

Testimony for House Bill 121
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Office of Delegate Wanika Fisher
Delegate Wanika B. Fisher, Esq.
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Dear Delegate W. Fisher,

I submit this testimony in support of *House Bill 121*, the establishment of **The Harriett Tubman Community Investment Act**. This timely and audacious bill contributes to growing movement of grass roots efforts on the local level seeking restitution for descendants of former slaves.

If HB 121 is enacted, it would establish the Maryland Reparations Commission to provide reparations to the descendants of former slaves subjugated in the state of Maryland. This legislation is in line with successful efforts for restitution on the local level. In 2015, the city of Chicago approved a reparations ordinance to provide restitution for hundreds of African Americans who were tortured while in police custody. The ordinance provides \$5.5 million in financial compensation and hundreds of thousands to sponsor a public memorial, and assistance for health, educational and mental support. Furthermore, in 2020, the students at Georgetown University voted to establish a fund that would raise \$400,000 to provide restitution to the descendants of close to 300 slaves sold by the college in the 1830s. HB 121 goes a giant step farther than the ordinance in Chicago and the fund at Georgetown because it would develop unprecedented processes and procedures for providing ongoing cash and tuition payments to the descendants of individuals enslaved in Maryland.

In addition, if HB 121 is enacted, it will likely have the domino effect of encouraging support for successful restitution within the legislative branch of other states across the country. Although there were hearings this past summer on Capitol Hill in support of reparations and all democratic presidential candidates at least supported establishing a commission to studying what form reparations could take, H.R. 40 has not been brought to the floor for a vote since it was first introduced in Congress in 1989 by

the late Congressman John Conyers, Jr. HB 121 will likely spark similar state bills that will, in turn, build momentum for a long overdue national discussion on reparations and reparations proposals.

While reparations continues to be a racially polarizing issue, the call for reparations has been trumpeted by some of our nation's greatest civil and human rights leaders for centuries. The great educator, institution builder, entrepreneur, statesman and adviser to presidents, Booker T. Washington, urged white people to once remember "that they were dealing with people who were forced to come here without their consent and in the face of a most earnest protest." He believed that, since whites have and will continue to benefit from slavery, they should be able to give Black people the basic necessities they need to live a "free" life.

The renowned Swedish economist and sociologist, Gunnar Myrdal, asserted that America needed to make amends for the terror of slavery because America's failure to help ex-slaves with an "agrarian economic base" contributed to an "entrenched segregated society." The great civil rights leader, human rights leader, visionary pastor, teacher, Martin Luther King, Jr., once said: I believe we ought to do all we can and seek to lift ourselves by our own bootstraps... But it's a cruel jest to say to a bootless man that he ought to lift himself by his own bootstraps, and many Negroes by the thousands and millions have been left bootless as a result of all these years of oppression ... While King believed personal responsibility was important, he thought it was cruel for Americans to insist that blacks lift themselves up without providing them with the boots and the laces to pick themselves off the ground where they have been forced to stay after centuries of oppression.

In sum, the establishment of the Maryland Reparations Commission will position Maryland to be one of the first states to help America begin the long overdue process of healing from the stain of slavery. It will provide justice in the form of compensation for the descendants of slaves who continue to experience pain and suffering. It will help break the cycle of white supremacy that still terrorizes black and brown people because of America's denial of the terror of slavery. Black Americans will join the train of other groups who have been wronged and receive compensation from the American government, confirming that "Black Lives Do Matter."

Recently, the 46th president, Joseph R. Biden offered, these relevant words in his inaugural address: “to heal we must remember.” While the president was talking about the white supremacist violent insurgency that took lives and attacked our democracy on January 6th, the same logic applies to the reparations debate which is a response to another more deadly rein of white supremacy that forced Africans into chattel slavery. Indeed, in order for America to heal from the nightmare of slavery, we must remember and provide restitution for the injury that terror has caused in the lives of the descendants of former slaves. For these reasons, I enthusiastically endorse the enactment of HB 121.