



D.C. POLICY

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Public Hearing

B23-0038, “Racial Equity Achieves Results
Amendment Act of 2019”

Committee on Government Operations
Councilmember Brandon T. Todd, Chairperson

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John A. Wilson Building

Testimony of Kathryn Zickuhr
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Good morning, Chairperson Todd and members of the committee. My name is Kathryn Zickuhr, and I am the Deputy Director of the D.C. Policy Center, an independent, non-partisan, independent think tank dedicated to providing objective, targeted, and high-quality data analysis to support a productive policy debate in the District of Columbia. I thank you for the opportunity to testify on the Racial Equity Achieves Results Amendment Act of 2019.

Racial equity training and racial equity-related performance measurements are important first steps as the District seeks to dismantle the foundation of today's inequitable outcomes for residents of color. We urge the Council to go beyond the measures in this legislation and think more expansively about how data and analysis can empower communities of color in D.C. to drive policies for racial equity.

One of the biggest challenges in assessing the impact of new and current policies is the lack of relevant, timely, and disaggregated data. If data on a policy's impact is collected, it might not include information on race or other relevant information, or it might be collected sporadically or in different ways each time, making analysis over time difficult. Agencies may even already collect this data but be unable or unwilling to share it with other agencies or the public due to technological difficulties, broad privacy concerns, or limitations on staff time and capacity. We also cannot ignore that national, state, and local government agencies have often collected and used data on race and ethnicity in order to discriminate against and deny resources to people of color,¹ and that asking for this information can still be viewed with suspicion.

Responsible use of data also requires understanding its context. Policies on the books might be different from how those policies are applied in practice. Data collected and analyzed by a single agency may also only capture a small part of

¹ For one of many examples, see "[Mapping segregation in D.C.](https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/mapping-segregation-fha/)" for a history of how the Federal Housing Authority institutionalized racial exclusivity as a criterion for mortgage lending. Sarah Shoenfeld, "Mapping segregation in D.C." D.C Policy Center (April 23, 2019). Available at <https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/mapping-segregation-fha/>

the picture, as that agency may be unable to track downstream or aggregate effects of a policy.

We saw many of these dynamics at play as we prepared a recent report on racial inequities in fines and fees in the District.² Data on who pays fines and fees in D.C. is hard to come by, often because that type of demographic data is not collected in the first place; if it is, it may not be shared outside of that agency, either within the D.C. government or with the public.

To be clear, lack of comprehensive and systematic data does not prevent us from knowing that this is a problem. We know, for instance, that having outstanding traffic debt can prevent individuals from renewing their drivers license; we have plenty of data on the vast racial inequities in income and wealth in D.C. that underlie this issue; we can chart the policies and practices that effectively criminalize poverty, and lead to even greater debts and legal obstacles for low-income residents in D.C., who are predominately people of color. But this type of timely, disaggregated data would be enormously helpful in understanding the scope of the issue, and what policy levers would be most effective for action.

At the same time, quantitative data and analysis is only one facet through which we can understand the impact of government policies and practices—and data is not a substitute for policy, judgment, or justice. D.C.’s residents of color should be central in determining the District’s racial equity goals and how those goals are reached, with data one of many tools we can use to help identify issues and understand the District’s policy options.

Dismantling government practices that could aggravate racial inequities will be a challenging—but vital—endeavor. But D.C. can learn from other jurisdictions that have brought the voices of affected community members into their policymaking processes. For instance, San Francisco launched its Financial Justice Project in 2016 to assess and reform how fees and fines impact the city’s most vulnerable residents.³ The Financial Justice Project works with community groups and is

² Kathryn Zickuhr, “Applying a racial equity lens to fines and fees in the District of Columbia.” D.C. Policy Center (April 22, 2019). Available at <https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/racial-equity-fines-fees/>

³ More: <https://sftreasurer.org/financialjustice>

embedded in the Office of the San Francisco Treasurer. It also coordinates San Francisco’s Fines and Fees Task Force, comprised of community members, ten government departments, and the courts, which examined best practices, heard expert and community testimony, and made 40 policy recommendations across six policy areas.⁴

Importantly, the Financial Justice Project has had significant policy impact.⁵ Many of its recommendations have been implemented, including eliminating locally-controlled criminal justice administrative fees in San Francisco courts, reducing tow and boot fees for very low-income residents, creating “Ability To Pay” guidelines for paying off traffic debt, and even eliminating overdue fines at the San Francisco Public Library.

I’m using fines and fees as an example here because they are precisely the types of policies and practices whose effects are often invisible without targeted attention and research. It often takes significant time and effort to understand the extent of current inequities, their history, and what options exist to address them. However, there are many other policy areas in which this approach can be used—where a group of community members, researchers, and government officials could connect the priorities of D.C.’s residents of color with data and policy analysis to create policy reforms for racial equity in D.C.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

⁴ Overview of the Financial Justice Project (December 2018), available at https://sftreasurer.org/sites/default/files/Overview_of_the_Financial_Justice_Project_12.11.18.pdf

⁵ For a full list of implemented policy reforms, see the “Financial Justice Project Accomplishments to Date,” last accessed April 24, 2019. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1gUo96d0Idfa6qdFj5QhGY-cdl61MZ_9q/view