

BIO

Ateira Griffin is a life-long Baltimore City resident, educator, facilitator, and community organizer. She is the founder of BOND - Building Our Nation's Daughters, Inc. which mentors single mothers to cultivate positive mother-daughter relationships and increase their economic mobility 2 generations at a time. Ms. Griffin earned a bachelor's in civil engineering from Morgan State University and a master's in secondary education along with a certificate in school leadership and administration from Johns Hopkins University. She has served as a k-12 educator, school administrator, and has authored and facilitated leadership training for adults in Baltimore and across the nation. Ms. Griffin was awarded the 2019 Echoing Green Fellowship in recognition of her leadership and her work with BOND.

Written Testimony

Ateira Griffin

CEO & Founder Building Our Nation's Daughters

Chairwoman Maloney, Chairman Raskin, Ranking member Roy, and all committee members.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit my testimony.

21231. 21211. 21215. 21239. 21212. 21218. 21217. 21234. 21201. 44256.

These numbers represent every zipcode I have ever lived in. As a child, we moved 14 times both within Baltimore city and once out of state. For generations, my family has lived in Baltimore City. Like millions of families across the nation, particularly black and brown families, for generations we have been directly impacted by the federal government's failed promises for housing equity. The lack of action and accountability by HUD to affirmatively further fair housing is directly linked to my childhood experiences and current experiences of black and brown children today.

My family first settled in a neighborhood in central-west Baltimore using my great-grandfather's GI Loan after he returned home from serving as a ship's cook in WWII. He and my great-grandmother, Wilhemina, bought a home in a historically black neighborhood called Hoe's Heights named after black farmers who founded the community. Hoe's Heights proved to be a

beneficial choice for our family for generations to come. However, it was not truly their choice. My great-grandparents were denied loans for houses they originally wanted to purchase and instead were showed homes in segregated black communities where they may feel “more comfortable” due to racist housing practices and redlining in Baltimore. There was no protection in the 1940s by federal or local law at the time to ensure lenders, municipalities, and state governments not only prevented this type of discrimination but set proactive guidelines for anti-racist and anti-discriminatory practices in housing. My great-grandparents could not live and purchase a home in any community they choose.

The neighborhood my great-grandparents landed in was and still is considered a black enclave. A tree-lined, park flanked black community in the midst of white communities on every side. I remember the streets I used to jump rope or ride my big wheel down as a child. Shielded from heavy street traffic and noise pollution. There were lush woods and a park at the end of the block where I collected leaves or played with my brother hunting for frogs, bugs, and any other interesting finds to sneak in the house. My school received the full funding necessary to support the growth and development of its students and was a short walk away. Families on the block were referred to by last names and would host block parties for birthdays and summer celebrations together. We were a tight-knit, cheerful, healthy, and thriving community. Growing up I often compared my childhood experience in Hoe’s Heights to each subsequent neighborhood we lived in after. A predominantly black neighborhood was thriving - why and how? Proximity to white affluent neighborhoods which translates to indirect access to the resources white communities historically attract.

Our neighborhood was surrounded by middle to upper-class white neighborhoods. It fell right in the top middle portion of the “white L”. A term coined by Dr. Lawrence Brown in his research around racist and discriminatory policies impacts on the spatial distribution of people and resources overtime in Baltimore. The “white L” is where long life expectancy, better health outcomes, transportation, schools, and grocery stores are centered. A history of intentional and consistent investment is the cause. Our community tertiary benefited from the historical investments in white communities because of our geographic location in the midst of them. We were 3 blocks from a bustling shopping center with a large grocery store and aisles of fresh produce, a pharmacy and a gym. We had multiple parks and ample walking paths. Hoe’s

heights benefited from our wealthy neighbors in all of these ways, but most importantly access to the infusion of money and development which impacted our lived experiences.

When my family moved to another neighborhood after being priced out by rent increases, it felt like a different world. Our new house was in the middle of a block of closely clustered houses. Trees were far and few on our street. If they're, they were decaying. Two abandoned houses flanked our small street. Instead of falling asleep to the rhythmic sound of crickets, I now had to fight for sleep through the consistent sound of gunshots and speeding cars - which later became normal. There were also new rules that came with our new neighborhood: No playing outside. Come straight home, no after school programs. Stay away from the windows. I hated was the food. I missed fresh peaches, grapes, cantaloupe. I missed snapping fresh green beans and corn with my grandmother. Instead, everything was in a can, box, or bag. Nothing was fresh. There was a heavy sadness over our family. It showed up through weight gain, our lack of outdoor activities - my mom no longer ran every morning we no longer rode bikes. Me and my brother's academic performance - I loved school but began to lose focus in class and struggle with courses that once came easily to me. My brother was being considered for learning support - which he did not need in our other school. Our emotional state - my mother under constant stress and in my opinion depressed. Our health - I was diagnosed with Asthma due to the high amounts of pollution, higher temperatures, and poor eating. My mother had early signs of hypertension or "high blood pressure. She shared with me in later years "That was the best I could find for us because so many landlords turned us away. No one wanted to rent to a single mom with two kids - especially a black one." Her salary was just high enough to disqualify her from receiving housing support but low enough to be priced out of neighborhoods with better living conditions. Housing policies did not protect my mother and our family from these types of discriminatory housing practices.

