



Hon. Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
 President of the United States
 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
 Washington, DC 20500

May 4, 2022

RE: Creating a federal commission by executive order by Juneteenth to study and develop reparations proposals for African Americans

Dear President Biden,

Now more than ever, we know that many of the racial disparities that weigh this country down, and divide people in the US from each other, are unnecessary and can be eradicated if we address the ongoing legacy of enslavement. By righting our wrongs, we can make sure that all families in the US get a fair chance to acquire land, to buy a home, to enjoy good health, and to live without fear about tomorrow. That is why we write to request that you create by Juneteenth an expert commission like that which would be established by a bill in Congress, H.R. 40, *the Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African-Americans Act*.¹

As 365 civil rights, human rights, and faith-based organizations and dozens of activists, leaders and celebrities that support H.R. 40 pointed out in a letter on February 4,² addressing pervasive anti-Black racism and providing reparations, long overdue, cannot wait another day, year, or decade. We

¹ Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African-Americans Act, H.R. 40, 117th Cong. (2021), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/40>. Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African-Americans Act, S. 40, 117th Cong. (2021), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/40>.

² Letter from members of the *Why We Can't Wait* Coalition to US House Leadership, "Repair Can't Wait - Immediately Pass H.R. 40, the Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African-Americans Act" https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2022/02/Repair%20Can%E2%80%99t%20Wait%20-%20Immediately%20Pass%20H.R.%2040%20-%20Letter%20to%20House%20Leadership.pdf.

are in a once-in-a-lifetime moment that we cannot let slip away if we are to begin the process of repair.

You have seen first-hand the dire need and ardent demand for repair. Last June, you visited Tulsa and spent time with the three remaining survivors of the race massacre that decimated Black Wall Street. Your historic trip fixed a spotlight on 107-year-old Viola Ford Fletcher, 107-year-old Lessie Benningfield Randle, and 101-year-old Hughes Van Ellis, on massacre descendants, and on the Black Tulsa community that continues to reel from the effects of white supremacy. Calls for federal action on reparations were loud and ubiquitous during your stay, coming from massacre descendants,³ rights organizations, and members of the Congressional Black Caucus.⁴

This week, nearly a year after your visit, several of this letter's authors met again with the three known massacre survivors in Tulsa and massacre descendants, where in a courtroom they made their case for justice. As they race against the clock to secure reparations from the City of Tulsa, we implore you to seize on H.R. 40's historic momentum by creating a federal reparations commission while the window is still open.

We hope that you will take this opportunity to make good on the promise that you and Vice President Kamala Harris made to Black voters outlined in the [Lift Every Voice: The Biden Plan for Black America](#).⁵ In this campaign plan, you pledged to tackle systemic racism and the continuing impacts of slavery by "supporting a study of reparations." White House press secretary Jen Psaki is quoted as saying you support a study of reparations and White House senior advisor Cedric Richmond said that you support H.R. 40 specifically.⁶ It is important to seize this chance to show up for those who wealth have for too long weathered discrimination, abuse, and neglect in their tireless efforts to make this country into what it can and must be.

The US Congress made history when, on April 14, 2021, the House Judiciary Committee voted to move H.R. 40 to the House floor for full consideration, the first time in the bill's 32-year history. The bill now has a record level of support with 215 members of Congress committed to voting "yes" when the bill comes to the House floor. This is far more than the bill has ever had and it should pass in the House if voted on. In addition, on March 12, 2022, the Democratic National Committee (DNC) passed a resolution of support for reparations and H.R. 40.⁷ But considering US Senate dynamics

³ Dr. Tiffany Crutcher, "What I Told President Biden in Tulsa," *The Progressive Magazine*, June 23, 2021, <https://progressive.org/latest/what-i-told-biden-tulsa-crutcher-210623/>.

⁴ Black Wall Street Times, Congressional Black Caucus Members Commemorate Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial, *CBC House News*, May 18, 2021, <https://cbc.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=2325>.

⁵ "Lift Every Voice: The Biden Plan for Black America," campaign website for President Joe Biden, <https://joebiden.com/blackamerica/>.

⁶ The Hill, "Jen Psaki: President Biden would support study on reparations for African Americans," February 17, 2021, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgRScr6aQwI>; Mike Allen, "Biden adviser Cedric Richmond sees first-term progress on reparations," *Axios*, February 28, 2021, <https://www.axios.com/biden-cedric-richmond-reparations-f4984eab-18fd-4f4b-ad14-4cd10c54a18a.html>; Nikki Schwab, "Joe Biden's top aide Cedric Richmond says White House will 'start acting now' on reparations for African-Americans by tackling issues including free college tuition," *Daily Mail*, March 1, 2021, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9312575/Biden-aide-Cedric-Richmond-says-White-House-start-acting-reparations.html>.

⁷ Kaitlyn Kennedy, "Democratic National Committee Passes Resolution in Support of Reparations," *TAG 24*, March 13, 2022, <https://www.tag24.com/politics/us-politics/democratic-national-committee-passes-resolution-in-support-of-reparations-2369101>.

and timing—there are just a few months left before the end of this 117th Congressional session in January 2023—we are calling on you to work with supporting organizations and House sponsors of H.R. 40 to set up the same commission by executive order by Juneteenth this year.

