

**Hearing on FY21 Budget
Philadelphia City Council
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**A Message to City Council
on the proposed Philadelphia Fiscal Year 2021 Budget**

Testimony by

**Shyaine Betha, Leslie McCrea Washington, and Jessica Seigle
Advisors**

**Building Wealth and Health Network
centerforhungerfreecommunities.org/network**

Note: Opinions expressed in this testimony are those of the individual members of the Building Wealth and Health Network and are not an official statement from the Center for Hunger-Free Communities.



Mayor Kenney and members of City Council, thank you for considering this written testimony in regard to the proposed fiscal year 2021 budget for the City of Philadelphia. The events of the past few months have impacted us as individuals as well as our larger community, and we look to our elected officials to make decisions with our united best interests in mind.

We hope you carefully hear our words and seriously consider our collective testimony as well tell our stories. Many of us have been quarantined at home worrying, praying, watching everything going on, and feeling so many emotions, from fear to rage and even exhaustion. It's so painful and sickening because we all feel helpless, and we are TIRED. We built this country. Yet we are denied so much. It cuts so deep. But we are hopeful. Seeing a younger generation with less prejudice brings us hope.

Despite the images portrayed of us, Black people too just want to wake up with a smile and live their lives being productive members of society. It's sad that so many have had to die for more people to wake up and see the realities we experience every day. From social and educational discrimination to financial and economic discrimination, we see it all and it is embedded in the very fabric of American society.

For instance, we have one member of our network whose mother grew up in a tiny shack with 11 family members, many of them who didn't get the chance to go to school because they had to farm during the harvest. This was 60+ years ago. Did you know that is the reason so many older black people don't have a proper education and can't read and write? However, they too are very concerned for their children and grandchildren. Many of them want to march but cannot due to preexisting conditions or old age, but they are here in spirit.

This member's family came from an area of the South where the deaths of Black people weren't even reported, and now we broadcast them on the news. She broke down crying the other day thinking about her mother and what she suffered. Her grandparents had been sharecroppers in South Carolina, where her grandfather was not paid normally with wages, but in alcohol, and he eventually drank himself to death. Can you imagine being misused and mistreated in such a way? His story is not unique.

This member grew up in Wynnefield, where her family was only the second Black family on the block. The white neighbors were nice to her and her family, which because of their previous trauma, actually scared them. Can you imagine that? Being fearful of your own neighbor's kindness out of sheer caution? By the grace of God, they were good hearted people, and they became like a family.

From slavery to sharecropping to Jim Crow to the prison industrial complex, those of us classified as Black in America have experienced a disproportionate level of exclusion, punishment, incarceration, and blatant, outright hateful prejudice at the hands of both our fellow man as well as elected officials meant to serve the American people. WE ARE AMERICAN. There's so much hurt here in this city alone. How many of you remember the MOVE bombing of 1985? Can you imagine being targeted because of your lifestyle or the color of your skin? To this day West Philly

has not fully recovered from that horrific experience, enacted by then Mayor W. Wilson Goode and the Philadelphia Police Department.

Proposed Fiscal Year 2021 Budget

The proposed budget cuts paired with an increase in budget for the police show a blatant ignorance, lack of understanding, and lack of solidarity regarding what people in the community really need. It is exclusionary of poor people, many of who are the everyday working citizen, and seems to favor those with deeper pockets, as well as those who work in their interests. It's absurd that these little pieces of designer paper we call money are used to measure an individual and a community's worth. But it is evident through this budget that the lives of Blacks, people of color, and the poor are not valued. It is telling us we are not welcome here. Our community, and Philadelphia as a whole, does not need more policing, we need more support to not just stay alive but to thrive.

Recreation and After School Activities

Instead of more policing, we would like to see the City funding extracurricular activities in public spaces to the fullest extent possible. A community that is socially invested in its neighborhoods has more unity and an overall better quality of life. Busy children are more engaged in their communities, which gives them a sense of belonging and a sense of pride. Our children need other adults in their lives as mentors. Rec centers and summer camp programs, of which there used to be so many, offer these opportunities. Unfortunately, many parents can't afford sports and other such activities but access to parks and playgrounds offer an accessible option to keep families active and healthy. We would love to see programs and organizations that support holistic health funded in this upcoming year's budget.

Education

Specifically, for Black people, we need more resources and educational opportunities that teach us the core things we are not learning in inner-city schools - finances, the law, our rights, and our history. We need to see more places like the Dornsife Center in West Philadelphia that provide a space for their community. Everyone needs a Dornsife Center in their neighborhood. Education is essential for our community to be successful, and valuable after school programming should be something every child has access to. We would like to see programs that teach our children the skills they need in life as early as middle school. Our children are brilliant; and given the opportunity and resources they need to explore themselves, we can make a huge impact on their immediate futures. We need to see more support for teachers and social workers who are woefully overworked and under resourced. They are the heroes of our communities and don't get enough support. With our underfunded school system more focused on the school to prison pipeline, lots of young Black men can't obtain work and have to use other means to support themselves. They don't want to do that, but they feel like they have to because options are limited and slim. I'm sure you all are aware that we spend more on police, policies, and prisons to lock up young Black men than we do on the education that could have prevented them from ending up there in the first place.

Mental Health Support

We need more accessible mental health support. If we can support the wholistic health of more individuals, we might not need so much policing in our neighborhoods. Black people are being disproportionately under-served and Black neighborhoods need education and social programs like rites of passage, to provide skills training and mental health services. These services and outlets need to be directly in our neighborhoods.

Affordable Housing Programs

Our city needs more affordable housing. This will continue to be a challenge as many politicians continue receiving campaign contributions from construction companies and developers. Serving the underserved sounds great, but if you all can't find funds for your campaign without the developers, what is this really saying? It is saying they are more important than the communities you are elected to represent.

It's admirable for those politicians who did turn away developer money, but what are you doing to make sure Philadelphians can afford to stay in their homes? Why are we allowing the building of storefronts instead of promoting affordable residential housing development when there's so many working homeless, many of who are Black and Brown? Everyone deserves the dignity of safe and affordable housing!

How can our city continue to increase funding for the police when so many people can't even pay rent in the neighborhoods they grew up in? There are families paying 30 to 40% of their income toward rent and then at the end of the month don't have money for all the other necessities in life. This is a tragedy, and you can do something about it.

Conclusion

We urge you to reconsider your proposed budget, and reallocating where this money is going. Try and understand what the recent and longstanding outrage is all about. We understand it's hard for people with privilege to understand what's going on. But if there is any time to rip off the band aid and start healing the wounds that have been inflicted on our people for generations, it is now. You don't live in our shoes, but not sharing our experience is not an excuse to remain distant or to continue to uphold racist policies.

And for any who may be confused, we acknowledge racism to be a systemic denial of a person's rights to liberty, justice and the pursuit of happiness. For too long the Black community has been subject to this system but we come today seeking and offering hope for a future that supports and sustains all Philadelphians for the betterment and love for our beloved city. The narrative that Black people can endure more, that they can take on more pain, struggle, trials, and tribulations, like animals, is false. We too have a breaking point which we have crossed long ago, yet we remain happy, hopeful, and faithful that we can and will see a day beyond racism. We are not property. We are not thugs, criminals, or super predators. We are resilient, inventive, and creative. We too, are God's children.

Thank you.