

HB 339  
FAV

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Chair Peña-Melnyk, Vice Chair Kelly and members of the Health and Government Operations Committee: I am honored by the opportunity to seek your support for HB 339, extending the term of the Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission (MLTRC) .

I am the founder and President of the Maryland Lynching Memorial Project (MLMP) , a 501-c-3 created in 2018 to advance the cause of reconciliation in our state by documenting racial terror lynchings in Maryland, advocating for public acknowledgement of these murders and working to honor and dignify the lives of the victims.

The Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) under the direction of its founder and Executive Director, Bryan Stevenson, has documented no fewer than 6,500 racial terror lynchings in the United States between Reconstruction and 1950. The MLMP counts at least 38 racial terror lynchings in our state between 1854 and 1933. The victims include two children, ages 13 and 15.

Racial terror lynchings were brutal, sadistic and grotesque murders intended to enforce white supremacy and intimidate Black citizens. For too long that grim history has been ignored, minimized or dismissed altogether, despite the incontrovertible fact that the legacy of lynching has and continues to inflict profound damage in our communities.

Bryan Stevenson instructs us that “Truth and Reconciliation” are sequential; that is, there can be no reconciliation until the truth about racial terror is exposed, acknowledged and embraced.

The work of the MLTRC is critical to that process. Its public hearings help Maryland acknowledge the terror and brutality that we unleashed on our own people. They allow us to comprehend the scale and scope of the damage

inflicted on generations of black Marylanders and to recognize and confront the remnants of white supremacy that continue to plague us.

Most importantly, the MLTRC presents Maryland with the chance to “bend the arc of history towards justice” in a meaningful way. We have inherited a solemn responsibility and we must complete the work.

As I suggested four years ago, we owe it to the 38 black men and children we know were brutally lynched in this state. We owe it to the other unknown victims who were lynched. We owe it to their families and friends and neighbors who were terrorized by their murders and who lived in constant fear that they too could meet the same end. We owe it to the generations of Marylanders who accepted these horrors and did nothing not to forget what they didn't do.

And perhaps most importantly, we owe it to ourselves and to our children to embrace the responsibility that has been given to us. We can't change the history we have inherited and we can't change the choices that were made by those who came before us. But we can't turn our backs on it either.

Extending the term of the MLTRC allows us to confront the history of racism in our state and to recognize and right the wrongs of the past. Allowing the MLTRC to continue its work sends a clear signal to all Marylanders that we should expect justice for all, not just hope for it; and challenges us to do what we can as individuals and as a state to ensure that all our people can live their lives with dignity.

When the General Assembly created the MLTRC in 2019, we set an example for the rest of the nation. Extending the term of the Commission will affirm Maryland's leadership in the truth and reconciliation movement.

Thank you, again, for this opportunity.

Respectfully,



Will Schwarz

President

Maryland Lynching Memorial Project, Inc.