



Testimony
Of
Linda Tigani, MSW
Chair & Executive Director
NYC Commission on Racial Equity (CORE)

Before the

New York City Council
Committee on Civil & Human Rights Committee

On

Thursday, June 27th, 2024

Oversight – Implementation of the Racial Justice Ballot Measures after One Year

Good morning, Chair, Dr. Nantasha Williams, and members of the Civil and Human Rights Committee. My name is Linda Tigani, and I have the honor of serving as the inaugural Chair and Executive Director of the NYC Commission on Racial Equity (CORE). I lead CORE in partnership with 13 Commissioners and look forward to welcoming one more Commissioner to be appointed by Mayor Adams.

Today's testimony represents a significant step toward further establishing the Commission within city government. CORE's focus is to ensure that members of the public who have inequitable power, who historically have been oppressed, and are denied service, are included in groups that the government feels accountable to. Accountability is critical to democracy and the building of public trust in government. CORE was created to offer a public channel to bring community and government together to transparently discuss how the legacy of slavery and the structural denial of civil and human rights show up in the practice of multiracial democracy. **We are one of a kind.** There is no comparable independent accountability body on a local, state, or federal level whose explicit mission is to channel community accountability to identify and uproot racism in the fabric of our city, and to reimagine a city and a set of social systems centering racial equity and social justice.

CORE is a partner to the public and our city agencies in the efforts to advance racial equity in New York City's public engagement, legislative, and budgeting processes. Although this testimony is presented in the final days of the Fiscal Year 2025 budgeting process, the budget process is not over. I hope that the discussion today will encourage members of City Council, ahead of any final decisions, to reflect on how our city's Fiscal Year 2025 budget addresses racism, the legacy of historically racist policies, and how our budget can move oppressed communities past mere survival and instead ensure that they receive all of the services they need to live healthy, happy, and safe lives; a place of thriving.

Since May, the CORE team has reached over 140 organizations, and their members have consistently expressed excitement for our work. Throughout my conversations with the public, I continue to hear "I remember this, I voted for it." Many expressed their excitement in seeing the measure they enthusiastically voted for come democratically to life.

At the same time, community organizations and advocacy groups have shared concerns about CORE's capacity to fulfill its mandate to increase accountability for racial equity in government operations. In February 2024, Robin Hood released a new poverty tracker report that shows poverty in NYC rose from 1.5 million to 2 million between 2021 and 2022. Latino New Yorkers were twice as likely to live in poverty compared to white New Yorkers (26% vs. 13%); poverty rates were similarly elevated among Asian and Black New Yorkers (24% and 23%, respectively). Black



New Yorkers had the lowest life expectancy among racial/ethnic groups at 76.1 years, while white New Yorkers had the highest at 81.8 years. None of this should be surprising.

Racial disparities in access to government services are the direct product of policy, procedures and decision-making processes. **Racism in our operations is not accidental but, rather, the result of deliberate decisions – whether they are dictated through the administrative code, agency handbook, funding formulas, or legislation.** New York City is operating agencies and programs that were created during or in response to Jim Crow, widespread upset over forced desegregation, and the current attack and rollback of civil and human rights protections.

In recognition of these inequities, NYC Charter outlines five pathways for CORE. First, our Commission must identify and propose community equity priorities and outcome indicators relevant to the wellbeing of community members for possible inclusion in the upcoming citywide and agency racial equity plans, in accordance with the equity planning schedule. Second, following the releases of the Administration’s preliminary citywide racial equity plan and of the citywide racial equity plan, the Commission shall make public a statement assessing the extent to which the plan is responsive to the community equity priorities, and make recommendations on strategy, indicators, and goals set forth in the plan. Third, CORE will track and publicly report on agency and citywide compliance with the racial equity planning process. Fourth, we will receive complaints about agency conduct that may have the effect of exacerbating racial equity disparities, and we will make recommendations to agencies to address such complaints where appropriate. Lastly, CORE is mandated to respond to requests of the speaker of the council and its committees regarding racial equity concerns.

Now, I would like to turn to the development of CORE and provide updates on our work.

In Fiscal Year 2024, the Commission started with a total budget of 1.3 million which is separated into personnel services at \$905,000 and operating costs \$395,000. Our FY24 budget accounted for seven staff including myself and a small amount of operational funds to conduct community outreach. We accepted a proposed cut under the Plan to Eliminate the Gap (PEG) in Fiscal Year 2024 for \$451,000 which was covered by underspending in personnel costs due to delay in hiring. The accepted cut is expected to cover the full five-year target providing there are no subsequent PEGS.

CORE launched on October 11, 2023, three months after the identified start date in the NYC Charter and has since accomplished an extraordinary amount in view of the scarcity of resources. As the only staff member from October 2023 to March 2024, I focused on fostering CORE’s relationship with the public and government agencies. At this point, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Mayor’s Office of Equity and Racial Justice (MOERJ) who worked to

ensure CORE was in the Fiscal Year 2024 budget, was afforded staff lines, had desk space, and provided support announcing the City's Commission, administrative support, and collaborating with appointing bodies to identify Commissioners.

Within my first three months I held over a dozen introductory sessions with organizations that partnered with the Racial Justice Commission. I launched the CORE website with the support of OTI and MOERJ. I reviewed more than 600 applications to fill six positions on the inaugural team.

Starting in mid-March 2024, I began onboarding the first Commission staff after six months of operating as a team of one. **CORE is closing out Fiscal Year 2024 fully staffed.**

On May 13th, CORE released 16 Draft Community Equity Priorities both to the public at large and to city agencies for their review, consideration, and feedback. Prior to public release, CORE held seven virtual sessions and received feedback from 21 community-based organizations participating in the Taskforce on Racial Equity and Inclusion Neighborhood Network Initiative and from organizations that conduct Participatory Budgeting to shape the draft priorities. Additionally, CORE Commissioners shaped the language and identified the inequities that we must address. The Draft Community Equity Priorities and a public response form can be found on our website at nyc.gov/core. I have included the priorities in today's testimony to be submitted to public record. We have presented at each of the Citywide Racial Equity planning in-person and virtual trainings.

