

Will New Jersey pay for slavery's legacy?

Head of Reparations Council speaks about ongoing efforts in state

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Last Juneteenth, the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice launched the New Jersey Reparations Council to determine how to compensate Black people impacted by the legacy of slavery in the Garden State.

The council's goal is to put out a report on Juneteenth 2025 outlining how those reparations would work.

The next step for the council was to create nine committees that would address various aspects of the brutal and damaging institution of slavery in New Jersey: History of Slavery in New Jersey; Public Narrative & Memory; Economic Justice; Segregation in New Jersey; Democracy; Public Safety & Justice; Health Equity; Environmental Justice; and Faith and Black Resistance.

Four committees have held virtual sessions over the last year to discuss their findings and hear public comment. The most recent virtual meeting was held by the Health Equity Committee on Feb. 8, with the next one on April 14. There are plans by the council for an in-person event on June 19 to mark one year from when it launched.

The council's work on reparations comes at a time when the subject can bring about negative reactions and resistance both on a state and national level. The state Legislature has yet to pass a bill introduced in 2019 calling for the formation of a reparations task force, although 18 municipalities in New Jersey have supported its passage.

A Pew Research Center survey in 2021 on how Americans view reparations found that nearly 70% surveyed were opposed to making payments to the descendants of slaves while about 30% were in favor. There was a stark racial breakdown in the results, with 77% of Black people in favor and only 18% of white people supporting it.

Jean-Pierre Brutus, senior counsel



The New Jersey Reparations Council's work on reparations comes at a time when the subject can bring about negative reactions and resistance both on a state and national level. PROVIDED BY NEW JERSEY INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

for the institute's Economic Justice Program who also serves as the head of the Reparations Council, spoke recently to NorthJersey.com about the group's efforts, the challenges they face and what they hope to accomplish by Juneteenth 2025.

The following transcript has been edited for space and clarity.

Question: How and when did the council come about?

Answer: In 2019, the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice, along with many of our partners seeking racially inclusive justice in New Jersey, organized a coalition to seek a reparations task force in New Jersey. And that bill was introduced in November 2019. And the reason that bill was introduced was because New Jersey has some of the worst racial disparities in the country. It has one of the largest racial wealth gaps of over \$300,000 between the household wealth of white families and Black families. It has the highest disparity of Black to white adults incarcerated as well as incarcerated youth. And a mortality rate (of babies) born to Black mothers of 3 to 1 compared to white mothers.

Given these present-day disparities, folks know that New Jersey should study the issue of reparations and come

up with recommendations. So, we organized to have this legislation passed and the bill was introduced in November 2019, but there was absolutely no movement on the bill.

We heard from legislators in New Jersey: "Why call it reparations? Why not call it a Black Lives Matter task force? Why not call it a wealth disparity task force? Anything but reparations." So, given the Legislature's inability to move the legislation - and even hold a hearing on that legislation - the institute felt we should not wait, given the urgency and importance of such a task force.

Why does the council have nine committees?

That's a great question. The level of harm from slavery, from segregation and from ongoing institutional racism in New Jersey is vast. And there are nine categories because we looked at other task forces like California, the international standards around reparations, some of the work being done in Evanston (Illinois) and other localities around the country, and thought about how we should think about the subject matter areas so that we could come up with a kind of comprehensive set of recommendations.

The areas that we chose reflect some of the longstanding areas where Black

people in New Jersey and in the United States have been harmed by the legacy of slavery and its aftermath.

How are the virtual forums informing your efforts?

I think they have been great so far. Part of the purpose of the public sessions...one part is for the general public to be exposed to the work of the committees up to the point at which they are presenting. One of the things I have found consistently and particularly in the (virtual hearing) comments section, they will say things like "I never knew this about New Jersey." I think there is a lack of knowledge among the New Jersey public about how deeply entrenched slavery was in New Jersey and how deeply entrenched interracial racism is in New Jersey at different points in its history.

The second half is to get the public to participate by providing public comment and to get a sense of how people in the general public are thinking about this issue. I think it helps our committees and the council to think about what the public is thinking about these particular issues through reparations. What kind of reparative remedies are they seeking, what they like.

What are the challenges and setbacks to reparative policies that have been brought up?

In the Health Equity session, we did not get any people raising concerns. In the other sessions, people have raised questions about how we are thinking about eligibility for this and then also compensation. Are we considering cash payment? Which we are. We are seeking cash payments for individuals. We are also seeking investments for Black communities and seeking reparative policies as well.

What has it been like for the council doing this work?

It's been fantastic. It's really engaging. It's been energizing. And given me a lot of hope about the possibilities in this. Also, it has exposed me to how ingrained the harms are because of how institutionalized and deeply entrenched these policies are, given their long history and how much work is required to combat this.