

**Testimony from NYC Chief Equity Officer and Mayor's Office of Equity and Racial
Justice Commissioner Sideya Sherman**

Update on Implementation of the Racial Justice Ballot Measures

Committee on Civil and Human Rights

Thursday June 27, 2024 – 10:00am

Chair Williams, members of the Committees on Civil and Human Rights, distinguished members of the City Council, and the public: good morning. I am Sideya Sherman, NYC's Chief Equity Officer and Commissioner of the New York City Mayor's Office of Equity & Racial Justice (MOERJ). I am pleased to be joined today by Dabash Negash, Deputy Commissioner, and other members of the MOERJ team.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide an update on our efforts to implement the historic racial justice ballot measures New Yorkers passed in late 2022. Our team has been hard at work uplifting these mandates with an eye toward transforming government toward racial equity and justice.

Acknowledgement

I want to begin by acknowledging that this hearing is taking place on the heels of Juneteenth.

We are all here today discussing the implementation of racial justice amendments to our city charter because of those who came before us. Many whose names we do not know — people who suffered and fought for freedom, demanded their humanity be recognized, organized, and formed many traditions that endure today.

Their legacy is a powerful reminder of our collective responsibility to speak up and fight for justice. That spirit lives on in so many who have laid the groundwork for today's discussion, including:

- The former staff of the Racial Justice Commission and the Commissioners who, with input from communities, examined structural racism in our city and put forward ballot measures aimed at dismantling these barriers and promoting racial equity; and
- My fellow New Yorkers, who overwhelmingly voted to center racial equity in city governance and empowered us to carry this work forward. As a lifelong New Yorker, I was proud to witness this important moment for our city.

In recognition of the history and people who have brought us to this day, I wish to read a passage from the new preamble of our city charter:

“We, the people of New York City, united in our resolve to build a just and equitable city for all, recognize the efforts of those New Yorkers, past and present, who fought for racial equity and social justice, honor the contributions of those New Yorkers who have suffered in the name of freedom, and acknowledge all who fought, struggled, and dreamed for a better life and a better city. Together, we stand on their shoulders as we move boldly toward a brighter tomorrow for ourselves, our children, and future generations.”

Thank you for your attention, and with that said, I am pleased to update the Council.

Foundational Values

As highlighted in my testimony before the council last September, the new preamble of the City Charter introduces a groundbreaking set of foundational values designed to "...*guide the operation of our city government and inform and shape how the city carries out its duties, obligations, and authorities...*" This preamble casts a vision for a multi-racial democracy where we affirm that diversity is our strength, acknowledge the harms of the past, and boldly commit to building an equitable future for all. The preamble urges our government to uphold three core values:

- Justly value all talents and contributions;
- Ensure the conditions for thriving for every person; and
- Embrace vigilance, remedy, and reconstruction.

In crafting these ballot proposals, the former Racial Justice Commission spent months engaging the public and examining the root causes of inequity. From our perspective, the three resulting proposals were decidedly focused on shifting the direction of government rather than addressing any single-issue area. With that charge, we have oriented our work around these foundational values and the broader vision of our city's preamble, presenting a monumental opportunity for us -- as public servants -- to rethink and reshape how we serve New Yorkers. As MOERJ leads implementation of these new charter amendments, we endeavor to translate these values into actionable measures, ultimately institutionalizing progress across agencies and establishing new norms within city government.

Building Equity Infrastructure in Government

The charter calls for the city to create an Office of Racial Equity and an independent Commission on Racial Equity. In October 2023, MOERJ, which is the city's Office of Racial Equity, was announced alongside the Commission on Racial Equity. Leading up to the launch of these two new entities, our office spearheaded months of planning work across the administration to identify and secure fiscal resources, outline preliminary staffing structures, begin to establish personnel and other administrative systems necessary to hire staff, and ensure a solid and sustainable operational footing, all while continuing equity work underway prior to the passing of the ballot measures. Amid a challenging fiscal environment, MOERJ and CORE were among the new needs met in the city's FY24 budget, with the administration affirming its commitment to building the dedicated infrastructure needed for long-term racial equity work within city government. As we continue to thoughtfully grow our team and develop processes and systems for our nascent agency, we are keeping MOERJ's long-term goals insight to ensure the city has strong equity infrastructure for generations to come.

While continuing to operationally stand up our new office and implement existing work, we also convened an Advisory Board of diverse leaders across the city and nation to provide high-level guidance on implementing the ballot measures and transforming government towards racial equity and justice. Drawing on their significant experience implementing and scaling strategies across government systems, the Advisory Board has been instrumental in helping our team build a strategic framework for advancing structural reform through the racial equity planning process and other areas of work overseen by our office. We extend our deepest gratitude to the Advisory Board members for their service and unwavering commitment to building an equitable New York City.

