

Witnesses to Hunger

Testimony of

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Task Force on Poverty, Income Inequality, and Opportunity
and the Congressional Black Caucus

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In 1968, the Kerner Commission warned us. They warned that our country was “moving toward two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal.” The Commissioners saw that the discrimination and segregation in our society was threatening the future of America. They saw that white America created, maintained, and condoned segregation and poverty, and there needed to be a coordinated effort to end racism and classism.

The report warned us about inaction. That a failure to address these issue put the very future of America at stake. But here I am 50 years later, and it seems this report could have been written today. Our country is broken, fractured along racial lines, and I am deeply hurt, deeply concerned, and calling on everyone who will listen to take action.

My Background

I want to thank Congresswoman Lee for inviting me to speak at this Forum on 50 Years after the Kerner Report and to each of you for considering my testimony today.

My name is Tianna Gaines-Turner. I am an advocate with Witnesses to Hunger. Witnesses to Hunger is a movement of people like me— people who have experienced poverty, hunger, and discrimination. We speak about our experiences to teach the world about the truth and how to make change.



POVERTY DOES NOT DEFINE MY FAMILY

“We live in poverty. We face daily struggles. But it does not and will not define who we are, where we have been, and where we are going.”

- Tianna, Witnesses to Hunger: Philadelphia

All of us – we’ve had enough – more than enough of the violence of poverty, so much so that we cannot stay silent. We speak from our direct experience about the need for better wages so we can support our families. We talk about the need for safe and affordable housing so that we can have a place to call home. We speak about the need for safe streets and playgrounds so our children can play in peace, and so we can get to school and work safely and on time. We talk about our safety net programs and how they must be improved to help America’s families get out of poverty. We willingly share our lives through photographs and our testimony so our children will have a better future. I have included the pictures and voice of my Witnesses’ sisters in this testimony to show that the experiences I am describing are not my own but shared in different cities and communities throughout this country.

My husband and I have three children together, and I am also a step-mother to two beautiful daughters. We both work hard to provide for our family but still we often fall short. This is no way to live and thrive.

I recently got a new job. I am a Community and Housing Stabilization Specialist for a non-profit organization called Eddie's House. It's very rewarding as I am able to work with people in my community to find housing and use my own experiences of being homeless and struggling to pay rent to help others. I know the hardship and stress of being homeless. I know the systems and I know the barriers to moving forward. I want to make sure that no family has to suffer like my husband, children and I did, when we had no place to call home.

My Day

To share what this struggle is like, I am now inviting you in to my life – let me help you walk a day in my shoes. Welcome to my life, my neighborhood.

Each and every day I see the impacts of discrimination and racism in my life. From the neighborhood I live in, to the school my children go to, and to the job I have. I, and others, in my community – live at a disadvantage because of the color of our skin.

It Starts at Home

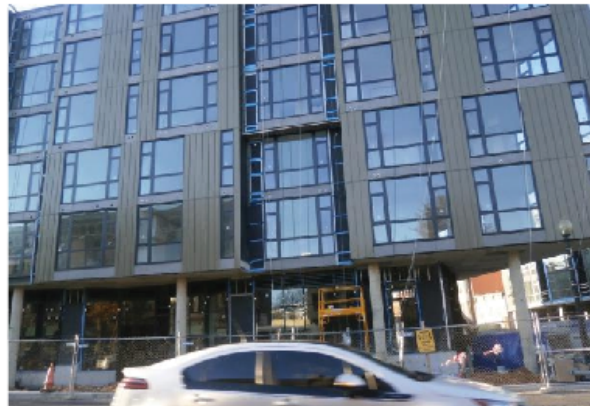
To begin to address the racial divide in this country we need to start at home. The ghettos and segregation described in the Kerner Commission Report still exist today.



WHAT'S SO DIFFERENT

"What splits the projects from that side of Shawmut is Massachusetts Avenue. Once you cross Mass Ave, you're no longer where the hood is, or where the Spanish or Black people are. Look at how nice that looks. Why are we so different if they're only a block or two apart – they're down the street. We're separated by Massachusetts Avenue. What do you see that's different? What can you point out? And now, you tell me why there is such a difference? This is Boston Housing."

- Tamara S., *Witnesses to Hunger: Boston*



NOT SO AFFORDABLE

"While the non-affordable homes are being built, I sit in my mother's home seeking, searching, and striving to become a home owner or even an apartment renter. The district is a thriving city. I wonder why the system and people of the city can't thrive together. No matter what one's pay is, every working person should be able to be housed safely."

- Nefatera M., *Witnesses to Hunger: Washington, DC*

Housing is the number one cost families face. When affordable housing options are so limited and only in high-poverty neighborhoods, it continues the system of segregation. It limits our access to jobs or forces us to travel far to find a job that pays a better wage. It hinders our children's educational opportunities as the neighborhood school is under resourced and over crowded. It keeps us unable to break the cycle of poverty.

