

Minutes of the
Sixth Meeting of the
MHAA Racial Equity Working Group
February 25, 2022

The sixth meeting of the Maryland Heritage Area Authority (MHAA) Racial Equity Working Group was held virtually on February 25, 2022.

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), Frederick Nnoma-Addison (Commissioner for the Governor's Commission on African Affairs), Steven 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), Wayne Clark (MHAA member), Megan Baco (Executive Director of Anacostia Trails Heritage Area), Bernadett Pruitt (former staff member of the Maryland Historical Trust), Janice Hayes-Williams (MHAA member), Ngozi Azubike (Commissioner for the Governor's Commission on African Affairs)

MHAA & MHT Staff Members Present:

Andrew Arvizu (Assistant Administrator with MHAA), Nell Ziehl (Chief, Office of Planning, Education and Outreach)

Symphonic Solutions Members Present:

Alonford Robinson , Natalia Victoria

Welcome and Introductions:

The meeting was opened at 11:32 by Mr. Andrew Arvizu, who thanked everyone for attending. He shared that the working group had finally, after nearly one year of procurement, been able to secure a facilitator. Symphonic Solutions, one of eighteen organizations that applied for the position, had been selected to assist the Racial Equity Working Group over the next six months.

Everyone introduced themselves, including Mr. Alonford Robinson and Ms. Natalia Victoria, representatives from Symphonic Strategies.

Staffing update

Ms. Nell Ziehl explained that Ms. Jen Ruffner and Ms. Ennis Smith, both former staff members with MHAA, have left the program and moved on to new positions. Although this has left

MHAA with a staffing shortage, the Maryland Historical Trust is working to quickly replace these vacancies and is providing all necessary assistance to ensure that the program can continue to function at full capacity. Additionally, this staffing change will impact the proposed timeline of Symphonic Solutions, since much of the qualitative analysis will be delayed until a new administrator for the program can be brought on board. Ms. Ziehl concluded by encouraging members of the working group to share MHAA's job postings with their networks.

Update on the Procurement Process

Mr. Arvizu updated the working group on the status of the procurement with Symphonic Strategies. He explained that a contract had been signed in late January and that Symphonic would be working with the working group over the next six months. Being the first phase in a multi-step process, Symphonic's deliverables focus on creating actionable proposals that MHAA can build on.

Mr. Arvizu thanked the Facilitator Review Panel for their time and thoughtful consideration in reviewing all 18 applications. He explained that the procurement process had taken far longer than anticipated, primarily due to the regulations associated with state procurement. He concluded by sharing that MHAA and MHT had learned a lot about the procurement process and would be better prepared for future, larger, procurements.

Discussion with Symphonic Strategies

Mr. Alonford Robinson started by calling on the working group to engage in discussion, rather than listen to a presentation. He explained that he hoped to walk away with a clear understanding of what the next steps for moving forward might look like. He also wanted to gain a better understanding of how Symphonic can integrate its work into the meetings of the working group.

Mr. Robinson offered some background on himself, explaining that he is from Silver Spring and has a personal connection to Maryland. He also shared that his family has ties to Lowndes County, where Elmore Bolling and many others were the victims of racially-motivated lynchings. This has informed Mr. Robinson's understanding of the importance of his work.

Mr. Robinson explained that Symphonic Strategies will have a number of individuals working on the project, including himself as the principal member and Ms. Natalia Victoria as the engagement specialist. In addition, there are several members of Symphonic Strategies that are Asian American or from Maryland. These local ties, Mr. Robinson suggested, would help the firm emphasize local connections on an authentic basis.

Mr. Robinson then discussed the proposed methodology, which will include a thorough review of the documents, one-on-one conversations, interviews, and focus groups. He warned that, due to limits with the budget, Symphonic would not be able to conduct as many interviews and focus groups as they would prefer. Instead, the working group will have to carefully prioritize who should be included in this first phase.

Mr. Robinson ended his introduction by sharing that he will keep the working group updated on the work that is being done and expects to treat the group like a partner throughout the entire process, rather than just delivering a report at the end. He stressed that he will ensure that Symphonic meets this tight deadline and will deliver on time and at budget. He then asked for questions from the working group.

Mx. Megan Baco asked if Mr. Robinson could share more about the timeline.

Mr. Robinson explained that the first step will be identifying the current reality of the program. For example, Symphonic will look at what strategies and policies MHAA is implementing and then at the potential impacts of these policies.

Step two will be applying racial equity lense to this analysis to determine what the ideal outcome would be. The discrepancy between the ideal and reality will serve as the foundation for Symphonic's proposals. It will allow Symphonic to identify what policies can be improved and it will support the planning of next steps for the working group.

