Bringing a Human Rights Perspective to [Mayor Gainey's *Transition Report 2022*](#)

Building a community conversation on how to transform our city

Pittsburgh Human Rights City Alliance, July 2022

Earlier this year, Mayor Gainey's administration launched its much-anticipated [Transition Report 2022](#), outlining 69 recommendations that emerged from the work of four teams of community leaders and experts addressing economic development, health, education, infrastructure, and climate change. Significantly, the transition committee included community leaders often left out of mainstream policy and planning spaces, and it began the process of shaping a new, more inclusive vision for the city. There are many excellent recommendations in the Transition Report, and the network of human rights advocates who engaged in this response support them all. We are especially grateful to the members of the committee, who put so much time into developing this thoughtful and expansive report.

Recognizing the substantial community leadership and initiative the Report (and our response) represents, we urge the Gainey administration to launch a robust process that engages our community in concerted work to implement the report's recommendations. We know that it will require considerable community involvement and meaningful engagement to realize the most promising recommendations. Together we can identify synergies across the dozens of recommendations that emerged from four different working groups. Having a clear vision and a strategy that centers core priorities will be key. While we look to Mayor Gainey and his administration to inspire, shape, and lead this work, we know that all Pittsburgh residents bear some responsibility in the hard work needed to build the city we all need.

*In this spirit, as a network of community organizations and residents committed to advancing a new social contract for our city, we offer the following response to the Transition Report in support of this leadership. We ask Mayor Gainey to take the community input reflected both here and in the broader Transition Report process as an **invitation to be a new kind of leader for our city**: A leader who will truly confront the reality that [our city remains one of the worst in the country in terms of the conditions for African American residents,](#) and that we continue to grapple with deep inequities, political polarization, and racism—all at a time when our changing climate requires an unprecedented level of unity and cooperation. We are committed to supporting this administration in such work, and we look forward to an ongoing conversation about how we collectively will make our city a place where all residents thrive together.*

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**Uniting around a guiding vision for our city:
human rights, equity & social inclusion**

We believe that a clear and unified vision is needed to guide decisions about priorities and strategies and move the Transition Report recommendations forward. Our city's residents and elected officials have already created a foundation here, providing a set of values and principles for local government that we urge this administration to build upon.

Specifically, in April of 2011, our City Council passed a [Proclamation declaring Pittsburgh a human rights city](#)—the fifth such city in the United States. The Proclamation expressed a commitment of City leaders to use the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a guide to policy. The Human Rights City Alliance is a network of community leaders who have been working to help support this vision, and its [Steering Committee members](#) recently shared with the Gainey team an [open letter that outlined some key policies and precedents that should be prioritized.](#)[1]

The city's commitment to follow international human rights principles in governance is also reflected in [Pittsburgh's 2016 ordinance that integrates the international Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)](#) into local policies. That Ordinance created the Gender Equity Commission that put out an important study, [Pittsburgh's Inequality Across Gender and Race](#), which highlighted the urgent need for attention to racial and gender disparities in our city.

Finally, the previous administration made an effort to connect Pittsburgh with the global community, responding to world leader's call for more concerted local leadership on climate change by bringing the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into City policy and practice. The city's 2020 [Voluntary Local Review (VLR)](#) represents a first step in this direction, and it both reinforces and can give impetus to the Transition Report recommendations.[2]

These past commitments can serve as a foundation for the work ahead. They help highlight two core themes implicit in the Report that we urge this administration to champion. First, **centering people and their needs in all policy decisions is a good strategy** for advancing all the Transition Report recommendations. This means abandoning the common assumption that by merely supporting business interests and economic growth we will be able to achieve social aims like housing security and racial inclusion. Second, Pittsburgh should join other cities taking up the principles of good governance advanced in the UN Sustainable Development Goals and elsewhere, recognizing that **equity and justice require decisions taken with the intention to leave no one behind and put those furthest behind first**.

