

Minutes of the
Tenth Meeting of the
MHAA Racial Equity Working Group
November 2, 2022

Attendees Present:

Robert McCord (Secretary of the Maryland Department of Planning and Chair of MHAA), Wayne Clark (Former MHAA member), Elizabeth Hughes (State Historic Preservation Officer, Director of Maryland Historical Trust, and MHAA member), Shauntee Daniels (Executive Director of the Baltimore National Heritage Area and representative of the Maryland Coalition of Heritage Areas), Aaron Shapiro (Executive Director of Patapsco Heritage Greenway and representative of the Maryland Coalition of Heritage Areas), Steve Lee (Commissioner for the Maryland Commission on African American History and Culture), Meagan Baco (Executive Director of Anacostia Trails Heritage Area and representative of the Maryland Coalition of Heritage Areas), Reverend Tamara England Wilson (Chair, Maryland Commission on African American History and Culture), Chanel Compton (Executive Director of the Banneker-Douglass Museum and staff to the Maryland Commission on African American History and Culture), Janice Hayes-Williams (MHAA member), Aadila Bhabha (Symphonic Strategies Staff Member), Alonford Robinson (Symphonic Strategies Staff Member).

MHAA Staff Present:

Ariane Hofstedt (Administrator, MHAA), Martha Waldron (Assistant Administrator, MHAA), Andrew Arvizu (Assistant Administrator, MHAA) Nell Ziehl (Maryland Historical Trust, Chief of the Office of Planning, Education, and Outreach), Brenna Spray (MHT & MHAA Outreach Coordinator)

Introduction:

Ariane opened the meeting at 3:04 and thanked everyone for attending. She thanked the Racial Equity Working Group for having started this process and was excited to share the results of the consultant's work. She informed the group that Secretary Robert McCord would be late to this meeting. Ms. Hosftedt turned the meeting over to Symphonic.

Presentation from Symphonic:

Mr. Robinson greeted the working group and introduced himself before asking the group to introduce themselves.

The group introduced themselves.

Mr. Robinson laid out the plans for the meeting, outlining the themes of the report. He related this project to other similar government contracts. In particular, he hoped this report could provide the basis for breaking down the structural barriers to entry for the program. Finally, he mentioned that one of the challenges that Symphonic faced was in preparing this report for multiple audiences.

First, Mr. Robinson discussed the methodology of the project. He stressed that the focus of the report was on changing the structures and systems of the program that create barriers to access. He also stressed the unique nature of MHAA's program as a multi-sector agency since the organization works with many partners at the state, local, county, and private levels. Structural racism has been embedded in these systems and these relationships, and while addressing these challenges will take time, steps can be taken to mitigate their effects now and set up the organization for success in the future.

Next, Mr. Robinson discussed the scope and deliverables of the report. He stressed the importance that this report remains independent so that it might speak truth to power and addresses the urgency of the moment. He reviewed the timeline of the project, discussing the document review, the interview process, and the writing of the report.

Then, Mr. Robinson shared the framework of the report, specifically the five sections of the report: awareness, access, effectiveness, relevance, and utilization. He shared that these frames apply far beyond the narrow focus of this report and speak to broader issues of structural racism in government.

Mr. Robinson started with barriers to awareness. He reminded the group that all of the recommendations are, at their core, measures to address the most pressing barriers. He explained that a lack of awareness of the program is exacerbated by several factors including mistrust of the government. Despite many heritage areas being non-profits, they may be "guilty by association" since the general public does not make a distinction between various types of organizations. Further, information from MHAA may be inconsistent and confusing for its audience. To raise awareness, a focus must be placed on making that information as clear and consistent as possible.

Next, Mr. Robinson discussed barriers to access, specifically technology, varying levels of literacy, a lack of time, and histories of exclusion. To address these issues, MHAA must find ways to streamline the application process, to shorten the length that it takes to send out grant agreements, and to make the language of grant agreements easier to understand.

Mr. Robinson discussed barriers to utilization, specifically that the funding process is time consuming and rigid. As a result, many people will choose to look elsewhere for funds. Creating a more flexible and faster process will attract a more equitable pool of applicants. Mr. Robinson encouraged Maryland to look at the success of trust based philanthropy.

Mr. Robinson then discussed barriers to relevance. He explained that the program does not currently address the way that relevance for one group of people may differ from relevance for other groups. In particular, the history of place may often be associated with stories of violence or suffering.

Finally, Mr. Robinson discussed barriers to effectiveness, pointing out that there are issues of poor customer service, poor cultural competency, and programs that don't address the needs of constituents. Well designed programs should be set up to break down these barriers and work to uplift the community. Mr. Robinson then asked the group for questions.

Mr. Lee added that one of the challenges in relevance is that for the African American community, many people do not even know their own heritage, since that history has been completely omitted from public education. This goes back to a deeper issue, that there is a lack of Black Heritage Areas. The lack of black-led organizations means that emphasis black history will never be at the forefront.

Mr. Shapiro asked if the structure as a whole is the problem and that the entire program should be redesigned. He reminded the group that each heritage area is specifically a grantee. He encouraged the group to consider whether the program as a whole should be reconsidered.

Mr. Clark asked about the limited staff availability at each heritage area. He worried that the limited staff resources were overburdened and may not be able to address these recommendations. He pointed out that increased staffing would make these proposals more feasible. He recounted the history of the program attempting to secure more staffing. He stressed the importance of tying the recommendations to actionable policies with plans for implementation.