Mr. Robinson continued, explaining that, given the six-month timeframe, the project will be conducted in two phases: past and future. The phase focused on the past will thoroughly document how the program has historically operated and will include twenty hours of conversations with involved stakeholders. It will be up to the working group to identify those stakeholders and strategically distribute those twenty hours between large focus groups and one-on-one interviews.

The second phase, focused on the future of the program, will highlight findings from the interviews, focus groups, and a careful review of program data. These findings will be focused into actionable recommendations which MHAA will be able to implement. Mr. Robinson hoped that these steps may be a proof of concept to set the precedent for racial equity work across the State of Maryland.

Mr. Wayne Clark asked about the type of report that would come out of the process.

Mr. Robinson recommended that deliverable be formatted as an audit that focussed on where the program can be improved and what steps would be required to meet those improvements. This

document would be strictly for internal use. He expressed concern over the political implications of producing something for public consumption, especially at this phase in the process.

Ms. Ngozi Azubike asked to hear more about the focus groups and interviews.

Mr. Robinson explained that Symphonic will conduct a combination of both interviews and focus groups, covering 20 hours total. He asked the working group for guidance on who to interview one-on-one. Symphonic, however, will take the lead in developing the interview questions and format.

Ms. Janice Hayes-Williams encouraged the working group to take a very active role in making sure that previously excluded parties are brought to the table for this discussion. She explained that many people have either never heard of MHAA or have never applied for MHAA grants, despite having critically important projects.

Mr. Robinson warned against inviting too many people who have not previously been included in the organization's constituents, since this would take up a lot of hours. He called for a very focused balance on new and current constituents. He shared that in the past, he found that it only takes a few hours with outsiders to get a general sense of the perception of the program and to identify potential flaws with current policies.

Mr. Frederick Nnoma-Addison asked if Symphonic had any ideas or insights into who they should interview.

Mr. Robinson explained that Symphonic will do some research on this but encouraged the working group to take the lead on determining which parties should be included.

Mr. Steven Lee asked Mr. Robinson to share some relevant key findings from other Symphonic's past projects.

Mr. Robinson shared some lessons from past projects, but could not go into detail due to non-disclosure agreements. He shared that he had previously worked primarily in the Mid-Atlantic, and that past work that he had performed in the South had been challenging. In the realm of grantmaking for state agencies, he shared that there are three primary challenges that he has consistently seen:

1. A large number of people do not apply for grants due to specific requirements and criteria
2. Organizations do not always apply their review criteria equally. Exceptions may be made for white-led organizations that are not made for BIPOC organizations.
3. Data to assess the impact of policies on racial equity often does not exist.

Mr. Robinson shared a previous contract that he had done with a Kansas City foundation. When the foundation received the final report, they did not want to make it public because of the substantial inequities that Symphonic had identified.

Mr. Lee explained that he had worked in many cities doing similar work. He found Maryland to be unique in its Southern mindset, despite being outside of the deep south. He explained that many Marylanders maintain a mindset that certain people know better than others, and that this determination, whether consciously or unconsciously, is often applied along racial lines. This mentality has a significant impact on grantmaking processes in Maryland, leading to a disparity in funding for black-led organizations. Mr. Lee asked how these critical conversations can be held without hurting feelings.

Mr. Robinson shared that it will be healthy to have these challenging conversations, since they are more likely to yield results. He said that he is fully open to learning from the experience of the working group.

Ms. Walkiria Pool asked about what role organizations serving the Latino community will play in the analysis, since they are also underrepresented in MHAA's history. She explained that there is a lot of challenge with buy-in from the Latino community, since historically the state has failed to deliver equitably. She encouraged the working group to make this process as inclusive as possible and focus on the experiences of all races. In particular, Ms. Pool called for greater capacity building operations at the state level.

Mr. Robinson shared that his past work has been focused on building capacity with BIPOC communities. But, given the limited timeline and resources, the program's focus will be on creating an audit, rather than capacity building.

Next Steps

Secretary Robert McCord asked for the working group to send Mr. Arvizu a list of organizations and individuals who should be interviewed, either one-on-one or as a focus group. He divided potential subjects into three groups: those who have been denied a grant, those who have received a grant, and those who were never engaged in the grantmaking process. Mr. Arvizu will synthesize this data ahead of the next working group meeting.

Mr. Lee asked for Mr. Arvizu to share data on past MHAA funding Decisions.

Mr. Robinson asked the working group to, in addition to identifying parties, share their thought process on why they identified the parties that they did.

Mr. Arvizu planned to schedule the next meeting of the working group at the end of March.

Ms. Azubike encouraged the group to reach out broadly to their respective communities and networks.

The meeting concluded at 12:35.