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City Council urged to create guaranteed income program for Black men

The idea is that such a program, paying \$600 to \$800 a month, would remove some men from the streets, thereby reducing their dependence on an illegal economy driven by the drug trade.

By Fran Spielman | Jun 9, 2022, 5:44pm CDT



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Chicago was urged again Thursday to get moving toward granting some form of reparations to descendants of African American slaves, perhaps beginning with guaranteed minimum income checks, focused on unemployed Black men prone to violence.

In early 2021, Kamm Howard, co-chair of the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America, testified virtually at [the first meeting of the City Council's subcommittee on reparations](#).

He urged Chicago alderpersons then to use as a reparations model [the redress paid to victims of the Jon Burge torture era](#).

On Thursday, Howard delivered a similar but more pointed message at the subcommittee's second meeting, perhaps because those two meetings were separated by 15 months of inaction.

His PowerPoint presentation focused on Columbia University studies of two crime-plagued Chicago communities, in Englewood and West Garfield Park, and the overwhelming number of households in those neighborhoods without a father present.

One slide in the presentation listed grim statistics for "Black Male Labor Force Participation" in America's largest cities: 12% for men age 16-20, and 28% for men age 16-24. It does rise to 50% for the 16-60 age group.

No wonder so many men end up in "survival mode," as Howard put it, working in an "informal economy" relying on acts of violence.

Next came a slide headlined: "Reparations as Public Safety."

It recommended a guaranteed basic income program that "removes" Black men from the streets and "reduces dramatically their dependence on the illegal economy that is

steeped in violence.”

It noted the average income for those men is \$700 to \$900 a month, so a basic income of \$600 to \$800 would replace the bulk of that. The income would be provided for up to two years, and only if the men remain in remedial services, with the goal of eventually moving into the labor force and providing for their children.

Mayoral challenger Roderick Sawyer (6th), who chairs the Health and Human Services committee that created the reparations subcommittee, has criticized Mayor Lori Lightfoot for using \$31 million in federal stimulus money to dole out \$500 monthly checks to 500 needy Chicagoans for one year.

Sawyer was more receptive to the two-year income program, but only if strings are attached.

“There should be some accountability with that. They should do something in exchange for that. Maybe an evaluation. Maybe, if needed, some behavioral help. Attending meetings or speaking with professionals. And also maybe some work, if you will. Not something major. But something to engage in the community while you’re getting this stipend,” Sawyer said.

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Sawyer was asked why so little progress has been made toward reparations in Chicago when the subcommittee was created two years ago.

“The mayor is not as supportive as I would have hoped. ... A lot of us are willing to go further. But there’s been some recalcitrance by an administration that does not think this is the way to go,” Sawyer said.

“I keep pushing. I’ve been pushing on this for years. I’m gonna continue to make this an issue. If we do this correctly, we will see a corresponding drop in criminal activity and also health outcomes and other things that we’re experiencing in the Black community.”

Ald. Stephanie Coleman (16th), co-chair of the reparations sub-committee, said a guaranteed basic income program earmarked for African American men would “give some young folks an opportunity to be stewards of their communities and be change-agents.”

“If we can find \$12 million for gas cards, certainly we can find some resources to really address one of the most vulnerable populations in our city,” Coleman said.

“This can really help get our city a better, safer city.”

Coleman did not hesitate when asked on why reparations in Chicago is moving at such a snail’s pace.

“This is the only committee that isn’t being supported. There are no resources or policy. We have nothing,” she said, especially when compared to a reparations program already approved in Evanston.

“I hope that our budget department sees that the need is there. ... I admire and am a little jealous of Evanston because they have laid the groundwork. In Chicago, we should be setting the trend instead of following.”

In November 2019, **Evanston made history by establishing a \$10 million reparations fund** to make amends to that north suburb’s Black population for historic wrongs traced to racial inequities. The money will come from a cannabis sales tax.

A prime mover in that pioneering effort was former Evanston Ald. Robin Rue Simmons, who spoke at Thursday’s hearing, just as she did at the first hearing.

She noted that “more than 100 municipalities” have advanced local reparations ordinances.

“What city more so than Chicago should be advancing reparations for its crimes and harms against its Black community?” Simmons asked.

“When I led this work in Evanston, I did it looking at a \$46,000 household income gap between Black and white Evanston. I imagine it is more so in Chicago. In Evanston, we had a 13-year life expectancy difference. This data was enough for us to advance reparations. In Chicago, it’s 30 years.”

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