



## **Cuyahoga County Citizens' Advisory Council on Equity**

**Thursday, March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2025**

**3:00pm-5:00pm**

### **I. Call to Order**

Chair Habeebah Grimes called the meeting to order at 3:11pm

### **II. Roll Call**

A quorum was present.

In attendance (in person): Chair Habeebah Grimes, Mayor Annette Blackwell, Ronnie Cannon, Stephen Caviness, LaRaun Clayton, Dr. Heidi Gullet, LeVine Ross, Glen Shumate, Yanela Sims, Sheila Wright, Reverend Kenneth Chalker, Jenice Contreras

Excused absences: Colleen Cotter, Melaak Rashid, Eddie Taylor.  
(Dr. Charles Modlin planned to attend by ZOOM, however, he was unable to do so)

### **III. Public Comment**

There was no public comment submitted via email to [equity@cuyahogacounty.us](mailto:equity@cuyahogacounty.us) and there were no requests for in-person public comment.

#### **IV. Message from Council President**

Cuyahoga County Council President Dale Miller attended the Citizens' Advisory Council on Equity meeting, where he opened by expressing his sincere gratitude for the opportunity to be included in the council's vital work. President Miller highlighted County Council's commitment to promoting diversity and equity, both in their ongoing initiatives and as a critical source of funding.

#### **V. Moment of Silence/Reflection**

Cuyahoga County Clerk of Courts Nailah K. Byrd shared her thoughts on the promises of Spring and the ironic reality of the new Presidential Administration- one that is promoting the exact opposite of what we associate with new beginnings. Recent executive orders from the Trump administration have sent shock waves throughout the nation by targeting years of established government agencies and disrupting hundreds of thousands of livelihoods.

Clerk Byrd spoke about the unprecedented attack on the Department of Education and Department of Veterans Affairs, emphasizing the detrimental impact the elimination of these agencies will have on state and local governments.

Despite the nationwide attack on diversity, equity, and inclusion, Clerk Byrd emphasized the importance of the CACE's work during these draconian times and encouraged the council to let charity and justice lead their work.

#### **VI. Message from the Chief of Staff**

Chief of Staff Erik Janas spoke on behalf of County Executive Ronayne who was unable to attend the CACE meeting. Chief Janas reiterated the administration's commitment to upholding diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives across the county. However, Chief of Staff Janas

acknowledged the County could improve by pushing equity training and said he is open to suggestions on how to better support the CACE and their work, as well as the Department of Equity and Inclusion under Director Lockett.

Chief of Staff Janas mentioned the implications of federal grant funding suspensions. He said the county is examining potential areas that will be affected and will inform the CACE of any impact.

Seated next to Chief of Staff Janas, was Sabrina Roberts, Senior Policy Advisor to the County Executive. Ms. Roberts re-introduced herself to the CACE and thanked the council for their commitment to supporting equity initiatives across the county.

Clerk Byrd acknowledged Jenita McGowan's attendance as well. Jenita McGowan introduced herself as the Deputy Chief of Staff of Climate and Sustainability for Cuyahoga County.

Member Glen Shumate asked Chief of Staff Janas about the administration's employment of a diverse cabinet. Chief Janas told Mr. Shumate the administration is not doing as well as they should be with regard to diversity within the executive's cabinet. Chief Janas also said this is an issue he's been discussing with Clerk Byrd and Ms. Roberts for some time. There are two openings within county leadership, both open to receive applications. The Director of the Office of Homeless Services and the Director of Housing. Chief Janas invited the CACE to circulate the applications throughout their networks and inform him of anyone they know who applied.

Clerk Byrd noted that the opening for the Director of the Office of Housing is a confirmable position.

## **VII. Update/Message from the CACE Chair**

Chair Habeebah Grimes thanked the CACE members, CACE staff, and County leadership for their courage in continuing to lead equity work and for their determination to keep the work going.

Chair Grimes mentioned organizations across the country who are removing equity initiatives from their website and preemptively complying to limits on constitutional rights.