We conducted training for 24 community organization staff to further these efforts within their respective networks and are continuing to receive requests from other partners. We presented to over 160 faith leaders coordinated by the Mayor's Office of Faith Based Partnerships, and at various Manhattan Community Board meetings. We're continuing to expand our reach to Community Education Councils, Community Boards, social justice networks, advocacy groups, faith-based organizations, and other community organizations to ensure we are meeting New Yorkers wherever they are and through service providers they trust.

Additionally, I have appreciated the partnership with Council thus far. While launching the Draft Community Equity Priorities, I began working with your team, Council Member Hudson, Council Member Nurse, and Council Member Louis to operationalize how the city can move forward the work of undoing racism through two critical pieces of legislation on reparations, reconciliation, truth, and healing: Intros 242 and 279. CORE remains a partner to all members and staff of City Council and looks forward to exploring how legislation can be strengthened to advance racial equity and social justice, regardless of whether CORE is named. **To build on this foundation and fulfill its promise to the electorate, it will be imperative for CORE to receive adequate funding.**



Now, I would like to turn to Fiscal Year 2025.

In fiscal year 2025, I will request additional money to close the CORE funding gap and complete the launch of our Charter mandates.

In Fall 2024, we expect the Administration's preliminary racial equity and citywide racial equity plan to be released. Following the release, CORE will have 30 days to review and provide public comments. CORE Commissioners are expected to finalize Community Equity Priorities. Concurrently, CORE staff will launch guidance for New Yorkers on how to file a complaint with CORE. We will expand to 12 team members, hiring five people in FY25 to provide support to each area of our work. To support the expanded integration and use of data, CORE will ask for a data system lead to manage the collection, tracking, maintenance, compliance and development of our use of data.

CORE will need to expand our team beyond the allocated five lines. To fulfill our mandate, we need to grow our Research and Policy team, along with our General Counsel and Legislative team, to support the second charter mandate, the assessment of the Administration preliminary racial equity and citywide racial equity plan; charter mandate three, which is the subsequent tracking of the final plan; and Charter mandate four, to address complaints about agency conduct that may have the effect of exacerbating racial equity disparities and make recommendations to agencies to address such complaints where appropriate. New staff will be requested to carry out charter mandates two, three, and four, and to partner with council to leverage the Racial Equity Impact Assessment Tool to sufficiently respond to requests from the speaker of the council and council committees on matters regarding racial equity; charter mandate five.

In Fiscal Year 2025, CORE will launch robust community organizing and engagement practices to ensure that community voices are at the table. We will need additional funds to increase payments to community groups for the time and resources they are contributing to COREs work. We will also need to pay Commissioners per diem for their time and reimbursements for their expenses related to work conducted for the Commission. Projected funding for Fiscal Year 2025 does not include a budget to pay Commissioners as mandated by law.

Our fiscal year 2025 budget will increase to \$1,329,093 and in Fiscal Year 2026, we are expected to be baselined at \$1,335,741. Increases in fiscal year 2025 and 2026 are a result of collective bargaining and managerial adjustments. It does not account for the development of CORE staff, workflows, or for Commissioner costs (per diem, and reimbursement.)

In closing, I want to urge the City Council to fulfill its mandate to apply a racial equity lens to NYC government operations and reflect on the following questions in the final negotiations over the city's budgetary items: How does this investment counteract racism and the history of racism, if at all? Will this policy or investment reduce, perpetuate, or exacerbate racial inequity in service delivery? Will it reverse the breakup of families and communities, or reduce the over marginalization and overcriminalization of New Yorkers of color? Is the policy or investment based on needs and goals expressed by impacted communities? And finally, does the investment reflect the foundational principles expressed in the Preamble of the Charter of the City of New York?

Draft Community Equity Priorities

Draft Community Equity Priorities
Our government justly values all talents and contributions
NYC communities call on their government to prioritize and measure the following:
1. Close the racial, gender, gender identity, age, and disability gaps in city government positions that create or decide over city policy with individuals who are committed to equity, and social justice.
2. Ensure and appropriately fund community members most harmed by racism, including youth, participate with government staff throughout the decision-making, planning, and implementation when creating new or reviewing existing rules, legislation, budgets, and programs
3. Close the racial, gender, gender identity, age, and disability gaps in salaries for city employees and staff at organizations working with NYC government
4. Ensure and appropriately fund government and organizations working with NYC government provide program services and share written information in the city’s top languages at an accessible level.
5. Evaluate and remove, where needed, racial, ethnic, and poverty-based bias in computer-based instructions that produce inequities including but not to limited to health care, housing, education, policing, criminal justice, employment, and social service
Our government ensures the condition of thriving for every person
NYC communities call on their government to prioritize and measure the following:
6. Ensure and appropriately fund prevention and provide legal and financial support for families facing eviction, lease theft, and deed theft.
7. Remove all government issued fees for services, where possible, and convert remaining fees and fines to an income based sliding scale.
8. Institute and appropriately fund trauma informed community safety practices and responses to mental health calls that lessens reliance on law enforcement.
9. Increase and appropriately fund school districts that are suffering from racial and class segregation to provide students, and families with social-emotional, health, educational, nutritional, and social services before, during, and out of school time hours year-round.
10. Increase and appropriately fund the number of organizations working with NYC government to provide health, mental health, and substance use programs that understand the lived experience of community members most harmed by racism.
11. Remove all tuition and associated fees for New York City residents attending all CUNY junior and senior colleges.
Our government embraces vigilance, remedy, and reconstruction
NYC communities call on their government to prioritize and measure the following:

12. Center equity and neighborhood level decision-making, planning, and implementation with community members in the city's emergency preparedness, response, and recovery system for communities harmed by racism and immigration status discrimination.
13. Increase and appropriately fund access and opportunity for communities harmed by racism to purchase government and non-government land.
14. Increase and appropriately fund accountability and disciplinary power of oversight bodies for law enforcement and all city workers who cause harm to people and abuse their authority
15. Close the racial, gender, gender identity, age, and disability gaps in access and opportunity to employment, and appropriately fund programs distributing money to start a business.
16. Reduce the number of people of all ages in jail, prison, or court monitoring for criminal offenses, and transform jails into rehabilitation centers.

Testimony of NYC Chief Equity Office and Commissioner of the Mayor's Office of Equity and Racial Justice Commissioner Sideya Sherman before the Committee on Civil and Human Rights

Update on Implementation of the Racial Justice Ballot Measures

June 27, 2024 – 10:00am

Chair Williams, members of the Committees on Civil and Human Rights, distinguished members of the City Council, and the public: good morning. I am Sideya Sherman, NYC's Chief Equity Officer and Commissioner of the New York City Mayor's Office of Equity & Racial Justice (MOERJ). I am pleased to be joined today by Dabash Negash, Deputy Commissioner, and other members of the MOERJ team.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide an update on our efforts to implement the historic racial justice ballot measures New Yorkers passed in late 2022. Our team has been hard at work uplifting these mandates with an eye toward transforming government toward racial equity and justice.

Acknowledgement

I want to begin by acknowledging that this hearing is taking place on the heels of Juneteenth.

We are all here today discussing the implementation of racial justice amendments to our city charter because of those who came before us. Many whose names we do not know — people who suffered and fought for freedom, demanded their humanity be recognized, organized, shared information, and formed many traditions that endure today.

Their legacy is a powerful reminder of our collective responsibility to speak up and fight for justice. That spirit lives on in so many who have laid the groundwork for today's discussion, including:

- The former staff of the Racial Justice Commission and the Commissioners who, with input from communities, examined structural racism in our city and put forward ballot measures aimed at dismantling these barriers and promoting racial equity; and
- My fellow New Yorkers, who overwhelmingly voted to center racial equity in city governance and empowered us to carry this work forward. As a lifelong New Yorker, I was proud to witness this important moment for our city.

In recognition of the history and people who have brought us to this day, I wish to read a passage from the new preamble of our city charter:

“We recognize that New York city sits on the traditional territories of the original inhabitants, the Lenape, and we endeavor to honor their stewardship of the land by protecting our environment and all living things.

“We acknowledge the grave injustices and atrocities that form part of our country’s history, including the forced labor of enslaved Africans, the colonialism that displaced Indigenous people from their lands, the devaluing and underpaying of immigrant workers, and the discrimination, racial segregation, mass incarceration, and other forms of violence and systemic inequity that continue to be experienced by marginalized groups, including, but not limited to, Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern, and other People of Color, women, religious minorities, immigrants, people who are LGBTQ+, and people with disabilities.”

“We, the people of New York City, united in our resolve to build a just and equitable city for all, recognize the efforts of those New Yorkers, past and present, who fought for racial equity and social justice, honor the contributions of those New Yorkers who have suffered in the name of freedom, and acknowledge all who fought, struggled, and dreamed for a better life and a better city. Together, we stand on their shoulders as we move boldly toward a brighter tomorrow for ourselves, our children, and future generations.”

Thank you for your attention, and with all that said, I am pleased to update the Council.

Foundational Values

As highlighted in my testimony before the council last September, the new preamble of the City Charter introduces a groundbreaking set of foundational values designed to *“...guide the operation of our city government and inform and shape how the city carries out its duties, obligations, and authorities...”* This preamble casts a vision for a multi-racial democracy where we affirm that diversity is our strength, acknowledge the harms of the past, and boldly commit to building an equitable future for all. The preamble urges our government to uphold three core values:

- Justly value all talents and contributions;
- Ensure the conditions for thriving for every person; and

- Embrace vigilance, remedy, and reconstruction.

In crafting these ballot proposals, the former Racial Justice Commission spent months engaging the public and examining the root causes of inequity. From our perspective, the three resulting proposals were decidedly focused on shifting the direction of government rather than addressing any single-issue area. With that charge, we have oriented our work around these foundational values and the broader vision of our city's preamble, presenting a monumental opportunity for us -- as public servants -- to rethink and reshape how we serve New Yorkers. As MOERJ leads implementation of these new charter amendments, we endeavor to translate these values into actionable measures, ultimately institutionalizing progress across agencies and establishing new norms within city government.

Building Equity Infrastructure in Government

The charter calls for the city to create an Office of Racial Equity and an independent Commission on Racial Equity. In October 2023, MOERJ, which is the city's Office of Racial Equity, was announced alongside the Commission on Racial Equity. Leading up to the launch of these two new entities, our office spearheaded months of planning work across the administration to identify and secure fiscal resources, outline preliminary staffing structures, begin to establish personnel and other administrative systems necessary to hire staff, and ensure a solid and sustainable operational footing, all while continuing equity work underway prior to the passing of the ballot measures. Amid a challenging fiscal environment, MOERJ and CORE were among the new needs met in the city's FY24 budget, with the administration affirming its commitment to building the dedicated infrastructure needed for long-term racial equity work within city government. As we continue to thoughtfully grow our team and stand-up processes and systems for our nascent agency, we are keeping MOERJ's long-term goals insight to ensure the city has strong equity infrastructure for generations to come.