My family and I have been homeless twice. We, like so many families, sit on housing waiting list over a decade to be able to access Section 8, a supportive housing program. This program helped me to put a roof over my family's head, but in an unsafe neighborhood and an unhealthy home.

So my family is forced to live in a house we can hardly afford, even though it has mold and pests that make my children sick, it is falling down around us, and we cannot go outside for fear of violence. This is the place my family and I start our morning each day despite our best efforts to make it a home. This destructive environment, where we are forgotten and cast aside, makes it really hard for us to join together and build a better community.

Leaving the House

I live in the Northeastern section of Philadelphia, where the poverty rate is one of the highest in the nation. When I walk out the door—I see the ravages of racism all around me. My family is practically swimming in it.

The housing in my neighborhood is extremely old. The houses are falling into serious disrepair due



HEALTH HAZARD IN MY HOME

"I had to move out of my home because this leak caused mold in my kitchen. Mold is a health hazard, especially for asthmatics like my son and I. My landlord kept taking my money, but he refused to fix anything. My hard work and money were going to someone who's supposed to keep me safe in my home. This is not safe at all. I work hard, I break my back to provide for myself and my family, and I have to deal with things like this? Really? People shouldn't have to live like this."

- Myra Y, Witnesses to Hunger: Philadelphia



GRAFFITI SURROUNDS MY DAUGHTER

"Despair, agony, grief - these are the feelings I get when I see my daughter in this kind of environment."

- Sherita, Witnesses to Hunger: Philadelphia

to slumlords who are not held accountable by the city. Our children grow up in a community filled with closed factories, dilapidated lots, and houses that are used for dumping grounds.

We start our day walking through a neighborhood littered with trash. We see needles and baggies that are the tools of drug use. While street cleaners work in nicer, largely white, areas, our neighborhood gets forgotten. As a result, that trash remains and just continues to build.

One day I hope that we can buy our own home, but homeownership in my community is out of reach. My Frankford neighborhood was redlined by the US government in the 1940s—deemed “unsafe” for mortgages – because of the concentration of black people in the neighborhood. The Fair Housing Act of 1968 was meant to improve that situation and end lending discrimination. Fifty years since the passage of that act, racial discrimination in mortgage lending is still happening today.

Going to School

The segregation in our housing carries over into our schools. The resources at my neighborhood public school are less because of the system we use to pay for schools. Lower property taxes from a low-income area mean less money for that neighborhood school. My children do not get the same opportunities that schools in wealthier, and largely white, areas have.

At our schools in Philadelphia children don't have books to bring home to study. Teachers have to ask parents for regular school supplies, or they buy them out of their own pocket.



ON THE WAY TO SCHOOL

“This is what my children see on their way to school. Baggies and things that held drugs is what they need to walk past and try not to step on.”

- Tianna, *Witnesses to Hunger: Philadelphia*



CHILDREN ARE THE FUTURE

“This is my son at his pre-K graduation. We were lucky to get him into a great school, but it's getting harder and harder for my three children to get a quality education. Schools are losing funding, programs are shutting down, and there's a lack of safe places to play. Many of these opportunities for children to learn and grow are being cut, especially in black communities. A lot of programs just push kids through the system, and not enough are pushing them to achieve. We need more government funding for quality education for our children.”

- Nadja B., *Witnesses to Hunger: Philadelphia*

My children's school has been on lock down twice due to shooting in the area. Each lockdown is traumatizing for the children, as they must sit in the dark with their heads on their desks.

Each day two Philadelphia police officers need to patrol the area to make sure it is safe. Sometimes there is violence the night before in the community, which means as parents we are always on high alert. The violence can be overwhelming and sometimes you can feel like a prisoner in your own community.



IT'S NOT NORMAL

"The violence in the community has everyone on high alert. WE worry about our children going to school, walking to the store, or playing at the playground. Children in high crime areas thing it's normal to see yellow caution tape or hear helicopters flying overhead and it's not. It can feel like you are a prisoner in your own community."

- Tianna , *Witnesses to Hunger: Philadelphia*

On the other hand, in the wealthier, whiter communities, kids leave their beautiful homes, walk along the nicely manicured streets, and enter a school with all of the resources and supports they need. How is it ever possible for my children to catch up? How can they reach their full potential when the very system by which our kids are supposed to gain the tools to move out of poverty is broken?

Getting to Work

My community faces higher rates of poverty, and we do not have the resources, or the money, to move out of poverty. Yes—this is in part because of the quality of our schools. But it's also because of the quality of the jobs we can find and the wages we are paid.

Black men and women are consistently paid lower wages than our white counterparts. As a black woman, I make 63 cents on a white man's dollar. It amount to a pay gap of over \$21,000 each year. Over my lifetime, the lower wages means fewer opportunities. It is harder for me to support my family; it will take me longer to pay off any debt; and it makes it impossible to buy a house. It makes it harder to go back to school myself or to send my kids to a good college. Lower wages are my reality, and they also limit my children's future.