Chair Grimes emphasized that the issue and clamor isn't about the words (alluding to diversity, equity, and inclusion) but about the work. No matter what we call it, the work we are doing is to ensure all people of all backgrounds, especially those who have been historically marginalized are able to thrive. That work continuing is what is under threat. Chair Grimes reminded the CACE of the multitude of ways racism impacts individuals and communities. The most important issue to her is mental health, however all facets of impact are represented on the council. Chair Grimes closed her comments by reminding members to take care of themselves and their families during these times.

In happier news, Jenice Contreras recently opened Centro Villa 25. Chair Grimes invited Member Contreras to share more. Centro Villa 25 has been in the works for over a decade, Ms. Contreras said seeing it come to fruition has been magical. This is the first space where the Latino Community can gather and call it their own. Ms. Contreras thanked County executive Ronayne, Health Equity Officer Laurel Domanski-Diaz, and Cleveland Councilwoman Santana for coming to Centro Villa to discuss safety and preparedness around potential ICE raids. Despite opening during a period of uncertainty for the Latino community, Member Contreras invited the CACE to Centro Villa anytime.

Member Sheila Wright also had exciting news to share with the CACE. Her company, Frontline Development Group broke ground on a 54-unit building that will provide mixed-income housing to the historic Hough neighborhood. Member Wright thanked the County for contributing to the dignified design of the new building. Ms. Wright's firm is the first black and woman-owned business to secure a project of this size.

## **VIII. New Business**

### **a. Approval of Minutes**

The minutes from the December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2024, meeting were distributed to the CACE on December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2024, for their review.

A motion to approve the minutes was made by Member Shumate and seconded by Member Wright. There was no discussion or opposition and the motion to approve the minutes passed.

### **b. Update on the Community Survey**

The CACE Chair and Communications Chair requested an opinion from the Cuyahoga County Inspector General about purchasing incentives to provide to participants of the focus groups and community survey. The AIG concurred that so long as the purchase does not benefit a CACE member or family member, it's permissible under the county ethics code.

Chair Grimes requested a vote to permit the CACE to use funding for incentives for the community survey.

Member Shumate explained the motivation to create a community survey in order to gauge citizens input on existing equity initiatives in the community and ones that should be implemented. The incentives will provide gratitude for input and time.

Reverend Chalker moved to utilize CACE funding for incentives to provide to participants of the Community Survey. Member

Stephen Caviness seconded the motion. There was no opposition or discussion, and the motion passed.

Chair Grimes moved to allocate no more than \$2500 of the CACE's funding to provide incentives to the participants of the community survey. The motion was seconded by Member Ronnie Cannon. There was no opposition or discussion, and the motion passed.

**c. Presentation from Enlightened Solutions**

ChiChi Nkemere and Bethany Studenic, co-founders of Enlightened Solutions (ES), a nonprofit racial and gender equity justice think tank, presented "Project Noir" to the CACE. Their presentation focused on an anonymous survey they conducted to examine the experiences of Black women in Cleveland, specifically within healthcare, education, and workplaces. Their work highlights systemic challenges faced by Black women in these areas and advocate for a stronger focus on racial and gender equity to create more inclusive communities.

Cleveland, despite being a Black-majority city, has been labeled as the worst place in America for Black women. Ms. Nkemere and Ms. Studenic emphasized that Cleveland and Cuyahoga County have the potential to become nationally competitive by investing in local talent, particularly in marginalized communities like Black women. They believe that starting with the most marginalized groups is key to building an inclusive society. By uplifting Black women, who are disproportionately affected by inequality, the City can build a more thriving and equitable future for all residents.

The presentation also highlighted the significant demographic shifts taking place, particularly with Generation Z, which is now 48% racially and ethnically diverse. This younger generation is also more likely to seek mental health support, both in personal

and professional contexts, especially after the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, ES pointed out that access to these opportunities remains uneven, and mental health struggles, particularly among Black women, continue to be a significant concern.

