

Taking Back our Human Rights: Black Pittsburgh’s Appeal to the World
Community listening session with Justin Hansford, UN Permanent Forum on People of African Descent
Summary Document-November 19, 2022

The Context

The United Nations established a Permanent Forum on People of African Descent (UNPFPAD) to “serve as a consultation mechanism for people of African descent and other stakeholders and contribute to the elaboration of a [UN declaration on the Rights of People of African Descent](#) – a ‘first step towards a legally binding instrument’ on the promotion and full respect of the rights of people of African descent.” Their first meeting was in Geneva, Switzerland on December 8, 2022. Justin Hansford, who is also a Howard University School of Law Professor of Law and Executive Director of the [Thurgood Marshall Civil Rights Center](#), serves on the UNPFPAD for the 2022-2024 term. In this role, Professor Hansford represents North America and Western Europe.

On Saturday, November 19, Professor Hansford met with **us** at Pittsburgh Obama 6-12 in an effort “to identify and analyze best practices, challenges, opportunities and initiatives to address issues relevant to people of African descent.” This conversation is connected to a global effort where leaders are calling for “concrete actions to address systemic racism and discrimination” and working on developing roadmaps towards reparative justice. In his opening remarks on December 5, Hansford said: “Together we can push for reparations...We can dream big and win big.” He promised to work to make sure the Forum “will not be a place for empty talk and speechifying” and that it will “be an instrument of liberation.”

On this day, November 19, Professor Hansford addressed the audience and helped to set the tone for the event. The audience consisted of a nice mix of more than 140 people from middle school students to retirees, from neighborhoods and communities from across the region, and from delegations from Atlanta, GA, Dayton Ohio, and Spartanburg, SC.

Setting a Vision for Black Pittsburgh with Justin Hansford

The public session opened with Dr. Jamil Bey welcoming everyone to join as we sung The Black National Anthem, “Lift Every Voice and Sing” by James Weldon Johnson. This moment set the tone and allowed us the opportunity to reflect on hope, faith, and remembrance while acknowledging the struggle ahead. Dr. Bey also reminded us of the reasons why we come together, the importance of the inclusion of young people, and the voices and direction of our elders. Members of Black communities from across SW Pennsylvania joined to set regional goals for Black folks. We discussed reparations, human rights, and personal concerns related to a selection of topics. We connected with people from different cities and had conversations about specific areas that impact Black life. Although the topics varied – as detailed below – each table was presented with a [handout depicting Life Expectancy in 63 selected neighborhoods and municipalities in Allegheny County](#) – reflecting a more than 20 year range from the most disinvested Black communities to nearby white neighborhoods.

Each discussion table had a varying amount of people, with a facilitator and a notetaker to capture the goals, priorities, barriers, and challenges that we share. The diversity in the atmosphere added great value to the conversations, considering we can’t solve any human issues without including multi-generational perceptions. We didn’t focus on just the issues,; however; we looked at what the problems are and the obstacles as they relate to youth, immigration, health, education, food access, environment quality,

economic development as well as art and culture. Following are summaries of the exchanges which highlight the insights, key points, and ideas that connect with other discussion topics. This is where we can recognize our common interest, relate to the experience, and determine the next steps.

Art and Culture

The arts and culture conversation highlighted the importance of building healthy relationships with art and people outside of our circle. It's necessary to create spaces where we can learn cultural differences while encouraging the design and distribution of our own art. People should be able to embrace our culture and other cultures without microaggression. Utilizing art, music, dance, singing, and theatre etc. as therapy should be a priority. Liberation is the goal in our community, however, there's a disconnect in understanding between different cultures. The ownership of cultural productions, and the ability to amplify a healthy lifestyle in our culture should be priorities. The barrier is the infrastructure for talent which does not have a balance between artists, musicians, and performers, compared to managers, promoters, and engineers. Our education system is Eurocentric and does not support our collective voices. The challenge is there's negative messaging in popular music and not enough positive popular music. The problem with art and culture is connected to economics because it recognizes the supply and the demand.

