LIBERATION VENTURES



OCTOBER 2026

PROCESS MATTERS:
STRUCTURING EFFECTIVE REPARATIONS COMMISSIONS

Virginie Ladisch

THERE IS MORE THAT CONNECTS US THAN DIVIDES US.

LIBERATION VENTURES

About Liberation Ventures:

Liberation Ventures is a field catalyst accelerating the movement working towards reparations for slavery and its legacies. Long term, we are building a culture of repair for all people in the United States. As a field catalyst, we mobilize resources, spread narratives, and strengthen movement capacity to make comprehensive reparations common sense and commonplace in our lifetime. We know reparations for Black people unlocks true belonging for us all, and enables a just multiracial democracy. This American dream – a dream in our name – is not only achievable, but necessary for our society to survive and thrive.

Cover: Redwood forest, Santa Cruz Mountains, Aria Florant May 2025

Design: Caitlin Gianniny



TABLE OF CONTENTS

05. Introduction

08. Methodology

09. Current Context

12. Findings

13. Structure: How the foundation is built

13. Timing

18. Staffing

21. Funding

24. Process: How the journey unfolds

24. Creating a reparative process

27. Trust building

31. Onboarding

33. Centering truth telling and truth listening

37. Creating accountability structures

43. Political strategy

46. Narrative and communications

49. High-level takeaways

54. Towards new ideas and models

55. Appendix

Letter from Virginie

There is more that connects us than divides us.

This principle has guided my work in reparations since I first entered the field in the early 2000s. While each context is unique, similar underlying needs and obstacles characterize the journey toward reparations.

Three of the most inspiring women I have had the honor to work with highlighted this point for me: Maria Alejandra, a former child soldier from Colombia; Evelyn, a forced wife of Joseph Kony of the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda; and Jackie, an advocate for women victims of sexual violence in Kenya. Gathered at the United Nations for a workshop on "Learning from Lived Experience," they each communicated the same message across linguistic, cultural, and contextual divides: **policymakers cannot assume to know what repair looks like, and reparations must be determined by those most impacted.** I can still picture their collective embrace on the last day of the workshop, a hug of solidarity that transcended individual differences.

The three women became a rope of many strands, pulling the stories and struggles of women from their communities forward toward recognition and a sense of justice. Together, they bore a weight that would have been far too great for any strand alone.

From Dr. Margaret Burnham's foundational evidentiary archive to N'nanba Rue Simmons' groundbreaking work in Evanston, Illinois, to Dr. Joanne Braxton's calming wisdom, courageous **advocates across the United States are weaving together the strands that will build toward a comprehensive federal reparations policy portfolio.**

The growing number of reparations commissions at the state and local levels is adding to the tapestry of reparations. Along the way, a few knots are appearing as obstacles along the path to repair. In speaking with advocates across the country, I am heartened to hear general agreement about these challenges and see many initiatives already underway to disentangle the knots and strengthen the strands.

Affirming the challenging nature of this work and connecting with others can help ease the heavy burden of this charge, as it did for Maria Alejandra, Evelyn, and Jackie. In turn, this can open broader horizons and spark creative problem solving. Looking globally provides inspiration and reminds us that while the road is long, it has been walked before.

In solidarity,

Virginie Ladisch

Virginie Ladisch
Senior Director of State and Local Initiatives



Alameda County Reparations Commission (ACRC) Pilgrim Church listening session. Credit: Courtesy of ACRC

INTRODUCTION

Liberation Ventures' work is rooted in the theory of change that reparations — the process of the government making amends for harm — will be built from the ground up. This is a lesson drawn from movements that came before — among them, the marriage equality movement — and confirmed by experience at the global level. In Guatemala, for example, the church-led Recovery of Historical Memory report laid the foundation for the United Nations-led truth-seeking process, which in turn established the foundation for Guatemala's national reparations program.

But that progress does not happen on its own. This theory of change requires an intentional connecting of efforts, so they build toward a larger movement. As Dr. Joanne Braxton puts it, it is crucial to "form bridges and connective tissue among local efforts, to connect them with state efforts, and then have bridges to the national movement in a way that this work from various organizations and entities reinforces each other." The groundswell of efforts now underway provides an opportunity to step back, reflect, learn from what has happened, and use those insights to shape our next interventions as we continue to experiment and innovate.