Beginning with these two principles, our response identifies three core strategies in the Transition Report that we think offer the most promising path towards solving our city's complex, inter-related challenges. First, it is clear that all city residents must be empowered to be fully engaged in the work of making our city livable for everyone. Second, it is essential that all residents enjoy housing security and that we provide an adequate and sustainable supply of affordable housing for city residents. Third, we need more equitable and just means of providing the needed resources to support all Pittsburghers and the communities and infrastructure we all rely upon. This response offers ideas and proposals for advancing all of these as we work together to make Pittsburgh a truly livable city for everyone.

From Vision to Action: Three Core Strategies

1. Community engagement and real democracy

As each of the four committee reports stressed, solving the major challenges our city faces requires better engagement of residents in this work. A relatively cost-effective strategy is to mobilize the energies, skills, and creativity of residents as co-leaders in local governance. This requires *building a culture of civic responsibility and pride while also providing resources that enable a politics of accountability, inclusion, and* _meaningful_ *public participation*. While city budgets may be stretched, Pittsburgh is rich when we consider the varied resources residents can bring to a collective process of governing our city. Similarly, all residents should be supported in taking more responsibility for helping promote the communities and cultures that allow everyone to live and thrive and that make our city vibrant.

- Multiple recommendations in the Transition report called for expanding community engagement, participation, and accountability. We need to take this further and get creative in thinking about *how* we can accomplish this. How, for instance, can we convince residents to put energies into the work of local governance? What supports are needed to ensure the aim of leaving no one behind and putting those furthest behind first? In addition to improving existing practices, we should consider models being used in other cities, such as city offices for future generations[3] and Human Rights Committees of Council.[4] Both would expand resident engagement and help nurture civic skills while helping bring creative solutions into policy debates.
- Ensuring that we leave no one behind and put the needs of those furthest behind first requires attention to policy processes that exclude those whose day-to-day struggles to address basic needs prevent people from organizing their neighborhoods, monitoring policies, and participating in public hearings and decision-making processes.
- *Anti-racism work must be a priority* to build the unity, trust, and cooperation we need as a community to take up the hard work ahead. Pittsburgh stands out for its exceptionally poor record. We can benefit from learning from the work of Winnipeg's city leaders, who took bold responses to a [national media headline designating it Canada's "most racist city](). "[5] Pittsburgh should lead with other cities aspiring to transform systemic racism by joining the [International Coalition of Inclusive and Sustainable Cities]() (formerly the International Coalition of Cities Against Racism) and working with residents to implement the global [Ten-Point Plan of Action]().[6]
- A number of recommendations called for better coordination among city agencies and for a better use of the many resources we have in our city's universities and other institutions. Greater attention to how we can mobilize synergistic energies across these organizations to advance the collective aims we have as a city can make up for budget deficits we might face.

2. Housing is Key

Affordable and safe housing with security of tenure is essential to healthy, vibrant neighborhoods. Repeated forced displacement of residents—particularly vulnerable groups such as racialized minorities, disabled people, seniors, and especially children—contributes to both long-term individual health problems and dysfunctional communities that require more services and diminish our city's potential.[7] Leaving no one behind requires a dramatic shift in how the city approaches housing policies. Pittsburgh should commit to improving overall housing security and protecting people's right to remain in their home

neighborhoods. We should also be working much harder to repair past damage and restore communities by working with intention to help displaced residents return.

- Numerous recommendations focused on ways the Gainey administration can improve access to affordable housing. All should be considered within the framework of an overarching ***human rights-based housing strategy.***[8] Such a strategy should begin with a comprehensive [fair housing audit](#) of housing needs,   existing infrastructure, and property ownership, and any new developments should be planned to ensure that overall housing costs *align with the incomes of existing residents*. Community networks are convening to explore how such strategies are being used in other cities, and we encourage the Gainey team to engage in work to spell out the concrete steps we can take as a city to ensure that all residents have secure access to safe, quality, and affordable housing that supports stable and vibrant communities.[9]
- To ensure that future development does not do further damage to our communities, we must pursue alternative models of development that protect public land and permanently affordable housing. [Cities like Baltimore have begun to see success in the use of community land trusts](#), and other innovative policy solutions are becoming more attractive as we're seeing the effects of community destruction caused by market-driven housing.