Enlightened Solutions' work in 2020 revealed that social determinants of health for Black women were largely rooted in the intersections of race and gender, rather than solely poverty or class. This finding reshaped the understanding of the challenges Black women face, as these issues are not just about economic status but also the compounded effects of racial and gender discrimination. In response to the city's ranking as the worst place for Black women, ES reached out to 450 Black women through surveys to better understand their experiences. In 2024, the team expanded the survey significantly, reaching 1,324 participants, to ask whether the lived experiences of Black women in Cleveland had improved or worsened over the past few years.

The data revealed a persistent gap in both personal and professional experiences for Black women. They reported receiving lower pay than their white counterparts in similar roles, being subjected to workplace discrimination, including people rifling through their personal items, and facing challenges in healthcare, such as doctors not prescribing adequate pain relief. Other reports included body shaming and the use of racial slurs in their workplaces and personal environments. Ms. Nkemere and Ms. Studenic stressed that the daily decisions made by individuals across Cuyahoga County either uphold or dismantle these systemic inequities. They emphasized these injustices could be addressed through data-driven action and changes in policies, behaviors, and practices.

To help drive meaningful change, they encouraged advocates and community leaders to partner with Enlightened Solutions, noting

their team is still small but highly dedicated to this cause. They called for public commitments to equity goals and the facilitation of open discussions led by Black women leaders. Moreover, they urged the community to support legislative policies that address critical issues like pay equity, workplace discrimination, and public education funding, all of which are essential to improving the conditions for Black women and fostering a more equitable environment in Cleveland and Cuyahoga County.

Chair Grimes reflected on the common idea that Black women are used to suffering and that is something they have to endure in life. Hearing about the experiences of black women across Cleveland is humanizing.

Member Ronnie Cannon asked about breaking the cycle of racism towards black women and how first generation and second generation plays an impact. Ms. Nkemere explained that racial identity and demographic was self-reported in the survey, however the generational divide can also be explained by age distribution. Ms. Studenic noted that the highest response came from Millennials and Generation Z. Older respondents spoke about segregated bussing and being the first black woman in their college class. Younger respondents are more focused on their success in the workplace.

Member Sheila Wright asked how supported Enlightened Solutions feels in this area. Ms. Studenic highlighted the frequent performative nature of equity work. She also pointed out the lack of significant investment, noting that the organization is still operating with just a two-person team.

Council President Dale Miller connected “Project Noir” to the national attack on diversity, equity, and inclusion. President Miller said improving these inequities across black women’s experiences in Cleveland will benefit all of Cuyahoga County.



Ms. Nkemere closed with a quote from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. “Budgets are moral documents”.

Mayor Annette Blackwell shared meaningful comments that arose from her observance of the presentation. She reflected on the hardships she has experienced as the first black and woman mayor of the city, despite pulling Maple Heights out of economic deficit. Additionally, Mayor Blackwell has encountered blatant racism after hiring black, Hispanic, and immigrant staff members.

#### **d. Virtual Meeting Policy**

HB257 takes effect on April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2025. This legislation permits public bodies to meet virtually once the public body has adopted a virtual meeting policy. The CACE has to opportunity to hold virtual meetings in the future if a virtual meeting policy is amended into the bylaws.

Member Glen Shumate moved to refer the creation of a virtual meeting policy to the communications subcommittee.

During discussion, Member Jenice Contreras expressed concern of shifting to a fully virtual model, as community building and connection comes from in-person CACE meetings. Chair Grimes and Clerk Byrd assured the CACE that the creation of a virtual meeting policy would not replace in person meetings. This amendment to the bylaws would make the meeting schedule more flexible.

There was no further discussion or opposition, and the motion was adopted.

## **IX. Update from the Department of Human Resources**

An update from Sarah Nemastil, the Director of HR, was sent to the CACE via email on March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2024.

## **X. Update from the Department of Equity and Inclusion**

An update from Lenora Lockett, the Director of the Department of Equity and Inclusion, was sent to the CACE via email on March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2024.

## **XI. Update from GARE/Facing Race Reflection**

An update on the Facing Race Conference attended by Clerk Byrd in November will be shared with the CACE via email in April.

## **XII. Next Meeting**

The next CACE meeting will be on May 29<sup>th</sup> at 3:00pm.

## **XIII. Adjournment**

The meeting adjourned at 5:08pm.