

Minutes of the
First Meeting of the
MHAA Racial Equity Working Group
October 29, 2020

The first meeting of the Maryland Heritage Area Authority (MHAA) Racial Equity Working Group was held on October 29, 2020.

Attendees Present:

Robert McCord (Secretary of the Maryland Department of Planning and Chair of MHAA), Reverend Tamara England Wilson (Chair, Maryland Commission on African American History and Culture), Walkiria Pool (Chair, Governor's Commission on Hispanic Affairs), Hesam Khalilzadeh Aghdami (Chair, Governor's Commission on Middle Eastern American Affairs), Ngozi Azukibe (Chair, Governor's Commission on African Affairs), Wayne Clark (MHAA member), Shauntee Daniels (Executive Director of the Baltimore National Heritage Area and representative of the Maryland Coalition of Heritage Areas), Elizabeth Hughes (State Historic Preservation Officer, Director of Maryland Historical Trust, and MHAA member), Steve Lee (Commissioner for the Maryland Commission on African American History and Culture), and Chanel Compton (Executive Director of the Banneker-Douglass Museum and staff to the Maryland Commission on African American History and Culture)

MHAA Staff Present:

Jennifer Ruffner, Ennis Barbary Smith, Andrew Arvizu

Introductions:

Mr. McCord opened the meeting by thanking everyone for showing up virtually. He thanked Ms. Ruffner for organizing the event. He then called on Ms. Ruffner to do introductions.

Everyone in attendance took turns introducing themselves.

Mr. McCord's Address to Reverend Wilson's Letter:

Mr. McCord thanked Reverend Wilson for her letter dated January 2, 2020, which raised the issue of racial equity in the Maryland Heritage Area Authority program. Mr. McCord expressed that this letter got the ball rolling but the process of addressing these issues had been delayed by

the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic. He explained that he and MHAA have a genuine interest in undertaking this process to make the program more equitable. He stated that these were unusual and challenging times and that everyone has been touched in so many different ways.

He continued, explaining that the meeting today was to talk about the heritage areas program. He called for genuine and good faith efforts to improve the programs policies, impacts, and funding. He called on everyone to bring their own experience to improve the program by taking a hard look at MHAA. He argued that we need to tell a broader story of MD's past. This, he suggested, is the job of the heritage areas, and will help with the challenges that we face now. He called on the participants to expect to have their frames of reference expanded and be open to being challenged. He then called on Reverend Wilson to talk about the letter that she had sent.

Reverend Wilson explained that the letter was sent out prior to the meeting for review but expressed that the goal of the Maryland Commission on African American History and Culture (MCAAHC) is to achieve equitable funding of African American cultural sites throughout Maryland and to achieve diversity in structures, criteria, and guidelines for funding initiatives. She then introduced Mr. Lee and explained that he will likely be the designee for this body.

Reverend Wilson thanked Mr. McCord for taking the letter seriously and addressing concerns in a timely manner.

Discussion of Expanding the Group:

Ms. Ruffner indicated that it was important to have the right people be a part of the conversation, and asked the group to share their thoughts on who else should be at the table. She explained that the initial invitations were sent to all of the Governor's ethnic and cultural commissions, but the group may need to look more broadly as well.

Establishment of Goals for the Group:

Ms. Ruffner prompted the group to consider developing goals. She explained that they did not need to develop goals during the meeting, but she did want to start the conversation. She mentioned several goals that the staff had identified, including review of: the structure of decision making, the manner in which funds are allocated, the review criteria, boundaries, the process of reporting, and access to assistance and capacity building.

Mr. Lee explained that in regard to goals, a guiding principle was one of equal opportunity. He said that as the group went through each point of the grant application process, he would like to consider if there's equal opportunity and to establish benchmarks.

Ms. Hughes asked the group about the focus of the working group. She asked if the group would be discussing just race or other issues like those pertaining to the LGBTQ community as well.

