



**RACIAL EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVISORY COMMITTEE**  
**July 17, 2024 (6:30 P.M.)**

**MEETING MINUTES**

**ATTENDEES:**

(Checked boxes indicate present. Unchecked boxes indicate absence.)

*Community Members:*

Dr. Pat Grant (Chair)  Sonia Canzater  Dr. Isaac Cudjoe  Jared Hautamaki  
 Joseph Hurst  Dr. Tasnuva Khan  Shane Lloyd  Akufuna Ngonda  Judith  
Thomas  Gustavo Torres

*County Staff Members:*

James Stowe (Vice Chair)  Selena Mendy Singleton (Parliamentarian)  
 Dr. Anthony R. Alston  Ilana Branda  Betty Lam  Lt. O'Neil Ormsby  
 Aisha Williams

**Office of Racial Equity and Social Justice Staff:**

Tiffany Ward (Chief Equity Officer)

**Guests:** Kennedy Cordle, Kimberly McLurkin-Harris, Patrice Cheatham, Rashaod Crosson Jr, and Sherlene Lucas.

**CALL TO ORDER**

- The meeting was called to order at 6:31 pm by Dr. Pat Grant (Chair)

**AGENDA**

- No objections. The agenda was adopted. Dr, Cudjoe motioned and seconded by Mr. Ngonda.

**MINUTES**

- The May 15, 2024, minutes were approved as corrected.
  - Request to correct language around attendees with check boxes since attendees were listed out instead.
- **Item:** New members introduced themselves – Akufuna (Funa) Ngonda, Judith Thomas, Ilana Branda.

- **Item:** Presentations were given on Voting Rights and the Impact on Racial Equity and Social Justice
- Presentations were given by:
  - Kennedy Cordle, NAACP ACT-SO member
  - James Privette, member of the community
  - Dr. Justin Hansford of the Howard University School of Law
  - Sonia Canzater, Esq.
  - Dr. Gilberto Zelaya, Montgomery County Board of Elections
- The first speaker was Kennedy Cordle from the NAACP Youth Council, who read an excerpt from Frederick Douglas’ famous speech entitled “What to the Slave is the 4<sup>th</sup> of July”. Other members from the NAACP Youth Council were in attendance, including their leader, Kimberly Mclurkin-Harris.
- Dr Stowe introduced the next speaker, Professor Justin Hansford, of the Howard University School of Law.

**Professor Hansford discussed:**

- Voting is the right that gives you access to all other rights. This access can’t be abridged without leaving people out of the whole system.
- The focus of the Thurgood Marshall Center is on reparations, police reform, criminal justice reform, housing, and voting rights.
- Voter Rights Act – outcomes included language access, issues around ability, and areas below that are being/have been challenged.
- Redistricting – currently being litigated in efforts to strike it down and prevent citizens from fighting redistricting.
- Pre-clearance provision – one of the most powerful components until 2013 when the Supreme Court struck this provision down.
- Recent actions show we can’t rely on the Act as much anymore and really on the community to ensure voter access, safety, and community comfort.
  - 44 jurisdictions selected for poll monitoring in 2024 – including Montgomery County
  - Voter Suppression – what does it look like? Threats by voting sites or online, misinformation around where/when/how to vote, threats of political violence. Up to the local community to prevent/counter this.
  - Professor Hansford offered to be an asset and support to the Office of Human Rights to ensure Voter Rights in November.

## Discussion:

- Member Hautamaki – RESJAC should request the Council to put forth a resolution calling for the full restoration/protection of Sections 2 and 5 in the Voter Rights Acts. RESJAC can also look at supporting Biden’s call for restricting the Supreme Court. Both could serve as steps to support the Voter Rights Act.

**Professor Hansford replied** many jurisdictions have taken similar actions to protect various communities and uphold human rights standards from around the world. Professor Hansford suggested that Racial Equity Audits could be considered to ensure no regressive changes.

- Selena Singleton asked for additional information on monitoring.

**Professor Hansford replied** that previously, Section 5 required any changes to go through Federal review; now that section is eliminated, communities have pushed voter suppression strategies knowing it would have to wait for a lawsuit to go through. The Federal government can’t stop beforehand but can still do monitoring. Montgomery County wasn’t part of the Section 5 change, but something must have happened previously that put Montgomery County on their radar for watching. List available at <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-again-monitor-compliance-federal-voting-rights-laws-election-day>

**Professor Hansford suggested** reaching out to the Board of Elections to identify why Montgomery County is on the land and see what the community can do to counter those issues. Areas to investigate include voter registration, polling information, access to polling sites, etc.

- Jim Stowe raised concerns about the perception of the impact of voting—people sitting out of the process—and how to highlight the impact of that choice.

**Professor Hansford answered** that the importance of local elections such as judges and other offices that are majorly impacted by up-ballot and low turnout, which also signals to elected officials that your issues are not important – political power is determined by voter turnout. Professor Hansford reminded attendees that people bled/died for us to have this right – it is a sacred right that we should take seriously.