Economic Development

We need urban planning and redevelopment programs that focus on Black small businesses and Black autonomy. Especially involving the redevelopment of the Homewood Coliseum. Creating Black owned commercial areas in Black communities is a priority. Which includes more retail, more parking, and efforts to teach people how to build businesses. We need overall more concentrated Black economic and political power. Barriers to economic development are the lack of transit to communities and feelings of unsafety in communities. There's also a cynicism that many people have about their job, living wages and their benefits. The lack of cooperation and support amongst each other, as well as the lack of culturally competent resources and institutional support to build skills for success are challenges. The lack of representation fighting for our interests in the halls of power is also a challenge.

Education

Our schools require an inclusive culture that is responsive to the needs of kids. It is necessary to have more role models in the classroom, teachers who can relate to and share resemblance with children. We must work in the areas of creating opportunities that allow experimental learning in the curriculum and building on current models that work. The barriers arise from adequate and inequitable funding, low expectations, and lack of support for students. Some kids are treated like adults instead of kids. Accountability of funding should be a priority, as well as influencing school board members, Black teachers, and young people to get involved to gain better leadership. The challenges are aligning goals and priorities, for our people with political leaders and people with authority.

Food Access and Environment Quality

"It's time for us to get organized!" It's our responsibility to teach our kids the basics of how to clean up our neighborhoods and how to care for home and businesses. It's essential for the community to understand the benefits of urban gardens. Environmental issues are all our concern. People should spend money where we live, supporting the development of co-ops, with community ownership as the solution. Public transportation access is a separate issue which creates a barrier to access food. There are

overlapping issues that impact Black businesses such as establishing connections with grocery distributors, helping Black business owners access key resources, and addressing inequitable outcomes related to government enforcement (or lack of enforcement) of regulations.

Health

We need to understand the problem we are trying to solve. Many of the barriers that prevent Black thriving and flourishing, are institutionalized in policies and practices. Programs intended to impact a community should have more collaboration with community connections, representatives, policy makers, “gatekeepers”, and include intergenerational teamwork to create solutions and share resources. The main goal is to develop an action plan to address the issues within the community. It’s a priority to start recruiting and bringing younger people in for opportunities to work with the community, obtain positions of authority, and represent the communities we serve.

For instance, people need more education about health issues. People are unaware of how certain behaviors lead to poor health outcomes. It’s difficult for older adults to engage with younger folks in health conversations. There’s a need to support inter-generational work around health, and to prioritize health equity for Black residents in public policy. For instance, revisiting the chart showing the 20-year gap in life expectancy between primarily Black and primarily White neighborhoods, the city should identify leading drivers of that gap and work with communities to find solutions. We know, for instance, that gun violence and maternal health care are central here, so how can we move forward solutions around those obstacles?

Housing

The housing discussion stressed the need for us to work to change consciousness so that housing is understood as a human right, not a commodity to be used for profit-making. There needs to be more community control over housing through measures such as the expansion of social housing and other forms of decommodified housing (i.e., CLTs, Cooperatives), rent controls, and protections from eviction and homelessness. Attention to promoting lifespan housing stability for people whose abilities change as they age and/or face disabilities is key. In particular, the housing needs of children must be prioritized with the aim of ensuring stable access to affordable and safe family-supportive housing that enables our youth to realize their right to education. Students whose families face eviction or homelessness cannot do well in school and face lifelong hurdles. The city’s large population of college students is also subject to increasingly predatory treatment by landlords and developers incentivized to prioritize profits. In short, city leaders must develop an explicit housing policy that centers the needs of residents, and this must take into account the need for an adequate supply of affordable housing for students admitted to area universities.

On the supply side of housing, public officials need to regulate *housing as a social good* and enact policies to discourage absentee/non-local ownership and to encourage property owners to be responsible landlords through greater protections for tenant rights. A city rental registry and policies to tax speculative housing developments and better regulate new construction to ensure adequate supplies of housing that is permanently and effectively affordable to residents. Ample evidence shows that building new housing does not solve the affordable housing crisis. What is needed is intentional planning and greater protections for renters through legal reforms that prioritize housing’s social purpose over its economic/market value. Such policies include, for instance, aligning minimum wage laws with housing

costs (e.g., a *housing wage*), taxing or otherwise inhibiting financial speculation in the city's housing stock, ensuring tenant access to legal counsel and other support services, and enacting legislation to discourage the extraction of profits from rental housing. Ensuring urban development that locates affordable housing near jobs and amenities such as grocery stores, health and other service facilities, and parks is the only way we can ensure the long-term well-being of existing residents and future generations.