While continuing to operationally stand up our new office and implement existing work, we also convened an Advisory Board of diverse leaders across the city and nation to provide high-level guidance on implementing the ballot measures and transforming government towards racial equity and justice. Drawing on their significant experience implementing and scaling strategies across government systems, the Advisory Board has been instrumental in helping our team build a strategic framework for advancing structural reform through the racial equity planning process and other areas of work overseen by our office. We extend our deepest gratitude to the Advisory Board members for their service and unwavering commitment to building an equitable New York City.

As we advance work that is long-term in nature, MOERJ has also remained focused on collaborating with partners to invest in and implement strategies to address the needs of New Yorkers in real-time, including but not limited to:

- Over \$6M investment in new and expanded services for LGBTQ+ New Yorkers that builds and expands on the work of the NYC Unity Project, within MOERJ
- Partnering with SBS to launch Merchant Organizing grants to support diverse communities – many hit hard by the pandemic – in building vibrant neighborhood business communities and commercial corridors.
- Working with our internal Taskforce on Racial Inclusion & Equity (TRIE) and community groups to identify existing and new strategies that can be targeted to help address long-standing disparities in the Bronx.
- Collaborating with city and public partners on the citywide expansion of the Save for College program, NYC's universal college savings program.

Planning for an Equitable Future

The charter requires the city to produce a citywide racial equity plan, inclusive of individual agency racial equity plans, on a biennial basis. Per the charter, the city's racial equity plan should encompass:

- Outcome measures
- Short and long-term goals
- Strategies to reduce racial disparities

The Commission on Racial Equity ensures community voice is bought into the process – proposing community equity priorities and outcome indicators for possible inclusion in the plan.

The MOERJ team has been working diligently to roll out the city's inaugural citywide racial equity plan. We have designed a planning process that is first and foremost focused on structural reform and moving government towards equity and justice in greater unison. To get at the heart of this, our planning process is focused on the core levers of government: budget, staffing, procurement, service delivery, and policymaking, to name a few. This is not a mere compliance exercise, but an opportunity for the city to pursue long-term transformation. Agencies are examining their priorities relative to the foundational values of the charter, assessing disparity data and community equity priorities, and developing short-, mid-term, and long-term goals and strategies that are responsive.

Over the past months, our team has worked on multiple fronts to ensure a successful racial equity planning process. We have briefed senior leaders, identified planning teams across agencies, developed planning tools, and led full-day training workshops. We are providing continuous support to agencies throughout the process through dedicated office hours and 1:1 technical assistance sessions.

This is the first time our city has taken on racial equity planning at this scale. Together, we're building a shared understanding of structural inequity, operating with a common set of values, and building the uniform tools and processes needed to upend the ways structural racism impacts our city.

Agencies have enthusiastically embraced this process. This fall, we look forward to sharing a preliminary plan with the public and a final plan thereafter. Once the plan is released, our work continues, with MOERJ quickly shifting towards implementation and working closely with agencies to advance critical goals, track progress, and make continuous improvements to eliminate racial disparities and promote fairness for all New Yorkers.

Simultaneous to the citywide racial equity planning process, we are also working to produce the city's first True Cost of Living Measure. As outlined in the charter, the New York City True Cost of Living measure will establish what it costs to live in our city with dignity, without consideration of public, private, or informal assistance. Recognizing the inadequacy of the federal poverty measure, the True Cost of Living measure will move beyond basic poverty calculations to capture what it costs to meet basic needs, weather emergencies, and have the economic stability needed to plan for one's future. This measure will analyze costs across various household sizes, age groups, and essential areas of need to create a comprehensive understanding of what it takes to thrive in our city. As one of the first cities to pursue a measure of this type, NYC's True Cost of Living measure can help inform state and national policy priorities and help us further advocate for the needs of working people in our city. We are committed to getting this right and taking the necessary steps to develop the measure carefully, including leveraging local and national research.

We look forward to providing an update later this year and sharing our full report in 2025.

Reflecting on Our Past

We recognize the painful history of slavery that endures throughout our city and country and the importance of highlighting the often-under-appreciated history of the resilience of New York City's Black communities. We are proud of the administration's important

work happening on this front. For instance, earlier this month, the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission and Mayor Adams announced, "More Than a Brook: Brooklyn Abolitionist Heritage Walk," an interactive audio tour exploring Brooklyn's history related to the National Abolitionist Movement and the Underground Railroad. In this spirit, the city looks forward to working with the council to advance Int 1150 (Marte, 13) - in relation to establishing a New York City freedom trail.

Furthermore, the city, led by the NYC Department of Transportation (DOT), commits to installing or working with a third party to install a new informational sign to mark the site of New York's first slave market near the intersection of Wall Street and Pearl Street. DOT looks forward to continued discussions with the Public Advocate and historians to identify an appropriate location and content for the sign in response to Intro 833 (Public Advocate Williams) - which requires the Department of Transportation to place a sign at Wall Street and Pearl Street marking the establishment of New York's first slave market in 1711.

Looking Ahead

At a time when diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives are under attack nationally, our city has an opportunity to demonstrate how government guided by racial equity and justice works best for all in our city and, therefore, across the nation.

Over the coming months, we will steadfastly advance these major government reform efforts while continuing to roll out new equity initiatives through our office. Recently, we were proud to announce the launch of NYC Her Future, a new companion office to the Young Men's Initiative, focused on developing programs and addressing disparities experienced by young women and girls. Furthermore, as we close out Pride month, we are thrilled to continue sharing investments through the NYC Unity Project, including the recently announced expansion of the Family Acceptance program, focused on LGBTQ+ Youth.

Thank you again for the opportunity to discuss our efforts to create a more just city. We welcome your questions.