- One element missing from the Transition Report is the importance for the city to enact policies and regulations that affect the demand side, and not just the overall supply of affordable housing. Housing experts agree that the most significant threat to affordable housing is expanding financialization, and there are ways municipalities can impact its effects. Specifically, we need policies that protect rights of renters vis-à-vis housing markets and that value our city's land and housing primarily for their value in housing the people who live and work in the city, rather than as a source of speculative profit. Multiple policy tools are emerging, and governments in places like Berlin and Denmark have enacted local restrictions to discourage the speculative investments that are driving dramatically rising housing costs.[10]

3. Resourcing and investing in equity

Each of the different task forces that shaped the Transition Report all recognized that good intentions will go nowhere unless we confront our city's budget challenges and mobilize more financial and other resources to support effective government and vibrant communities.

- Budgets specify the values of a community, and the Transition Report authors have pointed out the need to transform our budgetary processes to better align with people-centered priorities. The [government of Scotland has adopted a human rights budget process,](#) and provides useful resources in this regard, and the [United Nations is also encouraging and supporting governments in implementing Human Rights Budgeting](#) practices.[11]
- Although we often think of balancing budgets by addressing the expense columns, the Transition Report shows that by confronting the long-standing problem of our unjust and highly inequitable tax policies, we can alter the income column of our budget and strengthen our capacity to address chronic problems. For far too long large so-called "not-for-profit" entities have been able to extract profits from our communities without adequately supporting our city's physical and social infrastructure. Effectively, individual residents and our communities have been subsidizing these enterprises, and we need to make some radical changes to existing approaches. The problem of tax inequity and evasion has become a more prominent concern of policy makers and economists

worldwide, and it is urgent that we remedy this problem in the near term.[12] One possible way forward is the [fair share tax proposal](#) put forward by Keystone Research Center and PA Budget and Policy Center.

- In addition to asking how we can expand city budgets through fairer taxation, we should deploy "workforce development" to strengthen public institutions and governance. We can, for instance focus less on preparing people for the competitive and increasingly non-local economy and instead ask how we can help educate our young people and re-train displaced and un/under-employed residents to work in the public sector and to otherwise contribute their skills and energy to the cooperative efforts of governance and community problem-solving. Moreover, an inclusive, people-centered economy that prioritizes *decent work*[13] can mobilize new, untapped resources and creativity for collective community benefit while fostering a culture that builds community pride and trust in local government.

- Greater attention to the needs of future generations can help us shift away from the short-term, money-centered and fossil fuel-driven logic that guides too much policy thinking. A future-oriented and cooperative approach that centers people and communities can help us identify creative solutions to chronic problems such as the mismatch between our educational systems and the demand for particular skills.

- Finally, we need unity and collective commitment to confront the complex challenges we now face. We can no longer ignore long-standing structural conflicts that perpetuate racial divisions and deprivation. We must bring attention to our history and how past practices ranging from slavery to redlining to ongoing discrimination in housing and employment reproduce and reinforce growing racial divides. We cannot reduce racial inequities without attention to this history and the need for reparations. Cities like [Los Angeles have taken promising action](#) in this regard, and the international community has recently intensified calls for reparations in order to address systemic police violence and the social conditions that drive it.[14]

In closing, we urge the Gainey administration and our fellow Pittsburghers to join in a new, bold experiment to make our city one that will support our children's children and be a model for others around the world. In electing our city's first Black mayor, we are hopeful that we will find the collective courage to move this promising Transition Report forward in ways that center people and well-being and that leave no one behind while putting those furthest behind first. We look forward to being part of the changemaking process that Mayor Gainey and his Transition Committee leaders have begun.