More equitable taxation policies can help finance alternatives to existing development and housing policies, and political leaders must explore avenues for realizing this. The role of the financial sector and banks in housing and other aspects of public policy needs greater scrutiny, since these entities have long been linked to deep and racialized inequities in housing. In addition, policies related to the policing and criminal-legal system impact the enjoyment of the right to housing through over-policing and criminalization of low-income communities, racial disparities in policing and incarceration, and punitive policies that obstruct formerly incarcerated people from accessing affordable and safe housing.

Immigration

Black solidarity among African Americans, Africans, and Latinos is a must and a required step in establishing a collective Black identity. For immigrants having to think about how to interact with broader society and being afraid of speaking their own language isn't something that should happen as often as it does. People should avoid assumptions about different cultures and instead seek understanding. Students should be educated in cultural competency and the sensitivity to the lived experience of other people. This is what is meant by "your truth." This can only be achieved by having people in schools that actually care about students of color.

Both local and global governments need to be held accountable for their treatments of Black immigrants. We need to elect people in positions of power that understand the immigrant experience and act in their interests. Xenophobia and the experience of othering that many immigrants face is a major barrier highlighted in this discussion and it manifests in different forms. For many immigrants there's a constant fear of deportation. This fear is a form of trauma and stress that contributes to poor planning, decision-making, and health outcomes.

Participants in this discussion mentioned the need for language access in public services, especially in regard to accessing affordable housing. In addition, constraints and contradictions in public assistance policies are causing hardships for immigrants. There's a need for improved access to health care for immigrant residents and for efforts to remedy the constant stress immigrants face due to discrimination based on their legal status and chronic economic precarity.

Youth

Young people who want to step up and be leaders or to champion a cause may not feel supported, mentored, or sponsored. This is happened in informal community settings and in formal programs. They get discourages in their programs and may drop out of school/training. This results in less representation of political roles, and lack of trust of young people for established "leaders".

Key challenges relating to youth are the intergenerational trauma that exists in communities, the marginalization experienced in Black life and the lack of time to process trauma. The barriers to youth flourishing exist in the current system and infrastructure which divides and oppresses Black people. The business developments in our communities don't work for our interest or serve our needs. Our young

people need time to develop and enough space to grow. This could be accomplished in the form of long-term support systems for young and older people or spaces for self-discovery. Opportunities for young people to find their own paths and build healthy relationships with their communities and themselves should be encouraged and created.

Wrap up

Our goal for the public session was to end with starting points for an action plan. Our overall goal is to improve the quality of life and the life expectancy for Black populations across the region. There are organizations pushing for reparations in many cities, as part of an urban reparations movement. The Permanent Forum on People of African Descent has centered reparatory justice in its mission, and this global conversation must inform our local work. We took one step to set the agenda to bring urban planning together with global conversations around human rights and reparatory justice for people of African descent.

We end with a reminder that in this work it is often easier to find fault with those closest to us and our activist work than it is to unite against an unjust economic and social order. During the discussion at the youth table, we asked “What would it look like if this issue were not an issue?” Someone replied, “It’s a privilege to be able to think like that.” That statement is one of several barriers that we all face. It is difficult to understand or predict how people think and make decisions when they are always responding and reacting to white supremacy and its impact on our quality of life. People are desperate, hurt, traumatized, uncertain, panicked, flustered, while wanting a better world for their children and their kind. This is the operating contexts for People of African Descent on a planet where white supremacy dictates the protocols and procedures.

Now that we know our problems, obstacles, and disputes, let’s think about immediate steps that can be taken.

The ability to think in opposition to the people with power is equal to the ability to empower people who think in opposition. Let’s ask ourselves the following questions to know how we can make an impact, and empower our future leaders:

1. What youth are we connected to who we can learn from and educate about community issues?
2. How can we serve an organization that will collectively influence our area of interest?
3. When and how can we encourage political leaders to listen to and implement our priorities into policies?
4. Who can we build a healthy relationship with that will support and encourage accountability?

If we are going to make progress on these issues, we must get organized, and be prepared to take more steps. Our hope is that you will join one of the efforts or organizations already working to address the issues.

Later, you will also receive an invitation to a large meeting early next year to bring us together again to coordinate our efforts to create a regional agenda to remove barriers to fostering thriving Black families.