuberculosis patients, these Black nurses were lovingly named the "Black Angels"; and

RESOLVED, That this Legislative Body pause in its deliberations to honor the Black Angels for their dedicated service and contributions to the field of healthcare; and be it further

RESOLVED, That copies of this Resolution, suitably engrossed, be transmitted to the New York City Health and Hospitals Corporation for display at Seaview Hospital, Staten Island, New York, and to the surviving Black Angels and families of those Black Angels that have passed away.