Ms. Ruffner explained that as the group looks at these issues she expects some spill over, but the focus of the group is really up to the group's members. Originally staff had seen this as an opportunity to focus on race.

Ms. Daniels reminded the group that Reverend Wilson had submitted this letter specifically in regards to African American culture and access to funds, but also reminded the group of intersectionality. She pointed out that the group contained commissioners from both the African and African American communities, as well as other representatives from the Governor's cultural and ethnic commissions. Further, she explained that within the Black community, there are Latinx and LGBTQ individuals, so there is a great deal of intersectionality in these issues. Ms. Daniels recommended that because the issue is so big and so long ignored, for the sake of this group, it would be beneficial to focus on the letter written by Reverend Wilson. She called on the group to be specific to equity as it relates to African or Black Americans.

Mr. McCord thanked Ms. Daniels for her comment. He stated that he felt the same way and wanted to keep the African American experience the primary focus of the working group. He said that he wouldn't prevent the group from talking about other things but wanted to center the group on the content of the letter and the question that was originally asked.

Mr. Clark agreed on specifically addressing the letter, especially in regard to institutional representation. He discussed the historically low amount of African American representation in the administration of the Maryland Historical Trust and the Maryland Heritage Areas Authority. He then drew attention to Native American history, mentioning the great racial injustice suffered by that community. He expressed that he was personally very passionate about that issue. He told the group that only less than one percent of grants go towards Native American community. He concluded by stating that despite the lower population of Native Americans in Maryland, he felt that it was important to also consider that group.

Mr. McCord responded by stating that he appreciated what Mr. Clark said and by recognizing that there are other struggles worthy of consideration. Still, he felt that if the group focused on the experiences of the African American community, the group would learn about ways to present the experiences of other people. He suggested that the narrower approach will equip the program to be more equitable. He worried that if the group tried to deal with all issues of race, then the group would have a harder task. He concluded by stating that having a primary focus would not diminish the needs of Native Americans.

Ms. Smith recalled the comments of Mr. Lee, stating that the group's focus would be on equal opportunity. She suggested that if the group focused on equal opportunity, then the barriers faced by other racial and ethnic groups will come through in the discussion. She said that, in her view, the group would be about de-centering white culture, which would affect many other groups. She concluded by stating that staff had invited the Maryland Commission on Indian Affairs but had not heard back from the commission recently.

Mr. Lee responded, explaining that he is also a Native American from his mother's heritage. He further stated that Black people have always bore the brunt and greatest part of racism. He argued that as Black people led the struggle for civil rights and equality, they had established the trajectory for all other minority groups to achieve. He continued, stating that this was not just

here in America, but most manifest here in America. He explained that he had been told by Asians, Latinos, and Native Americans that they have been able to move forward in their own struggles due to the efforts of African Americans. He concluded by stating that improving conditions for African Americans aids in advancing all struggles.

Ms. Ruffner agreed with Ms. Smith, that this group is about de-centering the white experience.

Ms. Pool agreed that this was a vital point, that African Americans are leading the movement for racial equality. She explained that the Latino community is learning a lot from the African American movement.

Mr. McCord thanked Mr. Lee and Ms. Pool. He called for consensus on keeping the group's focus on the African American community.

Review of the Facilitator Statement of Work:

Mr. McCord asked the group to review the facilitator statement of work. He asked the group for comments on the document.

Ms. Azukibe asked about the timing of getting a facilitator.

Ms. Ruffner explained that the timing depended on the procurement process of the state, which is quite slow. She was not entirely sure how long it would take and expected that it may be difficult to get a hold of facilitators quickly. But she was still committed to moving forward as quickly as possible.

Mr. McCord asked staff to check to see if someone was already under state contract. He explained that there may be other state groups that were already working with someone that we could be brought in.