One summer as I played with my dolls on the living room floor our front door was kicked open. I jumped to the other side of the room and hid behind a chair scared. A man rushed through the door, ran through our living room and dining room, and then out of the back door in our kitchen - where my mother was. I heard her scream. A few seconds later a blue blur ran the same path through our house. A police officer chasing the man. We received no apology, explanation, or even acknowledgment of what happened when my mother called to report the incident. At the age of 8, I learned - Our family, our neighborhood, our community was invisible, dispensable,

and often blamed for its current conditions. When she called to report the incident my mom was told, “ If you don’t want to experience that, then don’t live there.” She decided we wouldn’t. We packed up our house in West Baltimore and moved in with my grandparents in Northeast Baltimore. The trees, parks, good schools, and resources were back along with the proximity to white affluent neighborhoods. This is not an isolated phenomenon unique to my family. If we asked any family living in neighborhoods like this across the nation they would outline similar experiences. Housing inequity is both widely experienced and deeply felt by communities across the nation.

Living with my grandmother, Veronica, I learned about her life in the ‘50s and her work at the Housing Authority of Baltimore City. She experienced her share of racism and discrimination, was among the first classes to integrate Eastern High School, was outspoken and often stood up for others to fight injustice. This spirit led her to work at the housing authority where she spent 24 years of her life committed to ensuring low-income families in Baltimore had access to safe, clean, affordable housing. In her 20th year there, she became sick but still pushed forward to research and present better ways HABC and the vouchers department could serve families. I heard her talk about her frustration with the lack of clear frameworks and federal support to ensure all families could live and thrive in any neighborhood in Baltimore. She fought each day for families hitting many walls in her attempts to change the application system for housing. My grandmother worked to impact this system and get at least one more family housing until she was no longer physically capable. She was officially diagnosed with stage 4 Pancreatic Cancer in 2001. The affirmatively furthering fair housing rule if enacted sooner would have supported what my grandmother gave her last days. I cannot help but wonder what if federal regulations were in place to support my grandmother’s work on the ground? What if she had access to data and tools in partnership with the HUD to support her push to implement proactive measures of disrupting racist and discriminatory housing policies? Unfortunately, these changes came 13 years too late. She passed away in 2002. And now we face a proposal to remove the proactive system providing oversight in affirmatively furthering fair housing altogether. It is not lost on me today that I sit here picking up the baton for my grandmother and carry it to further her legacy. My grandmother’s last words to me were “ Baby girl, I don’t want you to be afraid.” I am not afraid and I will give voice to her experiences and those who work every day to impact systemic change from within. How much more can they do with the full support of the federal government?

We moved to Medina, Ohio when I was 11 years old. Leaving behind everything familiar for this new place was not how I wanted to start middle school. My mom tried to help me understand we were moving to find a better home, better schools, and a better chance we could afford. Instead, once again, we were directed to the part of town “our people” would feel more comfortable. No black enclave awaited us this time. Our new neighborhood had a corner store, surrounded by fast-food restaurants, no public transportation, and the school with the lowest scores in the county - it was 85% black. My mother found a way to get me to a different school which came with its own harmful experience namely being isolated and tokenized as one of three black students in the entire school. We thought we could escape the racist and discriminatory practices for housing in Baltimore and how it negatively affected our mental and physical health, education, and economic opportunities. We were wrong. This time the impact was two-fold. We experienced the same housing inequities and lack of resource access and we were far from our community of support we leaned on in the past as in Baltimore.

Quickly we realized the “escape” mentality or making it out was not the answer. This is not simply a problem isolated to local and state policies and practices. These practices are baked into our national housing system at every level and can only be changed by reverse-engineering the policies supporting systems of oppression propping up housing inequities across America. This is not just a problem of having enough houses, housing affordability, or housing laws. It is about how we invest in communities and whose community we choose to invest in. We must choose to eradicate zipcode destiny with intentionality supporting families regardless of their racial identity, socioeconomic background, and geographic location. The generational impact of housing inequities I’ve outlined didn’t develop overnight. Rural, Urban, Suburban - black, brown and historically marginalized communities have suffered for decades under intentional, institutionalized discriminatory housing practices and disenfranchisement. We as a nation must be willing to do the tough uncomfortable work of confronting our nation’s past decisions to systematically oppress black and brown communities in America. We must proactively enact measures to dismantle these systems while identifying solutions eradicating the root causes. These roots are deep, but we must dig them up and replant policies to grow a healthy fruitful America.

It is easy to say “ these regulations cause too much paperwork and entanglements between federal and state”. It is easy to blame bureaucracy and partisan politics. My family moved 14

times chasing resource-rich opportunities afforded to wealthier white communities. My grandmother and great-grandfather tried to work within these systems to change outcomes locally. They both realized these changes must be guided by federal frameworks and mandates, much like other civil rights.

Those closest to the pain are closest to the solution. Those farthest from the pain have the luxury of philosophizing it. I do not have that luxury. The single mothers we support in BOND do not have that luxury. My grandmother died not having that luxury.

As a teacher, one question grounded me when making decisions for my classroom. I leave you with a series of similar questions I hope will help you make decisions for the children and families across America:

Are you helping or are you hurting? How are families? How are the children?