Juneteenth presents you with an important opportunity to commemorate the end of enslavement while also recognizing much more still needs to be done to create equity and real opportunity for African Americans in the US beyond declaring a national holiday. The Black to white racial wealth gap remains vast, with white households having a median of \$188,200, 7.8 times that of Black households at \$24,100,⁸ a vestige of the legacy of enslavement—which can find its roots in redlining, the Homestead Act, and denying Black people access to federally backed home mortgages—and the failure to address the exploitation, segregation, and violence unleashed on Black people that followed. Moreover, the ongoing impacts of enslavement have resulted in deep psychological harms, including by way of forced separation and collective trauma, which require comprehensive remedy. The Covid-19 pandemic has only widened the inequality. It is also important that this commission be established by Juneteenth so that it can start working and issue recommendations before the next presidential elections.

H.R.40 would establish an expert commission to study the legacy of enslavement and how the failure to address harms stemming from it have resulted in huge racial disparities between white and Black people in: the ability to accumulate wealth and to access health care, education, housing and employment opportunities; environmental outcomes; and policing, among other things. The commission would also recommend proposals for how to provide repair for what the study reveals. This bill does not authorize payments or any specific remedy. It simply creates a commission to study the problem, gather relevant information, extensively involve and consult with impacted communities, and recommend solutions. Like the federal commission that investigated the forced relocation and wrongful incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II, an H.R. 40-style commission can help pave the way for a critical and truthful reckoning and accounting for past harms and the present harms that flow from them.

As states, cities, and other institutions, including the state of California; Wilmington, Delaware; Providence, Rhode Island; Burlington, Vermont; Tullahassee, Oklahoma; Greenbelt, Maryland; Detroit, Michigan; Evanston, Illinois; Georgetown University; the Jesuits; and others pursue reparations at an accelerated pace,⁹ it would be sheer irony for the federal government, which

⁸ “The Black-white wealth gap left Black households more vulnerable,” Brookings, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/12/08/the-black-white-wealth-gap-left-black-households-more-vulnerable/>.

⁹ Soumya Karlamangla, “California’s Reparations Task Force Meets Again,” *New York Times*, December 8, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/08/us/californias-reparations-task-force.html>; Sophia Schmidt, “Wilmington could get a task force to study reparations,” *Delaware Public Media*, December 4, 2020, <https://www.delawarepublic.org/politics-government/2020-12-04/wilmington-could-get-a-task-force-to-study-reparations>; Madeleine List, “Providence mayor signs order to pursue truth, reparations for Black, Indigenous people,” *The Providence Journal*, July 16, 2020, <https://www.providencejournal.com/story/news/2020/07/16/providence-mayor-signs-order-to-pursue-truth-reparations-for-black-indigenous-people/42496067/>; Zuri Hoffman, “The city of Burlington establishes Reparations Task Force,” *NBC 5*, November 17, 2020, <https://www.mynbc5.com/article/the-city-of-burlington-establishes-reparations-task-force/34705446>; Rachel Chason, “Greenbelt residents approve commission to study

sanctioned the kidnapping and trafficking in human beings that slavery entailed, and maintained subsequent anti-Black laws and institutions, to continue to lag behind and circumvent real progress on reparations.

It is in Tulsa where you so powerfully and unequivocally stated: “the only way to build a common ground is to truly repair and to rebuild.”¹⁰ As the 101st anniversary of the massacre approaches, and racial disparities continue to keep communities across the US divided, we could not agree more.

For the above reasons, and those stated in our February 4, 2022, letter referenced above, we hope that we can count on you to take this meaningful first step toward achieving racial justice and realizing reparations for centuries of ongoing harm. We ask that you create a federal commission to study and develop reparations proposals for African Americans similar to that of H.R. 40 by Juneteenth this year. We stand ready to work with you to ensure this happens and kindly request a meeting as soon as possible to discuss the details. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (N’COBRA)
Color of Change
Reparation Education Project
National Action Network
Rainbow PUSH Coalition
Faith for Black Lives
Black Church PAC
Black Voters Matter Fund
Samuel Dewitt Proctor Conference
Church World Service
NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice
The Union for Reform Judaism
Friends Committee on National Legislation
Presbyterian Church (USA), Office of Public Witness
National Consumers League
Batrice & Associates

reparations,” *Washington Post*, November 3, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2021/11/03/greenbelt-maryland-reparations-referendum/>; Candice Williams, “Detroit voters OK launching reparations commission,” *The Detroit News*, November 3, 2021, <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/politics/2021/11/02/reparations-proposal-leads-early-detroit-returns/8570995002/>; Will Jones, “Evanston, Illinois, to begin paying reparations to some Black citizens this summer,” *ABC 7*, June 14, 2021, <https://abc7chicago.com/evanston-illinois-reparations-direct-payments-for-black-americans-white-wealth-gap-restorative-housing-program/10734144/>; Susan Svrluga, “Georgetown students renew push for reparations to descendants of enslaved people,” *Washington Post*, December 9, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/12/09/georgetown-reparations-slavery-students/>; Rachel L. Swarns, “Catholic Order Pledges \$100 Million to Atone for Slave Labor and Sales,” *New York Times*, March 15, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/15/us/jesuits-georgetown-reparations-slavery.html>.
¹⁰ “Remarks by President Biden Commemorating the 110th Anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre,” speech by US President Joe Biden at Greenwood Cultural Center in Tulsa, Oklahoma, June 2, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/06/02/remarks-by-president-biden-commemorating-the-100th-anniversary-of-the-tulsa-race-massacre/>.

Reparations 4 Slavery
Make it Plain
Live Free USA
Until Freedom
Nikkei Progressives
Nikkei for Civil Rights and Redress
Japanese American Citizens League
San Jose Nikkei Resisters
National Nikkei Reparations Coalition
Terence Crutcher Foundation
Human Rights Watch
United Church of Christ, Justice and Local Church Ministries

Cc: Vice President Kamala Harris, Ambassador Susan Rice, and Senior Advisor Cedric Richmond