JUMAANE D. WILLIAMS

**STATEMENT OF PUBLIC ADVOCATE JUMAANE D. WILLIAMS
TO THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON CIVIL AND HUMAN
RIGHTS
JUNE 27, 2024**

Good morning,

My name is Jumaane D. Williams and I am the Public Advocate for the City of New York. I would like to thank Chair Williams and the members of the Committee on Civil and Human Rights for holding this hearing and allowing me the opportunity to provide a statement.

New York City is exceptional. Anyone who has lived here for any stretch of time knows that it is not like other cities. Our buildings are not just buildings, they are the most striking skyscrapers in the country. Our stock exchange is not just a market, it is the center of global finance. Our business is not just local, but represents a bellwether of national and international economic phenomena. These achievements are something to be proud of. They are also the result of a history of the exploitation and enslavement of Black people dating back nearly four hundred years.

The bill I have introduced, [Int 0833-2024](#), would require a sign to be installed, to acknowledge and inform the public on the original location of New York City's first slave market, established in 1711. I first proposed the installation of a sign in 2014, in [Int 0036-2014](#). While this bill was never voted on, the de Blasio administration decided to place an informational sign in Mannhatta Park located several blocks away on Water and Wall Street. I re-introduced [Int 0934-2023](#) which would have required the sign to be placed in the correct location of Pearl and Wall Street. This bill received a hearing, but was not voted on before the end of the last legislative session. A sign, educating New Yorkers about the city's history of slavery, in the correct location, is long overdue.

In 1626, just two years after Dutch colonization, the first eleven enslaved Africans arrived in what is now New York City. By 1711, the English had taken control and established an official slave market in an attempt to regulate the flow of enslaved people from Africa and the West Indies. New York was a center of the slave economy in colonial America. It is easy to ignore the bloody history of enslavement in the North, but the fact is, by 1790, New York was the largest

hub of the slave economy north of the Mason-Dixon line. By 1790, 40% of households in Kings, Queens, and Richmond counties owned slaves.¹

Historical sites such as Fraunces Tavern, the first City Hall, and Wall Street's namesake wall were all built using slave labor. Within the city, enslaved people worked in homes and workshops, including as cooks, domestic servants, coopers, and porters. Outside the city, slave labor was used on family plots and larger agricultural farms. These workers would be sent into the city to buy or sell goods, and while waiting for the tides to turn, enslaved people found time to socialize, share news and information, and even hold dance competitions.²

Even when enslaved people were imprisoned, abused, and coerced to work far from our city, New York City's elite found ways to benefit. Southern slave owners who required financing for their large plantations found that financing in New York banks. Captains of slave ships needed insurance policies for the treacherous and inhumane trafficking of enslaved Africans. New York insurance companies underwrote those policies.³ It is estimated that 40% of all cotton revenue in the United States was captured by banks, insurance companies, and shipping firms in New York.⁴ Clearly, New York's first slave market shares more than just a physical proximity to Wall Street. New York City is the seat of global economic power, and that power is not possible without the seed of the immense profits of the slave trade.

New York outlawed slavery in 1827. Despite this, New York remained the center of the illegal slave trade.⁵ Furthermore, anti-Black violence was commonplace. During the 1863 anti-draft riots, in protest of the Union cause, a mob burned an orphanage for Black children to the ground. Eleven black men were lynched, and hundreds more left the city in fear for their safety.⁶ After the conclusion of the Civil War, backlash to reconstruction calcified into the Jim Crow laws, a system of racist and uneven laws and courts to enforce the status of Black Americans as second-class citizens. The legacies of these laws, along with redlining, discriminatory policing, and systemic racism present in virtually every institution have left Black and Brown people disadvantaged. The lessons we take from slavery do not just belong in our history textbooks, though now we need to fight to even keep them there. Indeed, slavery and the systems of domination descended from it are present all around us, and we must acknowledge it in our institutions, in our lawmaking, and even on our street corners.

Erecting a sign will not change our city's history and ignoring it won't change it either. Much more is needed to address the historic and continuing exploitation of workers, especially Black

¹ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41053779>, p. 2

² <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41053779>, pp. 16-17

³ <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2015/06/29/slave-market>

⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-49476247>

⁵ <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2015/06/29/slave-market>

⁶ <https://press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/317749.html>

and Brown workers, that New York City is built on. What this sign would do, is memorialize the forced sacrifice of the enslaved people who helped to build this city. Before we can do the work to uplift New Yorkers of all races and origins, we must acknowledge our city's perpetuation of and benefit from America's original sin.

I would like to thank the committee for giving me the opportunity to submit this statement, and I would also like to thank Councilmembers Louis, Brewer, Restler, Farías, Williams, and Cabán for supporting this bill. This aspect of our history is shameful, and that is why it must be documented. I look forward to continuing the work of building a city for the benefit of all who live here.

Thank you.



Testimony of FPWA

Presented to:

Committee on Civil & Human Rights

Hon. Chair Nantasha Williams

Council Chambers

June 27, 2024

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Good morning Chair Williams and Committee members.

I am Jennifer Jones Austin.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony about the implementation to date of the 2022 Racial Justice Charter revisions. As Chair of the New York City Racial Justice Commission, which was tasked with developing ballot measures to revise the New York City Charter to dismantle government-sanctioned, structural racism and embed racial justice and equity in all government functions, I am eager to share with the Committee on Civil and Human Rights and the City Council my knowledge and reflections on the implementation of the three historic and unprecedented measures that were passed by a vast majority of New York City citizens to ensure New York City is equitable and inclusive for all.

