

WANIKA B. FISHER, ESQ.
Legislative District 47B
Prince George's County

Assistant Majority Leader

Judiciary Committee



The Maryland House of Delegates
6 Bladen Street, Room 414
Annapolis, Maryland 21401
410-841-3340 · 301-858-3340
800-492-7122 Ext. 3340
Wanika.Fisher@house.state.md.us

THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

January 28, 2021

Honorable Chairwoman, Shane E. Pendergrass

Vice Chair, Joseline A. Pena-Melnyk

Members of the Health and Government Operations Committee

Re: HB 121 - State Government - Maryland Reparations Commission - Establishment (Harriet Tubman Community Investment Act)

“Two hundred fifty years of slavery. Ninety years of Jim Crow. Sixty years of separate but equal. Thirty-five years of racist housing policy. Until we reckon with our compounding moral debts, America will never be whole.” - Ta-nehisi Coates

The United States of America has a long history addressing groups that have been wronged. Communities such as Japanese Americans, Native Americans, Jewish Americans, and others have been founded to have ground for the government to take action. But somehow, the concept of reparations to African Americans or Black people for being forcefully removed from their native homes, and slavery is controversial. The topic of reparations has taken many forms, conversations, and thought over the years. But I come to this committee today with the first real opportunity here in the State of Maryland to address the original moral wrong of our State and Nation, Slavery. In Maryland, the first presence of slaves was in 1639 and it was codified into Maryland in 1664. In 1638 the Colony Council in Maryland created the Maryland Doctrine of Exclusion which stated: "Neither the existing Black population, their descendants, nor any other Blacks shall be permitted to enjoy the fruits of White society." The State abolished Slavery in Maryland in 1864. That means Africans and the descendants of African slaves were in the chains of Slavery for 200 years here in our State. Not to mention the slavery-like conditions that descendants endured under sharecropping and discriminatory laws. An example would be like in 1796 when this very General Assembly prohibited free blacks from testifying in freedom suits. That same year, the legislature passed strict vagrancy laws, allowing the county government to sell unemployed free blacks into terms of servitude and to apprentice their children to white

farmers.¹ This means the 200 years of sanctioned slavery does not even accurately cover the institutional oppression by and slavery-like conditions many descendants of African slaves endured.

This legislation is the first step in righting the institutional wrongs of slavery and the long term community impacts of slavery. In the Maryland General Assembly, we discuss issues in the legislature around, education, the achievement gap, affordable housing, criminal justice reform and more are related to the systematic issues that have impacted African Americans. There is a direct correlation to the impacts of slavery on the community. The various issues that are discussed all root in the inequalities and lack of access to opportunities.

Black families, regardless of income, are significantly less wealthy than white families. The Pew Research Center estimates that white households are worth roughly 20 times as much as black households and that whereas only 15 percent of whites have zero or negative wealth, more than a third of blacks do. Effectively, the black family in America is working without a safety net. When financial calamity strikes—a medical emergency, divorce, job loss—the fall is precipitous. Reparations would address the missing generation wealth and fair opportunities that were not afforded to descendants of slaves.²

The work on the topic of reparations has been in constant discussion in our Nation and State. During the era in the civil war, the concepts of “40 acres and a mule” occurred in re-distributing previously held confederate lands. Over the years many discussions have taken place. In 1987 under an umbrella organization called the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America which works on the concept of reparations today. The NAACP endorsed reparations in 1993. Charles J. Ogletree Jr., professor at Harvard Law School, has pursued reparations claims in court. These efforts have led us to the conversation today.

It is clear in this new decade that our State not only takes responsibility for our role in slavery but works to make things right by providing equity to descendants in the form of reparations. For these reasons, I ask this Committee for a **favorable** report on H.B. 121.

Sincerely,

Wanika B. Fisher

Wanika B. Fisher Esq.

Maryland State Delegate – District 47B

¹ Pg. 10 A Guide to the History of Slavery in Maryland, The Maryland State Archives, Annapolis Maryland revised 2020 edition

² <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>