I am lucky and thrilled to now have a full time job with consistent hours. That has not always been the case. Often, people in my community are forced into part-time jobs that do not have any benefits and with schedules that can change week-to-week. This cycle makes it impossible for us to find other employment to supplement our low wages

or plan ahead for the future. If work is meant to move people out of poverty, then people must be paid fairly, treated with respect, and given opportunities for advancement.

Coming Home Safe

Like every mother, I want my children to be safe. But as a black mother, I have a deeper worry about whether my children, especially my sons, will make it home each day. In our community, we have an additional and unfortunate right of passage for our children. It is the moment we need to tell our sons and daughters that they must speak more softly and react differently in situations than white children. It is when we have to tell them that they might get stopped, harassed, or even shot and killed because they are black. To get home safe every night, we are held to a different standard and the fear of what could happen – what has happened to so many – keeps me awake at night.

The Kerner Report saw this 50 years ago. But it's the same reality today. I see cop cars slow down when a group of black children are playing at the park but drive right past a group of white children. As we have seen in the media recently, black people cannot go to Starbucks, play golf, wear a hoodie, buy mints, or even sleep in their dorm without being harassed, without being treated as a problem. This is traumatizing to me, my children and to my community. It's extremely damaging.

Solutions

The Kerner Report spoke of the need for action. It called for a compassionate, massive, and sustained movement backed by real resources. It urged every American to have new attitudes, new understanding, and, above all, a new will.

The report had a number of recommendations that I believe should be revisited and enacted. In addition, I would like to see the following take place.



JUST TRYING TO GET HOME SAFE

"To get a good education, my sons have to take two buses and a train through the hood to get to school. They fight all day but here they were tired, cold, and supporting each other just trying to get home safe."

- Angela S., *Witnesses to Hunger: Philadelphia*

1. Focus on the positive in black communities as much as the negative.

We need to focus on the successes in black communities as much, and if not more, than we focus on the violence. We do not hear about the single dad studying for his GED to get a better job for his children, or the woman who opens a business and hires from the community to help support her neighbors. The news does not talk about the teens who are cleaning up their neighborhood park or who have spent their weekend volunteering as mentors. I live in a community that helps each other and supports each other. It is a strong community just trying to survive and we should be celebrated.



WITH FUTURES SO BRIGHT

"With futures so bright, my children will never look back. We must remember that children are the future. One day, this generation of children will be taking care of us. If we as a society don't take care of them and don't invest in them, there will be no future. It is imperative to remember not only my children, but all children, when making program and policy decisions that affect their lives."

- Tangeka, F., *Witnesses to Hunger: Philadelphia*

2. Acknowledge pervasive racism in all of our systems.

In order to make change, we must first admit that there is a problem. We must acknowledge the generations of economic injustice and discrimination in our policies. Punitive laws like work requirements for SNAP recipients, or drug testing for welfare recipients, only create more problems. Because such actions don't address the underlying trauma of racism and discrimination.

We have to acknowledge that racism is in *all* of our systems—it's even in our water systems. Look at Flint, and our country's shameful, shameful inaction.

Once systemic racism is acknowledged, not only can we fix our systems, but we must pay reparations for the damage these systems have done over many generations. We need to repair and to heal – and that takes major systematic investments.

3. Ensure decision makers are as diverse as the community they are making decisions about.

When the decision makers and those in power do not represent the people they are making decisions for, the solutions will never address the deep racism that causes poverty in the first place. This must exist in all levels of government. Our government should be as diverse as the people it represents and decision makers should connect

with all communities, not just donors, about their needs and the changes they want to see. I invite any policy or decision makers to my home. In fact, I invite anyone to live a week in my house and then maybe more people will see and feel the discrimination in their bones, like we feel it.

Conclusion

While I appreciate the opportunity to come here today to share my experiences, I am saddened that this is a conversation we are still having in America. In 1968, a Presidential Commission clearly identified the issues around racism and ways to address it.

Yet fifty years later, parents are still burying their children because of racism, black men are being pulled over and bullied by police because of racism, workers are being paid lower wages because of racism, and families are struggling to survive because of racism.

Will our children ever experience a world where the color of their skin will not determine if someone says hello to someone else on the street? Will they experience a world where everyone is valued as a human being, and not seen as a threat because of the color of their skin? It's up to all of us here to fight for that world. It's up to us to build a country that we can be proud to call our home.

Witnesses to Hunger is a groundbreaking community advocacy program featuring the voices and photography of people who have experienced hunger and poverty first-hand. The photographs, along with their life stories, have been shared throughout the country. Witnesses to Hunger is a program at the Center for Hunger-Free Communities at Drexel University's Dornsife School of Public Health.

For more information about the program visit www.witnessestohunger.blog and www.centerforhungerfreecommunities.org.