As we advance work that is long-term in nature, MOERJ has also remained focused on collaborating with partners to invest in and implement strategies to address the needs of New Yorkers in real-time, including but not limited to:

- Over \$6M investment in new and expanded services for LGBTQ+ New Yorkers that builds and expands on the work of the NYC Unity Project, within MOERJ
- Partnering with SBS to launch Merchant Organizing grants to support diverse communities – many hit hard by the pandemic – in building vibrant neighborhood business communities and commercial corridors.
- Working with our internal Taskforce on Racial Inclusion & Equity (TRIE) and community groups to identify existing and new strategies that can be targeted to help address long-standing disparities in the Bronx.

- Collaborating with city and public partners on the citywide expansion of the Save for College program, NYC's universal college savings program.

Planning for an Equitable Future

The charter requires the city to produce a citywide racial equity plan, inclusive of individual agency racial equity plans, on a biennial basis. Per the charter, the city's racial equity plan should encompass:

- Outcome measures
- Short and long-term goals
- Strategies to reduce racial disparities

The Commission on Racial Equity ensures community voice is bought into the process — proposing community equity priorities and outcome indicators for possible inclusion in the plan.

The MOERJ team has been working diligently to roll out the city's inaugural citywide racial equity plan. We have designed a planning process that is first and foremost focused on structural reform and moving government towards equity and justice in greater unison. To get at the heart of this, our planning process is focused on the core levers of government: budget, staffing, procurement, service delivery, and policymaking, to name a few. This is not a mere compliance exercise, but an opportunity for the city to pursue long-term transformation. Agencies are examining their priorities relative to the foundational values of the charter, assessing disparity data and community equity priorities, and developing short-, mid-term, and long-term goals and strategies that are responsive.

Over the past months, our team has worked on multiple fronts to ensure a successful racial equity planning process. We have briefed senior leaders, identified planning teams across agencies, developed planning tools, and led full-day training workshops. We are providing continuous support to agencies throughout the process through dedicated office hours and 1:1 technical assistance sessions.

This is the first time our city has taken on racial equity planning at this scale. Together, we're building a shared understanding of structural inequity, operating with a common set of values, and building the uniform tools and processes needed to upend the ways structural racism impacts our city.

Agencies have enthusiastically embraced this process. This fall, we look forward to sharing a preliminary plan with the public and a final plan thereafter. Once the plan is released, our work continues, with MOERJ quickly shifting towards implementation and working closely with agencies to advance critical goals, track progress, and make continuous improvements to eliminate racial disparities and promote fairness for all New Yorkers.

Simultaneous to the citywide racial equity planning process, we are also working to produce the city's first True Cost of Living Measure. As outlined in the charter, the New York City True Cost of Living measure will establish what it costs to live in our city with dignity, without consideration of public, private, or informal assistance. Recognizing the inadequacy of the federal poverty measure, the True Cost of Living measure will move beyond basic poverty calculations to capture what it costs to meet basic needs, weather emergencies, and have the economic stability needed to plan for one's future. This measure will analyze costs across various household sizes, age groups, and essential areas of need to create a comprehensive understanding of what it takes to thrive in our city. As one of the first cities to pursue a measure of this type, NYC's True Cost of Living measure can help inform state and national policy priorities and help us further advocate for the needs of working people in our city. We are committed to getting this right and taking the necessary steps to develop the measure carefully, including leveraging local and national research.

We look forward to providing an update later this year and sharing our full report in 2025.

Reflecting on Our Past

We recognize the painful history of slavery that endures throughout our city and country and the importance of highlighting the often-under-appreciated history of the resilience of New York City's Black communities. We are proud of the administration's important work happening on this front. For instance, earlier this month, the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission and Mayor Adams announced, "More Than a Brook: Brooklyn Abolitionist Heritage Walk," an interactive audio tour exploring Brooklyn's history related to the National Abolitionist Movement and the Underground Railroad. In this spirit, the city looks forward to working with the council to advance Int 1150 (Marte, 13) - in relation to establishing a New York City freedom trail.

Furthermore, the city, led by the NYC Department of Transportation (DOT), commits to installing or working with a third party to install a new informational sign to mark the site of New York's first slave market near the intersection of Wall Street and Pearl Street. DOT

looks forward to continued discussions with the Public Advocate and historians to identify an appropriate location and content for the sign in response to Intro 833 (Public Advocate Williams) - which requires the Department of Transportation to place a sign at Wall Street and Pearl Street marking the establishment of New York's first slave market in 1711.

Looking Ahead

At a time when diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives are under attack nationally, our city has an opportunity to demonstrate how government guided by racial equity and justice works best for all in our city and, therefore, across the nation.

Over the coming months, we will steadfastly advance these major government reform efforts while continuing to roll out new equity initiatives through our office. Recently, we were proud to announce the launch of NYC Her Future, a new companion office to the Young Men's Initiative, focused on developing programs and addressing disparities experienced by young women and girls. Furthermore, as we close out Pride month, we are thrilled to continue sharing investments through the NYC Unity Project, including the recently announced expansion of the Family Acceptance program, focused on LGBTQ+ Youth.

Thank you again for the opportunity to discuss our efforts to create a more just city. We welcome your questions.