Ms. Ruffner was excited to keep momentum, despite challenges of COVID, and was looking to bring people on sooner rather than later. She explained that, in terms of sessions and type of work, the group will be relying on a consultant to create plans. She stated that staff are not equipped to handle this process as well as trained consultant might.

Ms. Daniels suggested that the RFP include language calling for an individual with a cultural connection to the subject matter. She stated that if the group was going to do the work, it was important that the facilitator have a strong comprehension of what is being talked about from a personal and professional level. She explained that many facilitators have academic training in the subject matter, but don't have the experience of being Black and therefore have no understanding of the microaggressions that exist in the professional world.

Mr. Lee agreed.

Ms. Azukibe agreed and said it should not be difficult finding people with the right perspective and experience. She stated that while there is high demand, the right experience will provide a level of authenticity needed to get this work done.

Ms. Ruffner called on the group for help in vetting candidates.

Ms. Azukibe stated she would be happy to participate.

Reverend Wilson stated that Ms. Compton would be good to weigh in on this.

Ms. Compton responded by stating that having a facilitator for diversity and inclusion for this group is fine, but best practice would be to mandate this kind of facilitation for all of the MHAA boards to develop their own plan for diversity and inclusion.

Ms. Ruffner asked for clarification from Ms. Compton: each of the 13 heritage areas' boards, the Maryland Heritage Area Authority, or both?

Ms. Compton responded stating yes to all groups.

Ms. Ruffner stated that staff planned to start at the top with MHAA's policies and eventually make recommendations to the local heritage areas as well but agreed that doing this at state and local levels is important.

Ms. Hughes asked the group what success would look like. She asked what the group can use as a performance measure to judge success in relation to the established recommendations.

Ms. Ruffner explained that this was planned to be the first of two steps: Phase one is working with the facilitator to identify issues and to create a strategy. Phase two would be addressing the actual issues. She suggested that there would need to be a deep dive into the program first before it could implement changes.

Ms. Smith added that staff did want benchmarks eventually but imagined that the creation of shared definitions that we can eventually use to judge progress was necessary first.

Ms. Ruffner explained that the program does not have the data to evaluate where it is at. Demographic data is not collected at the time of grant application or award, so there was no good way to quantify this. She expressed a hope that this group will make recommendations about collecting this data in future grant rounds.

Ms. Azukibe stated that the statement of work has a few deliverables. She suggested that the language "recommendations and action plan" suggested that the group would be measuring and monitoring outcomes. She called for a change of wording.

Mrs. Daniels added that based on the letter from Reverend Wilson and the conversation with Mr. Lee, the data may be there, but is difficult to gather. She stated that the issue is the grant awards: who is receiving the grants and how those decisions are being made. She added that the management and who participates in the management is just one issue. The other issue is who is actually getting funded. She asked the group why the history of Black people is not getting

funded and if Black led organizations are being held to a different standard. She identified two phases. First: Have the Heritage Areas and their boards look into why certain groups aren't getting funding. Second: Look at the boards and ask why the boards themselves are not diverse. She encouraged the working group to look at these two separate issues very separately.

Ms. Pool agreed that these were great points, but also encouraged the group to think about capacity building and support. She explained that a lot of institutions do not receive the same kinds of basic support for operations.

Ms. Ruffner followed up on Ms. Daniel's points by stating that staff could generate reports showing which grants were funded, but there is a need for a shared definition of what constitutes an African American organization. Staff could check if grants addressed African American history subject matter, but not who was leading the grantee organizations. She stated that staff can start by generating these reports and sharing them with the group.

Ms. Pool agreed, stating that looking at the data would be great, but called on the group to consider how the data could be extended to ensure that minority led organizations will have greater opportunities. She mentioned that it has been very hard for other organizations to know about these opportunities. She pointed out that there may be great organizations that would qualify but simply don't know about this opportunity, suggesting that public outreach is also an area in which the group should make recommendations.

