

April 14, 2021

*Testimony of Rachel Talbot Ross supporting*  
**LD 1034, An Act To Provide Funding To Support the Permanent Commission  
on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Maine Tribal Populations**  
*Before the Joint Standing Committee on State & Local Government*

Senator Baldacci, Representative Matlack and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government, my name is Rachel Talbot Ross, and I represent House District 40, which comprises the Portland neighborhoods of Parkside, Bayside, East Bayside, Oakdale, and the University of Southern Maine campus. I come before you today, however, in my role as a chair of the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Maine Tribal Populations. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in favor of LD 1034.

The Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Maine Tribal Populations (Permanent Commission) was created by the Maine Legislature as an independent entity and signed into law in 2019. It is charged with promoting, implementing and coordinating programs that create and improve opportunities, and incorporate the goal of eliminating disparities for historically disadvantaged racial, Indigenous and tribal populations. Simply put, our work is focused on dismantling the structural manifestations of race, racism and racial injustice for the betterment of our state and all Mainers.

The Permanent Commission is comprised of 15 volunteer members who serve 2-year terms. Members may serve multiple terms. Our specific duties are to:

- *Carry out research* necessary to determine the status of historically disadvantaged racial, Indigenous and tribal populations, including the examination of quantitative and qualitative data regarding employment, housing, education, health care and access to wealth, capital and benefits.
- *Seek public input* by conducting public hearings, forums, conferences, workshops and other such meetings to obtain information about the needs of and solutions to the problems faced by these populations.
- *Inform the public* about the presence or absence of opportunities for these populations.
- *Promote and coordinate activities* on the state and local levels designed to address the needs of and solutions to the problems faced by these populations.
- *Advise and consult with the Chief Justice of the Supreme Judicial Court* and other officials of the State and the Federal Government with respect to state and federal policies, programs and other activities affecting or relating to these historically disadvantaged populations.
- *Advise and consult with the Governor and the Legislature* about, and assist them in improving, opportunities for these named populations; and,
- *Submit to the Legislature*, at the start of each regular session, such legislation as the commission determines appropriate for improving opportunities and eliminating disparities for these populations in the State.

This work is supported with limited administrative assistance provided by the Maine Department of Labor along with a research associate sponsored by Volunteers of America of Northern New England, and, most recently, student interns from the University of Southern Maine.

The Permanent Commission operates without funding but is authorized to accept funds from the Federal Government, State and/or a political subdivision of the State, individuals, foundations or corporations.

To date, we have issued one report which analyzed legislation that remained active in the 129<sup>th</sup> Legislature for possible impacts on eliminating racial disparities. It was conducted, partly, in collaboration with 55 Maine state legislators from across political parties. I have attached the report to this testimony for your review. This effort took place over several months with Commission members meeting multiple times each week. You will see that out of 454 bills, a mere 46 were determined, if passed, to have a positive impact. Key recommendations included the restoration of tribal sovereignty; criminal justice reform; improving access to affordable health care and educational opportunities; and the adoption of tools to combat public policies that either maintain or perpetuate disparities, to name a few. Without these tools and investments, we would simply pass the fight for equity and justice to another generation.

Throughout the life of the Permanent Commission, it has become clear to all involved that this is critically necessary work as our nation continues to see African Americans lose their lives to preventable police violence; and the raise in anti-Asian hate crimes has increased by nearly 150% with anti-immigrant xenophobia rising to levels not seen in the U.S. since the 1920s. The unnamed, invisible epidemic of missing, murdered and sexually assaulted Native American women and girls – with rates as high as 10 times the average in certain counties in this county – only adds to the American legacy of white supremacy. With the proliferation of extreme nativist and vigilante, the work of the Permanent Commission is unprecedented, both *long overdue* and timely. And, while you will hear from other Commission members this morning about the enormous sense of pride that we share in being part of a diverse group of Mainers that are leading and working together in the fight to dismantle systems of racial oppression, you will also learn how completely overwhelming the experience has been at times. Given the severe lack of financial and human resources, it can feel like a recipe for failure.

While Maine has had one of the lowest rates of COVID-19 in the nation, over the summer it had the largest racial disparity in cases. Black and African American Mainers contracted COVID-19 at a rate of more than 20 times that of white Mainers according to a report, *The State of Poverty in Maine, 2021*, released by Maine Equal Justice. It went on to point out that:

1. Black, Indigenous and People of Color are more likely to be unemployed due to the pandemic, with Black workers more likely to experience longer periods of unemployment than white workers. At the same time, workers of color are less likely than white workers to receive unemployment benefits for which they qualify.
2. Other data shows, in 2018, 37% of Black or African American Mainers lived below the poverty level as compared to 11.6% of white Mainers. That figure is 34% for American Indians (and Alaska Natives – the census combines these groups nationally), and 21% for Hispanics or Latinos.

3. And, while approximately 15% of white children live in poverty, the rate is 44% for children from Maine's Native American families and over 46% for children from Maine's Black or African American families.
4. Lastly, 26% of Maine's homeless population is Black or African American even though they make up only 1% of Maine's population.

I will not cite other data that has been analyzed in the areas of the criminal legal system, education, and health access at this time but ask that you read the fact sheet written by James Myall, Policy Analyst, Maine Center for Economic Policy dated June 2019 to fully understand the *status* of Maine's racial populations.

These outcomes are not new; they reflect the generational transference of racism and poverty. But we have the opportunity to reverse this course. We can take a strong step forward by supporting and funding the work of the Permanent Commission.

I have offered a proposed amendment to more accurately reflect the Commission's needs. I can walk you through it as it reflects a significant increase in funding while I point out that our initial request was prepared prior to creating an organizational work plan or understanding the totality of the socio-economic impact of the pandemic, and the lack of federal funds specifically being directed to the elimination of racial disparities. This request is, in itself, historic as it also represents the only time in our state's history when racial, Indigenous and tribal populations have come together to request funding in the fight against systemic racism.

I close with expressions of gratitude. To the members of the Permanent Commission and to members of the racial, Indigenous and tribal populations in our state, thank you for your resiliency, and unwavering dedication to the pursuit of freedom, self-determination, and justice for *all*. And, to this committee, I sincerely thank you for your time, consideration and attention to this important work. I am happy to answer any questions you may have for me.