



**County Resolution 142-20 – Howard County – Racial Equity Task Force
Position: Support**

September 21, 2020

As Executive Director of the Association of Community Services (ACS), I am offering this testimony on behalf of our 137 nonprofit member organizations and 36 community advocates who work diligently to serve our community. I am submitting this letter in support of CR 142-2020, which establishes a Racial Equity Task Force that will study present racial inequities in Howard County and propose legislative actions to eliminate those inequities.

ACS began learning about racial equity and prioritizing our own organizational commitment to it in 2019. Our work has included an exploration of the history of Black residents in Howard County particularly as it relates to housing, being active members of the Howard County Equity Collaborative, prioritizing racial equity in our affordable housing advocacy, collecting and sharing data on racial/ethnic trends in Howard County for the past 50 years, building a support network of nonprofits that are committed to racial equity, and operationalizing racial equity within ACS. This work has given us an appreciation for the extent of the work that needs to be accomplished if Howard County is to truly be a community that provides the opportunity for ALL of its residents to thrive.

There are many types of social injustices across our country. In Howard County one of those injustices for the past 75 plus years has been racial housing inequality. In our community, too many Black and African American families have lost land assets and have had to live in uninhabitable conditions.

- In the late 1800s and early 1900s as Howard County’s plantation economy waned, freed slaves became tenant farmers and then owners of the land that their ancestors had once worked. In the 1960s and 70s, land values shot up in Cooksville due to County decisions to preserve the County’s agricultural heritage and limit development west of Rt. 32. African American families who had owned land for three or four generations had to sell because they couldn’t pay the constantly increasing property taxes. Fifty years later, many of these family members come back to tend the graves of their ancestors in the small Mt. Carmel cemetery and they come back to attend Sunday services at the Mt. Gregory United Methodist Church; they have to “come back,” but they can’t afford to live there.
- A long-time resident of Guilford told us that in the late 1960s, almost all the Guilford community in which she was born were displaced when the County through eminent domain acquired property for Interstate 95. Some families moved back to this Jessup area by 95 and 32, but to smaller parcels of land losing important land and therefore wealth assets; some couldn’t afford to move back.
- In 1967 a JET magazine story referred to the Fels Lane area in Ellicott City as “perhaps the nation’s smallest ghetto.” *“None of the crumbling century-old structures had a bathtub or shower; very few had toilets. The old outhouses had been torn down forcing residents to dump their wastes in the Tiber.”* At one point the community organized a rent strike, but it never came off because, as one resident said, *“We have nowhere else to go.”*

Certainly, there have been attempts to address inequities and a few successes, most notably through affordable housing initiatives. But how much progress have we really made?

- Ten years ago, the process to redevelop downtown Columbia began. In 2015 the plan that is to result in 900 units of low and moderate affordable housing being built was finally signed by the County Executive and adopted by the County Council. Now, five years later, the County Council could make a decision that severely threatens the development of nearly half of those 900 housing units.
- Our County's decades old blindness to race inequities has resulted in neighborhood concentrations of low income, primarily Black and Brown families in 60-plus year-old housing. It should be no surprise that it is these concentrated communities of low wage earners that are the ones experiencing disproportionately high instances of COVID 19—a concrete example of how housing inequities are linked to health disparities.
- Today there's a shortage of 5500 affordable housing units for people earning less than \$50,000. The vast majority of the people affected by this lack of housing are low income Black and Hispanic residents, immigrants and seniors. APFO, the Administrative Public Facilities Ordinance, is pitting education and housing advocates against each other when we should be working together. How many of the 300 high school seniors who didn't graduate last year might have done better academically if they had been living in stable housing as they grew up?
- In the county population, there is one black person for every three white persons. Entering the county's homeless system, there are three blacks for every white. Is there a better indicator of housing inequities in our county?

Housing is just one area in which inequities have limited the opportunities of Howard County residents of color and we appreciate that land use and housing policies will be a focus for this task force. There is much to do to help ensure that when we revisit this County's story in 20 years, it will be one of more equity and inclusion.

Given that legislation plays such a major role in determining racial equities and inequities, we know that the formation of this task force is an essential step in doing our due diligence to be truthful about Howard County's history, where we are now, and developing the policies, programs and plans that will make our County truly a place of opportunity for all residents – regardless of their race or ethnicity.

I ask that you support CR 142-2020.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony.

Respectfully yours,

Joan Driessen
Executive Director
Association of Community Services of Howard County