I am a daughter, literally and figuratively of the Civil Rights Movement, a former New York City and State Official who served for better than 10 years working to advance systems change for the benefit of marginalized persons and communities, a civically engaged New Yorker who has been privileged for more than 20 years to serve on and lead several city and state, and nonprofit institutions and initiatives centered on undoing government-sponsored and sanctioned harms that have afflicted people and communities of color, and the CEO and Executive Director of the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies (FPWA), an anti-poverty, policy, and advocacy organization that works with and on behalf of community based organizations to dismantle the structural and systemic barriers that impede economic security and well-being. It was in the spirit of this work that I assumed the role of Chair of the New York City Racial Justice Commission.

Shortly after I began serving, I had the privilege of receiving sage advice from the former counsel for South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission that was stood up following the dismantling of Apartheid. Paraphrasing counsel, I was cautioned to be mindful as we developed the racial justice measures that those who created the System created it to persist. This advice served as an ever-present reminder throughout the Commission's deliberations that the work of overcoming systemic racism and inequity must be enduring and relentless if the results of our efforts are to prevail.

This caution has since proven most salient and timely as we now are experiencing the erosion of key advancements in racial justice, equality and equity, some of which have been in place for decades. The Supreme Court has effectively ended affirmative action in higher education and gutted voter protections for African Americans, and a lower court has enjoined reparations for Black Americans harmed by institutional housing segregation. State governments too have moved back the goalpost of fair opportunity and equity with 27 states passing restrictive voting laws and several making the teaching of Black history, which we know is American history, illegal. These government actions joined with increasingly successful attacks on DEI demonstrate the incontrovertible evidence that those who created the System created it to persist.

Amid these rollbacks across the nation there remains hope. By changing the City Charter with our votes in November 2022, we, New Yorkers, changed the structure that has long upheld the systems that enable racism to persist. By voting for racial justice measures put forth by the New York City Racial Justice Commission to change the Charter to mandate the dismantling of structural racism in government functioning, New Yorkers called for a reset and made equity foundational law.

The RJC ballot proposals were themselves the people's mandate. Now law, they help ensure the City of New York fulfills its responsibility to perennially advance equity for all in all government functions. And we all must do our part as well. We all must be accountable.

I commend the City Council for demonstrating your commitment to ensuring the racial justice Charter revisions are implemented and sustained. The public hearings held to date have helped ensure the City's adherence to the new law, and kept New Yorkers apprised of the status of implementation. Additionally, the City Council's passage of 1101 & 1118, which make annual anti-racism and bias training a mandated employment requirement for City employees and human services workers in agencies that contract with the City, will help ensure that the hundreds of thousands of people who play a part in service delivery and policymaking have the informed ability to perform their roles without violating the Charter and perpetuating harm.

Pursuant to law, the New York City Racial Justice Commission ceased to exist after the November 2022 election. However, Mayor Adams established the NYC Racial Justice Advisory Board shortly thereafter to aid the Mayor's Office in the buildout of the passed measures. The Advisory Board is comprised of 15 members, five of whom were Racial Justice Commissioners and several of whom led systems change from within government.

As a member of the Advisory Board, I can attest that the Mayor's Office of Equity has worked diligently to implement the first two revisions requiring that the City be guided by its newly chartered preamble and develop racial equity plans for all government agencies and offices. The preamble has been used to create a concrete and

shared understanding of equity, and to inform how and where the levers of government must be reset to control and manage for racial equity in government budgeting, services, hiring and more. This work was foundational and a prerequisite for the development of agency racial equity plans. Though behind in meeting Charter established timelines for the first racial equity plans I believe the Mayor's Office of Equity is moving in the spirit of the revisions to build a foundation and structure that will enable the City's annual compliance with the revision requiring biannual plans and reports in the off years.

The permanent Commission on Racial Equity has been stood up with the appointment of commissioners and an executive director by Mayor Adams, Speaker Adams, Public Advocate Williams and Comptroller Lander. Their primary responsibilities are to be a checks and balance entity, ensuring the City is adhering to the Charter mandates and reflecting the voice and concerns of New Yorkers, particularly those harmed by persisting racial injustice. Their engagement with affected communities is underway.

At this stage of implementation, even with the Administration's timelines extended well beyond the Charter-mandated timelines by as many as 18 months, as Chair of the Racial Justice Commission I am most concerned about the City's adherence to the Charter mandate for a true cost of living measure. Overwhelmingly, 81 percent of voters said yes to require the City annually calculate the true cost of living in our city. Specifically, I am not only concerned about the timeline, but more importantly about what costs the new measure will include.

During the RJC's community outreach phase, my fellow commissioners and I heard repeatedly from everyday New Yorkers, mostly persons of color, about their

struggles to get by and get ahead in a city where you can't even begin to plan for tomorrow because you are financially challenged to get through today. Their ability to thrive and live with dignity—to be economically secure—is getting harder and harder, even with college and graduate degrees.

The Commission appreciated that existing measures such as the official and supplemental poverty measures, and the self-sufficiency standard are tied to acute deprivation and basic needs, and do not capture adequately and accurately all costs necessary for individuals and families classified as low- and middle-income New Yorkers to get by, get ahead and stay ahead. We proposed to require the City do something never done. The Commission envisioned a first-in-nation *true cost of living measure* that captures what it truly costs for individuals and families to live here in New York City and adequately meet their daily needs, plan for their futures, and save for rainy days.

The ballot abstract text states that the new measurement is “intended to focus on dignity rather than poverty,” reflecting the intention to root it in economic security — what it costs to get by, get ahead, and stay ahead. Existing measures, including those aimed at providing a more accurate accounting of basic needs such as the Self-Sufficiency Standard, which I have worked with for more than 15 years while a senior leader at the United Way of New York City and still today at FPWA, are not true cost of living measures but rather measures centered in acute deprivation. The Commission understood this, and that's why we proposed the creation and utilization of a new measure — one that would capture the true costs of living today and for tomorrow, and

that would have the greatest potential in aiding in the undoing of structural economic deprivation.