While Liberation Ventures looks at the full range of ways to advance reparations, this report focuses specifically on government-supported efforts — the task forces, commissions, and harm reports that have proliferated at the city, county, and state level.

This moment of proliferation is also a moment of reflection. It is a time to step back, assess what is working, learn from what has not, and use those insights to shape what comes next. A growing consensus is forming among reparations advocates around certain persistent challenges. With that consensus comes a real desire for more sharing, mutual support, and structured opportunities to learn across efforts.

Several clear insights are emerging. Reparations must be understood as a long-term process, not a destination. That framing has implications at every level, from how task forces are structured to how coalitions are built and maintained. The process itself matters as much as the outcome; how we treat each other along the way is not separate from the goal of repair, it is part of it. A broad coalition of support is essential not just to establish a task force, but to sustain advocacy long after a task force ceases operations. There is a critical need to be more realistic about the phases of work involved — before, during, and after a commission issues its recommendations — rather than treating the passage of enabling legislation as the finish line.

At the same time, it is crucial to uplift the wins alongside the challenges. Evanston, Illinois, and Palm Springs, California, have demonstrated that reparations are not only possible, but they are also beneficial, and in ways that extend beyond those directly receiving them. As N'nanba Rue Simmons shared, "Our community is healing... reparations are transforming our community."[1] Economic and community life has been strengthened in ways that were not anticipated and trust in local government has increased. As of 2023, "the Evanston City Council's decision to pass the reparations ordinance led to double-digit net increases in trust in city government across all nine of the city's wards and among all ethnic and racial demographic groups."[2] As one reparations advocate put it, "We need acknowledgment first, then resources to back it up...It's possible, because we've seen it already."[3]

This report draws on that evidence — from ongoing and completed efforts across the United States and from global transitional justice practice, including truth commissions — to offer learnings, implications, and recommendations. Transitional

1 Interview with N'nanba Rue Simmons, founder and executive director of First Repair, January 2026.

2 "Overwhelming Support for Evanston Reparations Program, Survey Finds," Northwestern Now, October 24, 2023.

3 Interview with Jeffrey Trask, founder of the Champaign Urbana Reparations Coalition, January 2026.

justice approaches have been applied to a wide range of contexts and patterns of violations around the world. Developing this work in the U.S. to address slavery and its legacies will build the infrastructure needed to repair past harms and prevent future ones. This is a necessary foundation for a multiracial democracy, and one urgently needed as our government perpetrates new violations against vulnerable communities. As we work to transform our country to fulfill the promise of liberty and justice for all, this report aims to open space for the collective reflection this moment demands.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report draws on the expertise and generosity of many. Thank you to everyone who shared their time and insights in interviews, the leaders who sparked new ideas with their words in public meetings and presentations, the thought partners along the way, and those who reviewed drafts and offered feedback. Liberation Ventures is grateful for each of your contributions to this work and your ongoing partnership.

METHODOLOGY

This report draws on qualitative research conducted between November 2025 and June 2026. It is informed by observations from past and ongoing reparations efforts in the U.S. and globally, as well as desk research, meetings, and interviews with a range of people involved in this work. Interviews included a mix of open-ended questions and feedback on certain hypotheses. Interviews were conducted with individuals from across the country — from Georgia to Alaska — and from different sectors, including reparations leaders, government officials, faith leaders, academics, human rights lawyers, public policy experts, visual artists, and community organizers: Macky Alston, Dr. Carol Anderson, Dr. Joanne Braxton, Jan Bronson, Jean-Pierre Brutus, Nicole Carty, Dr. Anthony Tirado Chase, Lynda Davis, Jimmy Flemming, Debra Gore, Laurence Grandpre, Justin Hansford, Dreisen Heath, Dr. Karlos Hill, Dr. Marcus Anthony Hunter, Lisa Holder, Lauren Hood, Jumoke Ifetayo, Davida Ingram, Melissa Jones, Mary Lee, Selina Lewis Davidson, Dayvon Love, Esther Maddox, Dr. Linda Mann, Amy Millin, Alize Asberry Payne, Mia Schultz, N'nanba Rue Simmons, Sam Stragand, Linda Tigani, Anthony Torres, Jeffrey Trask, Pablo Vasquez, Jill Williams, Nye Winslow, James Woodson, and Darris Young. Additional insights came from the Black-Eyed Susan's for Repair meetings, the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland Reparations Task Force, First Repair National Reparations Strategy Sessions, the National Reparations Leadership Assembly, and Why We Can't Wait Reparations network meetings.