Mr. Lee stated that it was critical that the group establish a baseline for what improvements will be made. He stated that gathering this data would be a great first step to show sincere intent for addressing these issues. He called on staff to check the percent of funding going to African American organizations. He also asked what proportion of 13 heritage areas are run by African American organizations. He explained that if that answer was 0, that would be profound. He felt that if an African American organization was a heritage entity, there was going to be better outreach in the African American community than a white organization.

Ms. Azukibe stated that prior to the facilitated meetings, that data needs to be available.

Mr. Lee agreed, stating that the group needed that data earlier.

Ms. Ruffner asked the group how they would define an African American organization.

Mr. Lee stated that it was when the majority of the board is African American.

Ms. Compton added that it related to the mission as well. She stated that if the mission is about African American history, then the organization is an African American organization.

Ms. Ruffner thanked the group. She explained that staff lacked that definition but now can use that information to begin to collect some basic demographic data on past grantees. She explained that the reports would take some time, since past grantees would need to be surveyed to get that information.

Mr. Lee stated that he would love to see a heritage area management entity that has a primarily Native American board. He added that since Maryland was one of the first colonies, the program should be ashamed that it does not have a heritage area with a primary Native American board.

Description of the Heritage Areas Program and Local Management Entities:

Ms. Ruffner briefly described the Heritage Areas program. The 13 heritage areas are designed by the local jurisdictions, and their management entities are identified by those local jurisdictions during the certification process with the State. She explained that this was not to excuse lack of diversity, simply to note that MHAA does not select the management entities of the heritage areas, they are selected at the local level. She hoped that the group would come away with guidance for the local jurisdictions and heritage area management entities as well.

Ms. Compton asked what was meant by local jurisdictions.

Ms. Ruffner explained that heritage area boundaries and management were determined by the counties and incorporated towns that make up each heritage area. For the Baltimore National Heritage Area, the heritage area is located in the City of Baltimore. For the Stories of the Chesapeake Heritage Area, it's four counties plus all of the incorporated jurisdictions that fall within the boundaries. The establishment of the management entities was part of the certification process, which for many heritage areas was more than 20 years ago.

Ms. Compton asked if it was the city council or town council that made these decisions.

Ms. Ruffner stated that usually the heritage area certification process starts with a working group from the local jurisdictions, including various committees with representatives from various stakeholders.

Ms. Smith added that each management entity may have by-laws that determine who has to be on the board based on the composition of the heritage area, which often requires representatives from the various jurisdictions in the heritage area.

Reverend Wilson asked when the last time someone looked at the bylaws of these management organizations.

Ms. Daniels responded explaining that most heritage areas are 501c3 nonprofits, so at the creation of the 501c3 is when the management and boards are determined. She stated that originally, her heritage area was the Baltimore City Heritage Area. That was formed in 2001 under the Mayor's Office. The office developed an advisory board, from all sections of city government, and non-profit institutions. She continued, explaining that when her heritage area moved out of the mayor's office her 501c3 selected its own board. Baltimore is a small board, since it's just one city. Other heritage areas have bigger boards to reflect all of the communities that they cover. She concluded by stating that the group would have to go through all 13 heritage areas' bylaws to see if they meet the expectations of this discussion.

Ms. Hughes stated that local heritage area management entities are all very different. She explained that they are not a part of the Maryland Historical Trust, but they do receive funding

from MHAA. She noted a real feeling of local autonomy after the management plan has been approved. She warned that this group's recommendations may be challenging, as it will push up against questions of what control MHAA has to make requests of the local management entities. She concluded by stating that in the past, MHAA has only kept these kinds of changes to the grant level. MHAA has generally had little input in local heritage area management entities' policies and practices.

Reverend Wilson asked if the entities receive money from this body? She argued that surely if they get money from MHAA, they need to be responsive to the body. She added that if the group is going to say that it wants to make change, it needs to make change on all levels. The group should not settle for superficial change, but rather work toward institutional change. She felt that if the group does not make the change where the money has landed, then it will not have the broad effect that the group wants to see.