The danger of measures that only track basic needs is that they have the effect of disproportionately harming both low- and middle- income New Yorkers who have lower incomes and less assets due to structural racism. When government only tracks basic needs, it inhibits an individual and family's ability to build wealth and achieve economic security by disregarding the cost of the many forms of debt, and the costs associated with retirement, family needs beyond childcare, and emergent costs.

For New Yorkers working to get ahead, especially those whose opportunities have been diminished by structural and institutional racism, the City must select as its True Cost of Living a new measure that captures both present-day daily costs including debt of different types, especially for those classified as poor and middle income, and costs associated with saving for tomorrow and building wealth. This would allow our city to see and understand the full, complex financial picture of New Yorkers who are struggling to move beyond basic needs.

Doing anything less than a true cost of living measure undercuts not only the intent of the passed measure in its design but also in its results. I implore the Mayor and the City Council to do nothing less than effect a fully realized true cost of living measure, which to date has not been offered up in New York City.

Fortunately, New Yorkers' passage of the true cost of living ballot measure created the spark that ignited a conversation about what it truly means to measure economic security and financial resiliency for Americans classified as low- income and also as middle-income, who may be comfortable from day to day but still are financially

precarious because they can't save and plan for the expected and unexpected. In 2023, FPWA and the Community Service Society launched a nationwide coalition to effect a national true cost of living measure, and commissioned the renowned Urban Institute to create the measure. The Urban Institute is in the final stages of developing a measure that will calculate the true cost of living both county by county and for the country. New York can learn and benefit directly from their work, which is unprecedented, and just as the case was with the Racial Justice commission, be the vanguard for the nation in calculating the true cost of living securely and with dignity.

I commend the progress the Adams Administration has made towards implementing the racial justice charter revisions and exhort them to act with both a sense of urgency spurred by the Charter-imposed timelines and a sense of loyalty to the desires of all New York City residents and their families seeking a more equitable and secure life as their votes demonstrated. The System may have been created to persist, but with the implementation of the Charter revisions, New Yorkers have instructed their local government to push back.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.

Monday, July 1, 2024

**Testimony to the City Council from the Museum of the City of New York
Committee on Civil and Human Rights**



Chairperson Williams, members of the City Council, and distinguished guests:

My name is Stephanie Wilchfort, and I am the Ronay Menschel Director and President of the Museum of the City of New York. On behalf of our institution, I am honored to provide testimony in enthusiastic support of Res. No. 280, which designates November 30 annually as Shirley Chisholm Day in the City of New York.

For more than a century, the Museum of the City of New York has fostered an understanding of the distinctive nature of urban life in the world's most influential metropolis. Our mission is to celebrate and interpret the city's past, present, and future through exhibitions and programs that educate and inspire.

In recognition of Shirley Chisholm's extraordinary contributions, the Museum of the City of New York is proud to host the exhibition "*Changing the Face of Democracy: Shirley Chisholm at 100*," in collaboration with the Shirley Chisholm Project on Brooklyn Women's Activism at Brooklyn College. Opened on June 14, 2024, this exhibition marks the centennial of Chisholm's birth and explores her life and legacy. As the first major museum presentation dedicated to the legendary Shirley Chisholm, it will delve into the life and legacy of this trailblazing legislator, whose contributions to our nation's public policy endure today.

"*Changing the Face of Democracy*" will be the first major exhibition solely focused on Chisholm, presented in the Museum's second floor north gallery. It will feature original artifacts, photographs, art, ephemera, video clips, and more drawn from our expansive collection and borrowed from peer institutions. The exhibition is organized into three parts:

1. **Brooklyn Life:** This section includes objects and photographs that bring to light Chisholm's early life, providing a glimpse into Brooklyn's Black and Caribbean communities and the influences that laid the foundation for her political career.
2. **Political Career:** This section highlights ephemera from Chisholm's campaigns, providing deeper insight into the barriers she faced and her legislative agenda, which achieved lasting programs like the SEEK program in New York and SNAP.
3. **Legacy:** This section explores Chisholm's impact on subsequent generations of elected officials, artists, and activists, emphasizing how she broke barriers and opened pathways for underrepresented communities in politics.

The exhibition is supported by an Honorary Committee, including prominent figures such as Secretary Hillary Rodham Clinton, Congressman Hakeem Jeffries, Senator Chuck Schumer, and Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, among others. This broad recognition and support underscore the importance of commemorating Chisholm's legacy.

The resolution's designation of Shirley Chisholm Day is a fitting tribute to a trailblazer who has paved the way for so many and continues to inspire us all. By passing this resolution, the City Council will

reaffirm its commitment to recognizing and upholding the principles that Shirley Chisholm stood for: courage, equality, and unwavering dedication to the public good.

The Museum of the City of New York stands ready to support this resolution and any efforts that seek to honor and perpetuate the legacy of Shirley Chisholm. We are committed to preserving her story and ensuring that her message of empowerment and justice continues to be heard by all.

Thank you for considering our testimony and for your dedication to honoring a true icon of American history. We look forward to continuing our partnership with the City Council in celebrating the remarkable life and enduring legacy of Shirley Chisholm.

Dorca Iris Genao

[REDACTED]
Stratford, CT 06615

Dear, Honable Wayne M. Ozzi, JSC

My name is Dorca Iris Genao, and I am here today to testify regarding the circumstances that led to my termination from my job on October 3, 2021. I believe that my rights as a citizen of the United States have been infringed upon, and I wish to explain my position.