Mr. Robinson discussed phase two of the plan, when more specific actions will come out. He also mentioned that the entire purpose of the program should be redesigned, rather than just looking at the issue of staffing.

Mx. Baco asked Mr. Robinson to update the report to include a definition of heritage tourism and to consider the contrasts between trying to accurately represent the past and create heritage tourism products. They pointed out that there is tension between the stated goals of the program and serving the constituency and telling authentic stories of the past.

Mr. Lee agreed that there is tension between these goals, but stressed that the omitted history of African Americans is often isolated as Black History from Maryland History. He wanted to avoid putting things in boxes so that all Marylanders can appreciate and know each other's heritage.

Mr. Robinson then turned towards recommendations. He encouraged MHAA to take a “whole of government approach” to outreach and education to break down silos within government. Programs are less effective when they work on their own.

Next, he added that the program should target younger generations, both applicants and partners, to help build a pipeline of individuals in the next generation to support MHAA. To do this, he encouraged MHAA to show up in high-traffic events and spaces to reach a new audience.

Ms. Daniels discussed the challenges of getting young people involved in MHAA. She described her urban ranger program, which has been trying to gain support over the past 10 years. She explained that the issue there is simply a major lack of interest. Further, she explained that there is less engagement in other heritage areas. Specifically, heritage areas need to be meeting their communities where they are. Particularly, Ms. Daniels mentioned that a lot of energy is dedicated to trying to change the world now, rather than learn their history.

Mr. Robinson thanked Ms. Daniels for her comments. He added that other organizations are able to make their mission and programs relevant. Further, the younger generations have a more acute understanding of the systems of oppression that they face.

Mr. Lee suggested that many black people are not that interested in history since mainstream history focuses on slavery and suffering, rather than sharing the actual stories of each community. This goes back to issues of power and funding that precipitate a euro-centric version of history. Further it's vital to take the time to learn the histories of other cultures to fully appreciate your community.

Mr. Robinson agreed. He then encouraged MHAA to consider “what works” sessions across government entities to ensure that good ideas are being carried on within this program and across the state. He described “landscape forums” at the Department of Health which helped the department highlight regional success stories.

Mr. Robinson then discussed solutions to increasing access to the program, such as easier applications, intergovernmental partnerships, and financial literacy training, especially through CDFIs.

He then discussed proposals to increase utilization. First he encouraged MHAA to remove the matching requirement and find ways to simplify the entire funding process. Second, he encouraged MHAA to cultivate a network of grant writers to support minority led organizations. Third, he called on the local grant review process to be standardized and simplified.

Then, Mr. Robinson turned to proposals for Relevance and Effectiveness. He first encouraged more peer-to-peer coaching among heritage areas. Then, he called for a more flexible use of strategic themes. Next, he called for stronger relationships with Black constituents, both organizations and individuals. Finally, he encouraged the program to foster partnerships with predominantly black CBOs.

Mr. Shapiro asked Mr. Robinson to comment on the ability of MHAA to address all 17 of these recommendations. He further called on the group to take a moment to recognize the work of Mr. Lewis Diggs, a local scholar of African American history who had passed away earlier that month. He stressed the urgency of capturing this history while it is still here.

Mr. Robinson then looked at the next steps. He shared an ongoing project with the Girl Scouts of America, and explained how Symphonic performed an assessment in phase one and an action plan in phase two. He suggested that MHAA would follow a similar process. He warned that action planning may reveal the need to rethink the entire program.

Mr. Shapiro asked how major, paradigm shifting questions can be on the table when people who are so invested in the program will have a strong hand in crafting recommendations.

Mr. Robinson explained that there are other frameworks, like the criminal justice system, that have been able to address these challenges and asked MHAA to look in that direction.

Mx. Baco asked how MHAA's racial equity working group's efforts will reach and fit into other aspects of state government.

Mr. Clark asked about the introduction of the report and explained that he was disappointed that the report did not assess past granting data. He explained that there is not enough data to fully orient MHAA towards a phase two, especially when it comes to appealing to politicians to prove that there is a tangible issue with the program.

Mr. Robinson claimed that the initial draft was 80 pages long. Further, he suggested that the team was not funded enough to warrant that degree of research. Further, he stated that other jurisdictions are more interested in performing racial equity.

Ms. Daniels provided context on the Alliance of National Heritage Areas. At the national level, people are working to find ways to tell these stories. But compared to other National Heritage Areas, Shauntee stressed that Maryland is doing a great job. She added that, for ten years, Shauntee has been the only African American in the room. This points to systemic challenges in MHAA, since the powers that be are often white people. She stated that until the boards of Heritage Areas change, the program as a whole will not be able to change. That being said, the program is doing a lot better than other states.

Mr. Lee stated that the report was good, but there were two major weaknesses: first, there was no analysis of the history of the structure of the program and second there was no demographic analysis. Without this data, there is no key indicator on how to track progress in the future.

Conclusion:

Mr. McCord expressed that this report was worth the wait and expressed his support for the report's findings. He suggested setting up a Secretary's Citation for great ideas in addressing racial equity and encouraged featuring a Black-led organization at each MHAA meeting. He cautioned that reforming the entire program should not be done lightly, and encouraged more data before that option is pursued to make sure the program comes out stronger on the other side. Finally, he thanked the Commissioners and heritage area members for their efforts.

Mr. Clark thanked Mr. McCord for his time and dedication to this process.

Mr. Robinson thanked the group for their time and concluded the meeting.