



**Testimony of NYC Mayor's Office of Equity Commissioner Sideya Sherman  
Before the Committees on Civil and Human Rights and Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and  
International Intergroup Relations  
Regarding the Juneteenth Legislative Package  
September 19, 2023 – 10:00am**

Chair Williams, Chair Ossé, members of the Committees on Civil and Human Rights, Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations, distinguished members of City Council and the public: good morning. I am Sideya Sherman, Commissioner of the New York City Mayor's Office of Equity. I am joined today by Sreoshy Banerjea, Executive Director at the New York City Public Design Commission; JoAnn Kamuf Ward, Deputy Commissioner for Policy and External Affairs at the New York City Commission on Human Rights; Silvia Montalban, Chief Citywide Equity and Inclusion Officer at the New York City Department of Citywide Administrative Services; and other representatives from the administration.

Thank you for this opportunity to discuss the Council's Juneteenth legislative package, which seeks to advance racial equity and justice through truth and repair. This administration is committed to upholding these values, as we work to foster a fairer and more equitable city.

**Foundational Values**

Last November, New Yorkers voted overwhelmingly to embed racial justice in the heart of city government, passing all three ballot measures proposed by the Racial Justice Commission. Included in the ballot measures is a new preamble for our New York City Charter, which, for the first time, introduces a set of foundational values to guide how we govern and serve the public. In the preamble, New Yorkers acknowledge "the grave injustices and atrocities that form part of our country's history" and the government's responsibility to "act intentionally to remedy these

past and continuing harms and to reconstruct, revise and reimagine our foundations, structures, institutions, and laws to promote justice and equity for all New Yorkers."

The Office of Equity is steadfast and focused on uplifting these profound values throughout government as we lead implementation of these recently passed measures. This includes developing the city's first citywide racial equity plan, consisting of measurable goals and strategies for structural reform across all city agencies. The charter calls on all public servants to reorient our roles to bring in practices of repair. With this shared commitment, we express our support for the spirit and intent of these bills and look forward to discussing them further with the Council this morning.

There are eight bills in this package. I appreciate your patience as we discuss and share overarching comments.

**Int 1082, CM Louis:** *creates a task force to consider the impact of slavery and past injustices for African Americans in New York City and reparations.*

The legacy of slavery in our city and country requires that we thoughtfully document past harms and integrate approaches for repair. To achieve the most meaningful impact, we believe this bill could benefit from further refinement to align and address potential overlap with Intro 1073 – which calls for a Truth & Reconciliation Commission -- and the recently passed reparations taskforce bill that awaits Governor Hochul's signature at the state level. We also recommend extending the implementation timeline and that the start date is timed to fall more than one year after the city issues its first citywide racial equity plan.

Executing this work with the rigor it deserves requires significant staffing power, legal resources, research, and academic expertise. For example, California's reparations task force undertook two years of work with considerable staff resources and support from the California DOJ. More than one year would be required to lead this vital work in our nation's largest city, with one of its longest histories.

**Int 1073, CM Hudson:** *would create a truth, healing, and reconciliation process.*

Our charter's preamble recognizes "the profound physical, emotional, social, and psychological harm and trauma to individuals, families, and communities" and charges us to "reconstruct,

revise and reimagine our foundations, structures, institutions, and laws to promote justice and equity for all New Yorkers." Truth and reconciliation commissions can be a powerful vehicle for promoting racial equity and justice.

As stated earlier in my testimony, we recommend the Council consider refining this bill to address potential areas of overlap with Int 1082. We also share the same concerns regarding allowing an adequate timeline to ensure appropriate staff resources and quality execution of this work.

From a statutory perspective, Bill 1073 tasks the Commission on Racial Equity (CORE) to lead this work, which may fall outside CORE's intended focus as presently defined in the charter. CORE is not written into law as a watchdog or as a fact-finding body. As reflected in the Racial Justice Commission's report, CORE was developed in response to New Yorkers who "desired to have City government more directly reflect community priorities and, to the extent possible, incorporate community power directly into decision-making." CORE's essential charter-mandated duties include identifying community equity priorities and responding to the citywide racial equity plan. CORE's current composition reflects this goal. This process will require additional resources, access to experts, and ample time. We recommend that the Council consider how to best work with CORE to leverage its resources and clarify within the bill which body would implement the reconciliation process after a plan is created.

We support the aim and intent of both bills and would happily continue working with the Council to identify or review paths forward.

**Int 1101, CM Farias:** *requires the Mayor's Office of Racial Equity to create anti-racism training for employees of human services contractors used by human services agencies.*

Our city's robust human service sector provides critical social services to New Yorkers in need. It is crucial that those who selflessly serve our city's diverse communities understand anti-racism and can incorporate best practices into their work. We support this bill with caveats.