NOTES

[1] This [Open letter to Mayor-Elect Gainey reminded our incoming mayor of the city's past commitments to a human rights governance framework and benefitted from the input of experienced community leaders including some of the authors of the Gainey Transition Report.](#)

[2] Pittsburgh's Voluntary Local Review (VLR) ["Pittsburgh and the Sustainable Development Goals: A Voluntary Review of Local Progress"](#) was done in 2020. It can be improved upon by drawing from a rapidly growing body of evidence from other communities and policy advocates, such as this excellent resource: [City playbook for advancing the SDGs A collection of how-to briefs on advancing the Sustainable Development Goals locally,](#) Brookings Institute December 2021.

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[3] See, e.g., "Enhancing the Legitimacy of Offices for Future Generations: The Case for Public Participation" Graham Smith, *Political Studies* 68(4) 2020; and A Post-Election Strategy for National Unity: Focus on Future Generations, January 7, 2021 Commondreams.org By Jackie Smith.

[4] In 2019, Winnipeg became the first Canadian city to create such a committee to help guide city officials in work to address racism and related human rights challenges (see: https://www.mayorbowman.ca/news/read,378/280/appointments-to-new-human-rights-committee-of-council-adopted-by-executive-policy-committee).

[5] In response to the MacLean's January 2015 article, Winnipeg Mayor Brian Bowman helped launch a number of initiatives, including hosting a National Summit on Racial Inclusion, anti-racism education week, city-wide actions as part of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. Bowman also supported the creation of a Welcoming Winnipeg: Reconciling our History Policy and a Human Rights Committee of Council to establish institutional processes that would expand community engagement and help the city be more proactive in incorporating human rights perspectives in policy and practice. As a result, after just one year, the same national publication claimed that Winnipeg went from being the country's "most racist" to being a national leader: Winnipeg a leader in fixing Canada's racism problem (January 27, 2016).

[6] The world community is intensifying calls on governments to tackle systemic racism following the 2020 mobilizations protesting the persistent failure of governments to address disproportionate police violence and killings of people of African Descent, and this 2021 report puts forward clear demands and policy recommendations: Report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Agenda towards transformative change for racial justice and equality" (A/HRC/47/53).

[7] Mindy Thompson Fullilove, 2016 [2005]. *Root Shock: How Tearing up City Neighborhoods Hurts America, and What We Can Do About It, 2nd Edition* (New Village Press: New York).

[8] This recommendation was conveyed in a recent visit to Pittsburgh by UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Adequate Housing, Leilani Farha, who discussed this in her meetings with city, county, and state officials, housing advocates, and other residents. See this report on the visit, which provides a list of resources and tools for addressing housing insecurity in our city.

[9] See the following resources: Rights Based Housing Strategies (This report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Adequate Housing argues the case for a rights-based housing strategy, identifies 10 principles to guide such a strategy and recommendations for governments); Guidelines for the implementation of the right to adequate housing (The UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing provides specific guidance for governments in regard to housing); and examples of other cities that have begun to strategically employ a human rights framework in housing policy: Human-Rights Based Housing Strategy -Kitchener, ON; Toronto Rights-Based Housing Strategy; Boston's Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing Tools & Assessment form for developers.

[10] See The Shift Directives on Financialization and Human Rights (Leilani Farha, June 2022).

[11] The Scottish Human Rights Commission website provides links to a set of briefing papers on how to implement a human rights budgeting process (see: https://www.scottishhumanrights.com/projects-and-programmes/human-rights-budget-work/). And in 2017 the Office of the High Commission for Human Rights published this *Guide to Realizing Human Rights Through Government Budgets (at: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/RealizingHRThroughGovernmentBudgets.pdf).*

[12] See *Public Source*'s series, "The Tax-Exempt Dilemma".

[13] Decent work is part of the Sustainable Development Goals, and the international community is pressing for local leadership to implement these in municipalities. The previous administration made a tentative first step in this direction, and the Gainey administration could help lead us further to champion these important goals, all of which complement the vision implied in the Transition Report.

[14] See: UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Agenda towards transformative change for racial justice and equality" (A/HRC/47/53), June 2021. This report contains an important call for government action that we urge the Gainey administration to consider in its work to implement the Transition Report recommendations.