Ms. Daniels agreed that the group should look at structural changes, but also should focus the conversation on the question of funding and grants. She reminded the group that Reverend Wilson's letter seemed to focus on the funding of the grants, but the other aspect is how the process works. She explained that the funding isn't given out by the management entity but rather by MHAA. She asked the group how many African American grants could go into the system at the MHAA level but only a few get funded. She encouraged the group to keep the two issues separate: changes at the local heritage area level and changes at the MHAA level, which administers the majority of the grant funding.

Ms. Ruffner agreed and suggested that staff needed to share how the inner workings of the program operate to allow the group to make specific recommendations. She noted that most of the management entities are non-profits which were purpose-built to run the heritage area.

Mr. Aghdami asked since this working group has narrowed its focus to the African American community, what should the other commissions expect to contribute.

Ms. Ruffner stated that the group welcomes the broader input, but understands if other commissions feel that the group has narrowed its focus such that they no longer feel that being present would be useful. Still, she hoped that this group would address broader racial equity while primarily using a lens of African American inclusion and access.

Mr. McCord added that he hoped that the Commission on Middle Eastern American Affairs would build a relationship with the MHAA program and learn how it works, so that he could take this information back to his commission.

Mr. Clark stated that MHAA is a complicated program. He asked the group what will be done when a consultant comes in. He recounted that he had been with the Trust for 50 years, and had seen the history between the Trust and the African American and Indian commissions. He explained that there has been a lot of history of failures and successes in trying to address the heritage question, particularly in securing resources for underserved communities. He wondered if a consultant would be able to understand the specifics of these dynamics.

Mr. Lee asked the group for its focus and context. He stated that he was coming to the meeting with a focus on how the heritage area funding from MHAA is distributed. He added that he was not approaching the issue from the standpoint of the different heritage entities. He stated that his focus was on the funding that's distributed from MHAA and on setting up guidelines and recommendations for those funds. He felt that even these independent community organizations, in order to receive funding, should have to meet the guidelines established for those funds. He concluded by stating that MHAA should be able to establish criteria, even if they're independent groups, that the management entities must follow to get the funding.

Ms. Ruffner said that for her part she wanted to look beyond just funding and see the broader program structure, which also contributes to how funding is allocated. She explained that she hoped that both of those items would be part of this discussion.

Conclusions:

Mr. McCord asked the group about the steps for the next meeting.

Ms. Ruffner said that staff would be on the lookout for other individuals to join the group and called on the group to submit suggestions. She also called for feedback on the facilitator RFP, which staff would re-circulate after making edits based on the discussion. Finally, she stated that staff would work towards gathering baseline data on past grants to African American led organizations.

Ms. Ruffner added that another next step would be an overview of the program and how the funding works in terms of the process, where the local heritage areas weigh in, and how the grants panel works.

Mr. Aghdami agreed, stating that a workflow of the process would be very helpful for a high-level understanding of the process.

Mr. McCord thanked everyone for their work at the meeting. He encouraged group members to reach out to Ms. Ruffner with any questions or feedback for the group. He also encouraged staff to work quickly on gathering the requisite data for the next meeting.

Mr. Lee expressed his thanks to Ms. Ruffner and Mr. McCord. He stated that he had been working on this issue in the state for 30 years. This is the first time that he could believe we can achieve real change. He added that Reverend Wilson had been such a strong voice for change and had made this meeting happen. He concluded by stating that he was genuinely impressed with this group.

Ms. Pool asked when the next meeting was.

Ms. Ruffner asked if there should be another meeting before a facilitator was hired.

Mr. McCord called for monthly meetings, even if they were just to touch base, as this would keep the ball rolling and the issue at the forefront of everyone's mind.

Ms. Azukibe thanked the group and encouraged everyone to consider what expectations they had for the group before the next meeting.

Mr. McCord thanked the group and concluded the meeting.