Fueled by the pandemic, the human services sector has experienced considerable strain over the past few years. The Administration has worked diligently to improve how we do business with nonprofits, creating a new Office of Nonprofits, clearing over \$6 billion in backlogged payments, and embarking on the reform recommendations outlined in the Joint Task Force to Get

Nonprofits Paid on Time. To ensure this requirement is a true value add for employees and New Yorkers by extension, the city would need to invest significant resources and allow ample time for implementation. We also suggest resolving the ambiguity of "covered employee" by applying the requirement to all employees involved in providing services, including managers. We don't think anti-racism or anti-discrimination should only be for front-line workers.

**Int 1118, Williams:** *Requires the Department of Citywide Administrative Services (DCAS) to annually create anti-racism and anti-racial discrimination training for all city workers. Agencies can satisfy this requirement with alternative training if approved by the Mayor's Office of Racial Equity and CCHR.*

The preamble directs our government: "Vigilance is required to prevent the recurrence of past or worsening of continuing harms." DCAS implements an "Everybody Matters" training biannually that helps employees recognize different types of discrimination and racial inequity, introduces anti-racism concepts, and is mandated EEO training. To expand city employee understanding of racism and how it can show up in our work, we recommend that the Office of Equity and CCHR partner with DCAS to help build upon their existing "Everybody Matters" training to introduce a new and expanded anti-racism module. This module would also help city employees understand the recent racial justice charter amendments and the citywide racial equity planning required by law.

We support recognition of the painful history of slavery that endures through our city and country today, as well as highlighting and uncovering the often-underappreciated history of resilience, courage, and community-building by the city's Black communities across generations. In this spirit, the city, led by the Department of Cultural Affairs, looks forward to working with the Council to advance **Int 1150 (Marte, 13)** - *in relation to establishing a New York City freedom trail*. Furthermore, DOT and NYC Parks look forward to further discussions with the Public Advocate to identify an appropriate location for the sign, in response to Intro 934 (**Public Advocate Williams**) - *which requires the Department of Transportation to place a sign at Wall Street and Pearl Street marking the establishment of New York's first slave market in 1711*.

With respect to **Int 716 (CM De La Rosa)**, *which would create a school diversity monitor within CCHR, the City's Human Rights Commission, and Int 1085 (CM Nurse)*, *which would task the Public Design Commission (PDC) within six months to conduct a public works review and*

*create a removal plan*, we have concerns regarding appropriateness of the agencies identified and alignment with existing efforts and requirements.

The administration shares the Council's commitment to increasing diversity across our school system and ensuring equitable educational opportunities and outcomes. However, Int 716, which places an oversight monitor at CCHR, is inconsistent with CCHR's core functions of civil law enforcement outreach on the Human Rights Law's protections. Further, the critical work outlined in 716, which includes identifying the complex root causes of inequities is potentially duplicative of current and ongoing administration efforts to advance educational equity, including work of agencies like New York City Public Schools, and the newly mandated citywide racial equity planning process, requiring agencies to disaggregate data by race, establish goals, and build strategies to achieve racial equity through structural reforms.

We support the intent of **Int 1085** to reevaluate, recontextualize, and foster greater diversity in the city's art collection. We should note that the Public Design Commission considers applications related to permanent public art in the city's collection following the process outlined in the City Charter, which requires a public meeting and vote by the PDC, among other steps. The city owns approximately 2,500 pieces of art. The PDC would need a significant commitment of resources to conduct extensive research, likely in phases, and begin the collaborative process of creating and issuing new guidance on items in the city collection, requiring significantly more than six months to develop.

As part of the city's broader efforts to create a public art collection that better reflects our city's diversity, PDC is committed to promoting equity and diverse narratives through art, including by partnering with Black Gotham Experience to expand the City Hall tour program, focusing on the untold histories and impact of the African diaspora. The Commission recently approved the addition of a monument honoring Shirley Chisholm in Prospect Park, which is the first artwork in a larger project to honor more women in our public realm. Earlier in 2018 and 2021, following the 2018 Mayoral Monument Commission report, the PDC also approved the removal of the Teddy Roosevelt Statue at the American Museum of National History and the J. Marion Sims Sculpture at Central Park. The PDC advanced these actions through its existing application, public hearing, and vote cycle.

We look forward to discussing these bills and the full Juneteenth bill package further in today's hearing. Thank you again for the opportunity to comment and for these bold proposals to create a more just city. We welcome your questions.