



COALITION ON RACIAL EQUITY

**Testimony Neither For Nor Against LD 221,
An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations for the Expenditures of
State Government, General Fund and Other Funds and Changing Certain Provisions
of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the
Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2021, June 30, 2022 and June 30, 2023**

February 25, 2021

Joby Thoyalil, on behalf of the Maine Coalition on Racial Equity

Good afternoon, Senators Breen and Rafferty, Representatives Pierce and Sylvester, members of the joint standing committees on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and on Labor and Housing. My name is Joby Thoyalil and I am a senior policy advocate at Maine Equal Justice. I also have the honor of serving as a commissioner on the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Maine Tribal Populations and I help to coordinate the Maine Coalition on Racial Equity (CORE). I am testifying now on behalf of CORE, specifically on the portion of the Governor's proposed biennial budget relating to the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Maine Tribal Populations.

CORE is a group of Maine organizations committed to advancing racial equity and justice in Maine through legislative education and trainings, and through advocacy and government accountability. Its members are the American Civil Liberties Union of Maine, the Maine Chapter of the A. Philip Randolph Institute, Health Equity Alliance, the League of Women Voters of Maine, Maine AFL-CIO, Maine Center for Economic Policy, Maine Citizens for Clean Elections, Maine Equal Justice, Maine Initiatives, Maine People's Alliance, Maine Women's Lobby, and Planned Parenthood of Northern New England.

The members of CORE wish to express our concern that the biennial budget does not show a commitment to addressing racial inequality. The events of 2020 - both the COVID-19 pandemic and the protests over police killings of Black people like George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmed Aubrey - opened the eyes of many in Maine to just how pervasive and harmful systemic racism is in our society today. We are glad that Governor Mills has recognized the importance of creating a more just and welcoming Maine for people of all backgrounds. Unfortunately, this budget document falls short of meeting those aspirations.

First and foremost, this budget is a continuation of the status quo. While it does not present significant cuts to state programs, it does little to increase investment in services and in communities that bear the brunt of the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and structural racism. When we know the status quo contains so many racial disparities and inequities, a status quo budget merely perpetuates those problems.

This is not merely a theoretical exercise. In September, the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Maine Tribal Populations, at the request of legislative leadership, examined the outstanding bills from the 129th legislature, and recommended passage of a package of bills which would help improve racial equity in our state. Most of those bills have been reintroduced in some form this session and several have been modified to better target racial disparities, as was recommended by the Permanent Commission. You have the opportunity to pass them this year, but to do that will take resources and a willingness to invest in the eradication of structural racism in our state.

We appreciate that some money was allocated in the Governor's budget to address public health equity, but public health is only one of the many systems that are rife with disparities in our state. Moreover, we believe the best solutions for eliminating racial disparities will come from partnerships between the State and impacted people, and we encourage you to consider funding bills that take this approach. One bill submitted this session (LR 55) intends to take this approach on public health equity and we encourage you to consider it closely.

Finally, the members of CORE were dismayed to see that the Governor's proposed budget does not provide funding for the operation of the Permanent Commission itself. The volunteer members of the Permanent Commission have been able to accomplish a lot in a short time, but their time, labor, and expertise are not limitless. The September report requested by legislative leadership was only made possible through the temporary assistance of legislative staff. The Governor and the Legislature have repeatedly referenced the work of the commission and pointed to it as an important tool in addressing racial disparities in our state. We agree that the Permanent Commission has a lot of potential, but it cannot fulfill all its duties without ongoing funding for support staff.

The Permanent Commission requested that monies to hire staff be included in the budget and have submitted a commission bill to fulfill that same request. We urge you to support the commission by honoring its request and including that funding in the budget.

Racial disparities are the result of centuries of policy choices which have created a system that disadvantages people of color and ultimately holds us all back. Centuries of discrimination can't be undone overnight. But the good news is that we can undo them. It just takes a sustained and deliberate commitment to build a just and more equitable Maine. That commitment means investing public funds to address inequalities; allocating public funds in a way that is equitable and informed by communities of color; and funding institutions like the Permanent Commission so that it can fulfill its mission of creating and improving opportunities and eliminating disparities for historically disadvantaged racial, indigenous, and tribal populations in the State.

Thank you and I would be happy to answer any questions.