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Testimony to the UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent

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My name is Renee Hatcher. I am a community development attorney committed to racial and economic justice. I currently serve as the Clinical Teaching Fellow for the Community Development Clinic at the University of Baltimore's School of Law. I'd like to welcome the delegation and thank you for traveling to the United States, and particularly to Baltimore, at this critical time for Black people in this city and all across this country.

Black people in this country have suffered historical and perpetual oppression, systemic racism, and discrimination. They continue to be disproportionately denied economic, cultural, and social rights in this country. As a result, the right to self-determination for Black people in the U.S. remains illusive and suppressed.

While racism takes many forms, spatial racism has played an increasingly central role to racial inequality in this country. In communities across the US, a newborn Black child's zip code has become a predominant predictor of his or her access to quality public schools, healthy food, and whether his or her parents have access to quality job opportunities. That same child's socio-economic status and race will determine if he/she is protected or harassed and possibly killed by law enforcement. As a result, most shockingly, a Black baby's zip code affects their very chance and possibility of life. Here in Baltimore, some majority-Black zip codes have as much as a 30-year life expectancy gap when compared to other majority-white, affluent neighborhoods.

These dual realities have been constructed, perpetuated and protected by state actors at every level. Black neighborhoods have experienced several decades of concerted divestment and organized abandonment by the state. While others have faced rapid gentrification and displacement. In both scenarios, Black institutions have been dismantled and basic human services are substandard or go unprovided for all together.

Black communities rarely have access to quality housing, education, and job opportunities. In Baltimore city, there are approximately 91,000 more jobs than there are residents, yet the unemployment rate for Black males ages 20-24 is 37% (compared to 10% of their white male counterparts). Further, the median income for Black Baltimoreans is roughly \$33,000 compared to \$60,000 for white Baltimoreans. There are nearly 7,000 housing evictions every year in this city; the majority of which are Black women. Blacks are seven times more likely to experience homelessness than their white counterparts. Many Black residents have had their water shut off due to high rates. As we know in Flint, Michigan (a majority Black city), the water supply was knowingly poisoned by the state under an emergency management system; a tool used almost exclusively on majority Black cities and school districts. While Maryland is the richest country in the United States, public schools in majority Black neighborhoods in Baltimore (and other

cities) are not adequately funded and have even gone without heat during winter months, creating a health and safety risk to students. Majority Black communities are more often than not subjected to undue violence, hyper-segregation, unsustainable concentrations of poverty, and unhealthy environmental burdens.

In addressing this systemic and devastating discrimination, racial equity must be an integral part of every public and social system. Solutions must address past discriminatory practices as well as the overlapping and compounding nature of the systems at play. What good is it to prohibit discriminatory hiring practices, if there is no public transportation infrastructure to transport people in Black neighborhoods to job opportunities? Racial equity impact assessments, monitoring, and enforcement mechanisms must become a standard practice in all aspects of state action.

Suggested Questions

How does your (federal) agency implement and enforcement Executive Order 12898?

Executive Order 12898 directs federal agencies to identify and address the disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of their actions on minority and low-income populations, to the greatest extent practicable and permitted by law. The order also directs each agency to develop a strategy for implementing environmental justice. The order is also intended to promote nondiscrimination in federal programs that affect human health and the environment, as well as provide minority and low-income communities access to public information and public participation.

Recommendations

- Racial equity impact assessments of existing and future policies and projects that include affirmative obligations to historically disparaged communities and a means to monitor and enforce such obligations.
- Reparations for the descendants of enslaved Africans in the United States.
- Participatory budgeting to set community priorities on public projects.
- Community impact reports on subsidized economic development projects.
- A national living wage.
- Public support and investment for community land trusts, housing and worker cooperatives, and other democratically governed economic enterprises.
- Stronger inclusionary zoning policies, rent control, and homestead tax increment finance districts (TIFs) in communities marked for redevelopment.