



February 23, 2021

The Honorable Steve Cohen  
Chair  
House Judiciary Subcommittee on Constitution, Civil Rights and Civil Liberties  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20015

The Honorable Mike Johnson  
Ranking Member  
House Judiciary Subcommittee on Constitution, Civil Rights and Civil Liberties  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20015

Dear Chair Cohen and Ranking Member Johnson:

As part of the February 17 Subcommittee on Constitution, Civil Rights and Civil Liberties hearing on "H.R. 40: Exploring the Path to Reparative Justice in America," we write to provide the views of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) Action Fund. We would ask that this statement be included as part of the official hearing record.

The SPLC Action Fund is dedicated to fighting for racial justice alongside impacted communities in pursuit of equity and opportunity for all. We work primarily in the Southeast United States where we have offices in Alabama, Georgia, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Washington, D.C. The SPLC Action Fund promotes policies and laws that will eliminate the structural racism and inequalities that fuel oppression of people of color, immigrants, young people, women, low-income people, and the LGBTQ+ community.

We strongly support H.R. 40, legislation, sponsored by Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee, which would establish a commission to study and consider a national apology and proposal for reparations for the immoral and inhuman institution of slavery, as well as the lingering negative effects of slavery and race-based discrimination. We urge the Committee to support this important legislation and send it to the full House for approval as soon as possible.

In urging prompt congressional approval of this legislation, we acknowledge, with appreciation, the longtime leadership of former Representative John Conyers, Jr. in promoting this measure. And we deeply admire the extraordinary, clear articulation of the case for reparations set out by Ta-Nehisi Coates in the June 2014 issue of *The Atlantic*.<sup>1</sup>

After more than 400 years of oppression, overcriminalization, and discrimination, the United States must reckon with its long history of injustice if we hope to substantially remedy the harms the country has inflicted on many of its citizens in the name of white supremacy.

And there is no better time to do so. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a starkly disproportionate impact on Black, Indigenous, and Latinx communities — dramatically revealing staggering inequities in health care, the workplace, housing, and in financial and educational systems. At the same time, the killing of George Floyd last May — and many other unarmed men and women of color by the police — has driven thousands to sustained protests in the streets, energizing a decades-long movement calling not just for reform, but for a fundamental reimagining of policing and incarceration policies — and a deep

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<sup>1</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Case for Reparations*, *The Atlantic*  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/> June, 2014.

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reinvestment in community-based programs. An estimated 10% of Americans participated in these demonstrations of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement against racist policing and other forms of racial discrimination.<sup>2</sup> A large majority of Americans – nearly seven in 10, according to recent polling conducted by the SPLC – are concerned about racism in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

SPLC also strongly supports legislation introduced in the last Congress by Rep. Barbara Lee which urges the establishment of a United States Commission on Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation (TRHT). We believe that acknowledging, documenting, understanding, and educating about the effects of slavery, generational trauma, and institutional racism – and how they impact our nation's current laws and policies – is an important step towards healing and transforming our nation, propelling us towards a more just and equitable future. Only by raising public awareness and understanding the impact of past systemic institutional racism can we begin the necessary process of addressing persistent racial and gender inequities in education, housing, health care, voting rights, employment, and the criminal justice system.

Congress has created similar commissions in the past, including a Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians<sup>4</sup> to examine the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. That Commission's unanimous report formed the basis for the Civil Liberties Act of 1988<sup>5</sup> granting wartime survivors a public apology, individual reparations of \$20,000, and the establishment of a public education fund. In the same way, this legislation to create a long-overdue commission to study and create reparations proposals is a necessary step in acknowledging the injustices our country has committed. Enactment of this legislation will bolster a movement to eliminate racial discrimination.

We stand ready to help you promote this important initiative to help transform our nation and permanently eliminate persistent racial inequalities.

Sincerely,



Margaret Huang  
President and CEO

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<sup>2</sup> KFF Health Tracking Poll, <https://www.kff.org/racial-equity-and-health-policy/report/kff-health-tracking-poll-june-2020/>, June 2020

<sup>3</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center, *New SPLC Polls Find Overwhelming Support for Anti-Racism Education*, <https://www.splcenter.org/presscenter/new-splc-polls-finds-overwhelming-support-anti-racism-education>

<sup>4</sup> Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians *Personal Justice Denied*, <https://www.archives.gov/research/japanese-americans/justice-denied>, 1982

<sup>5</sup> Public Law 100-383 (1988), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-102/pdf/STATUTE-102-Pg903.pdf>