In the summer of 2021, my employer and my union informed me that in order to continue working at my job, I would be required to receive a Covid-19 vaccine. This directive made me feel as though I was being treated as a slave, with my job acting as my owner. Despite the mandate, my employer refused to take any responsibility should any adverse effects occur from the vaccine. As a person who values personal autonomy, especially concerning medical decisions, I was deeply troubled by this requirement.

I believe that every new medical treatment carries inherent risks, and I did not want to subject myself to what I considered to be a medical experiment. As a citizen of the United States, I believe I have the right to refuse medical treatment, particularly since I had already contracted Covid-19 and had developed natural immunity.

Since 2016, I have been a devout Christian, and part of my faith involves not putting vaccines into my body. This is a personal and religious conviction that I hold deeply.

On October 3, 2021, I was forced to leave my job because I refused to receive the vaccine. This decision was not made lightly, but I felt I had no other option to maintain my personal and religious beliefs. As a result, I am currently unemployed and have not been able to receive unemployment benefits.

The financial impact of my termination has been devastating. If it were not for the support of my husband, we would have lost our home. Additionally, I am burdened with over \$50,000 in debt.

I stand before you today to seek justice and to assert my right to make personal medical decisions without fear of losing my livelihood.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,
Dorca Iris Genao

Public Testimony of Rajesh Kamal Mehra

Contact info: RajeshKamalMehra@gmail.com

June 27th, 2024

Committee: Committee on Civil and Human Rights

Title: Resolution calling on Congress to pass, and the President to sign, S. Res. 144/H. Res. 269, recognizing the duty of the Federal Government to develop and implement a Transgender Bill of Rights to protect and codify the rights of transgender and nonbinary people under the law and ensure their access to medical care, shelter, safety, and economic security.

My name is Rajesh Mehra, and I am a public servant. More specifically, I'm the seniormost Licensed Creative Arts Therapist at Rikers Island Correctional Facility, where I've provided therapeutic care to marginalized populations for over a decade. I am here today to speak in my personal capacity on behalf of the transgender and nonbinary individuals I serve, who are often the most vulnerable and overlooked within our correctional systems.

At Rikers, I witness the profound impact that incarceration has on transgender and nonbinary people. They are disproportionately represented within our correctional systems, often due to systemic discrimination and marginalization that begins long before they enter our facilities.

In years past, back when there was punitive segregation units (by name), to me it seemed like these individuals were overrepresented within that context as well. When serving their "bing time," if they were let out of their cells to participate in my sessions, it was under the condition that one arm was shackled to the table, and one ankle shackled to the floor, regardless of whether they had any history of violence. These kinds of punitive measures only exacerbate the trauma and stigmatization many have faced throughout their lives.

The carceral environment inherently de-identifies and dehumanizes individuals, but the impact is especially severe for those who already struggle with societal affirmation. Transgender and nonbinary individuals, particularly those who are also people of color, face compounded layers of discrimination. This intersectionality must be acknowledged and addressed in our policies and practices.

The absence of certain legal protections for transgender and nonbinary people perpetuates a cycle of discrimination and incarceration. Without access to appropriate medical care, safe housing, and economic security, many are left vulnerable to

criminalization simply for trying to survive. The proposed Transgender Bill of Rights is a crucial step in addressing these injustices.

We must recognize that the marginalization of transgender and nonbinary people is not just an issue of individual prejudice but a systemic failure that our government has a duty to correct. By supporting this resolution, we affirm our commitment to human rights and dignity for all people, regardless of gender identity.

As a therapist, I strive to create sessions that stand in stark contrast to the rigid, restrictive, and binary nature of the carceral setting by creating spaces where individuals feel seen, valued, and affirmed. This approach, based on an affirmative therapy model, recognizes and celebrates the unique identities of transgender and nonbinary individuals. It is essential that our laws reflect this same commitment to affirmation and respect.

Incarceration should not strip anyone of their humanity. The Transgender Bill of Rights is essential to ensuring that transgender and nonbinary individuals are treated with the respect and dignity they deserve. It will help reduce the overrepresentation of these individuals in our criminal justice system, and provide the foundation for them to lead safe, healthy, and fulfilling lives.

I urge you to support this resolution. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Rajesh Kamal Mehra - MA, LCAT, ATR-BC

Pronouns: he/him/his

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Dabash Negash, Deputy Commissioner

Address: _____

I represent: NYC Mayor's Office of Equity & Racial Justice

Address: _____

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

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in favor in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Rachel Matelson, General Counsel

Address: _____

I represent: NYC Commission on Racial Equity

Address: _____

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

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in favor in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Sideya Sherman, Commissioner

Address: _____

I represent: NYC Mayor's Office of Equity & Racial Justice

Address: _____

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**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: 06/27/24

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Linda Tigrani

Address: 253 Broadway, 9th Fl. NY NY

I represent: NYC Commission on Racial Equity

Address: 253 Broadway, 9th Fl NY NY

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: 06/27/24

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Michael Matos

Address: 7420 Ridge Blvd, Brooklyn, NY 11209

I represent: Personal Protective Concepts

Address: _____

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Jimmy Pan

Address: _____

I represent: Myself - former Mayor's Office

Address: _____

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: 6/28/2024

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Jennifer Jones Austin

Address: _____

I represent: FEWA + Racial Justice Commission

Address: 40 Broad St, New York, NY 10004

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. 0108-2024

in favor in opposition

Date: 6/27/2024

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: RAJESH KAMAL MEHRA

Address: _____

I represent: Self

Address: _____

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: 6/27/2024

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Sharon Brown Jeter

Address: 130-10 140 Street Suite 1

I represent: Rose of Sharon Enterprises

Address: Jamaica N.Y. 11436

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**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

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I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Karen Davis

Address: _____

I represent: Myself

Address: _____

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**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Andrew

Address: _____

I represent: SELF

Address: _____

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