- Sonia Canzater provided an overview of the status of litigation against Section 2 (redistricting) of the Voting Rights Act.
  - NAACP vs Arkansas Board of Apportionment – 8<sup>th</sup> Federal Circuit Court
  - Lawsuit filed in 2021 claiming Arkansas map diluted the voting strength of Black Arkansans – including redrawing lines to move Black voters into districts with a high percentage of voters with opposing interests. The District Court dismissed the case in February 2022 saying NAACP didn’t have standing. Appeal filed in April 2022 and

the 8<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court denied the appeal this year. The Court said, “There is no private right of action for aggrieved voters to bring against Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act.”

- This decision by the 8<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court strips the mechanism for us to fight against redistricting for the purpose of voting dilution.
- Dr. Grant asked about the next steps. Sonia Canzater suggested that the next step could be appealing to the Supreme Court. The option of doing that rather than working on an alternative approach is still being considered.
- Illana Branda asked if we are seeing other states in the 8<sup>th</sup> district or other states redistricting.

**Professor Hansford answered** that we aren't seeing changes being reported and State's Attorneys do still have standing to push against these changes. Brought it back to what we can do in Montgomery County – things like mail-in ballots, hours of polling locations, and days available. Souls to the Polls – history of the Black community going to church and then polls. Many communities stopped allowing Sunday voting as a way to suppress.

- Dr. Grant introduced James Privette to share about voter trends and access to increase voter participation.
- Mr. Privette shared stats on national and Maryland turnout. Maryland has historically exceeded national turnout in presidential election years.
- Nationally there are very large turnout gaps. If voters of color turned out at the same rate as their white counterparts, there could be over 9 million more voters.
- Maryland's 2024 primary turnout was the lowest since 2012. Only 27.63%, which was more similar to mid-term turnout rates. 39% by mail, 14.9% early voting, 42.7% in-person voting, 3.5% provisional.
- Voter Strategies: Ask who the target audience is, what we are trying to accomplish, our targeted location, our plan of attack, and our timeline.
- Resources – rockthevote.org and vote.org
- There were questions in the Zoom Chat about voter turnout by County. Mr. Privette shared a link to the data: <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/growing-racial-disparities-voter-turnout-2008-2022>.
- Dr. Grant introduced Dr. Gilberto Zelaya, or Dr. Z. – Public Information Officer for Montgomery County Board of Elections.
- Dr. Z noted the Board of Elections is working with monitoring agencies. Dr. Z also discussed the following.

- There are over 687,000 registered voters.
- The primary consisted of a 172K voter turnout.
- There used to be one day to vote – no mail-in without excuse, no early voting, etc. Now, there are over 14 early voting sites open for 8 days, including Sunday, 25 polling sites, 58 drop boxes, and mail-in voting with no reason required.
- The voting registration deadline is Oct 15.
- The Board of Elections will do over 500 outreach events year-round.
- Reviewed registration required.
- Individuals can text CHECK to 77788 to check the status of their ballot.
- Election day – Nov 5<sup>th</sup> – can vote by mail (opens 30 days beforehand), early voting October 24-31 or election day.
- Dr. Z reviewed the process to count email/web delivery ballots, criteria for selecting early voting sites, maps of voter turnout, voter density
- Everything is available in English and Spanish. Also, recruit speakers in other languages
- Over 98% of voters have access to an early voting center within 5 miles of their home.
- The Board of Elections is looking for volunteers for election workers – text serves to 77788.
- Future Vote – founded in 2003 to support civic participation and preserve participatory democracy. The students provide election day support (no citizenship requirement). Over 50K students have participated. Guardians or someone over 18 must participate in training with the students. The program is open to students in middle school. High School students over 16 can work as poll workers. One-fourth of poll workers are under age 25.
- Trying to work on the Future Vote component statewide.
- Request to share with him any event where they can be there to engage potential voters and election workers year-round.
- Dr. Grant recapped the focus from Frederick Douglas to now—the importance of the vote and our role in helping to support access to the Vote.
- Lieutenant Oneil asked a general question about voter comfort level at sites—thoughts on asking for ID. Dr. Z responded that the Board of Elections doesn't make the rules; they just apply them, and there are certain conditions under which an ID may be asked.

### **UNFINISHED BUSINESS**

- **Item:** Retreat Feedback. None provided. Dr. Grant requested that RESJAC members email any feedback if desired.
- **Item:** Status of Palm Card. Dr. Grant will email out the updated version with Sonia's edits.

### **NEW BUSINESS**

- **Item:** Update from Chief Equity Officer. New members should have received a welcome letter with training that needs to be completed within 90 days. I realized some members haven't completed training – please look out for an email from Andrea if you still have the training to complete.

### **ANNOUNCEMENTS AND UPDATES**

- None

### **ADJOURN**

- Meeting adjourned at 8:45 by motion from Akufuna Ngonda and seconded by Jim Stowe. The meeting was adjourned by Dr. Grant (Chair).