Dr. Joanne Braxton, President of the Braxton Institute, joined a panel of experts "From Pain to Power: Mental Health Solutions for Coping and Thriving," at the Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission's historic public hearing on the enduring legacy of racial terror lynchings on April 4-5, 2025. Credit: Courtesy of Braxton Institute

CURRENT CONTEXT

Political developments at the national and global levels are destabilizing the very foundations of our democracy. We are witnessing increasing militarization and use of force against residents of this country, a gutting of key civil rights gains (including the voting rights act), a global turn toward authoritarian populist leaders, and a move away from diplomacy and compromise.

As the nation celebrates its 250th anniversary, competing narratives have emerged. One group is choosing to highlight a sanitized version of U.S. history while others insist on the importance of an honest depiction of our complex past. These advocates are bravely speaking out against erasure. Meanwhile, school districts are banning books, and ICE agents have been caught on camera telling protestors, "If you raise your voice, I will erase your voice."[4]

In this political climate, many in the reparations movement are witnessing increased tensions within their communities as they struggle to balance the fight against current violations with the fight for reparations for past and ongoing harms. Referencing the rolling back of hard-fought environmental protections, one advocate noted how "so much energy is focused on how we protect what we have right now — our land, our air, our water."[5] Others have shared how hard it is to maintain optimism and a proactive orientation, noting it requires significant energy and intentionality.

The present urgency creates both a narrative challenge and an opportunity to convert complex work into clear soundbites illustrating the connection between past violations and current ones. Rather than viewing past and present violations as in competition for attention, we need to help people see that reparations are about how to "fundamentally change how we treat each other and how we move forward as a society."[6]

Despite the challenging times and bleak picture painted by news headlines, the reparations movement in the U.S. has grown tremendously and continues to build momentum at city, county, and state levels. As of June 2026, there are 71 reparations efforts at the state and local levels across the country.

4 Ellie Quinlan Houghtaling, "'I Erase Your Voice': ICE Agents Threaten People After Alex Pretti," The New Republic, January 27, 2026.

5 Interview with racial justice expert, January 30, 2026.

6 Interview with Dr. Karlos K. Hill, regents' professor, Department of African and African American Studies, University of Oklahoma, February 25, 2026.

Because much of this work is happening locally, reparations do not always make the news. When it does, the media often fails to depict the significance of these policy wins. First Repair's interactive map, which tracks reparations initiatives and organizations, demonstrates the scope, power, and success of the local reparations movement. Liberation Ventures has also been tracking these developments and seen notable increases in the number of commissions, task forces, and harm reports undertaken at the city, county, and state levels (see Figure 1).

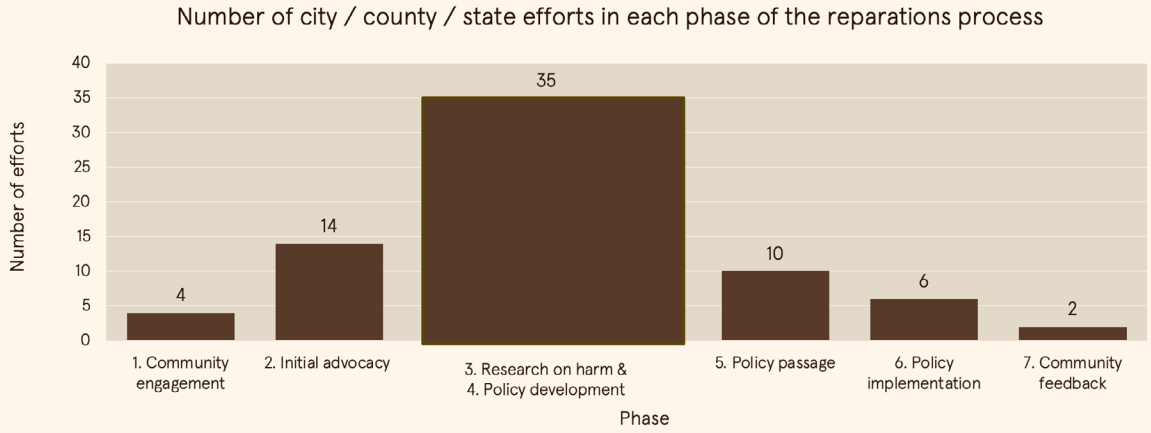
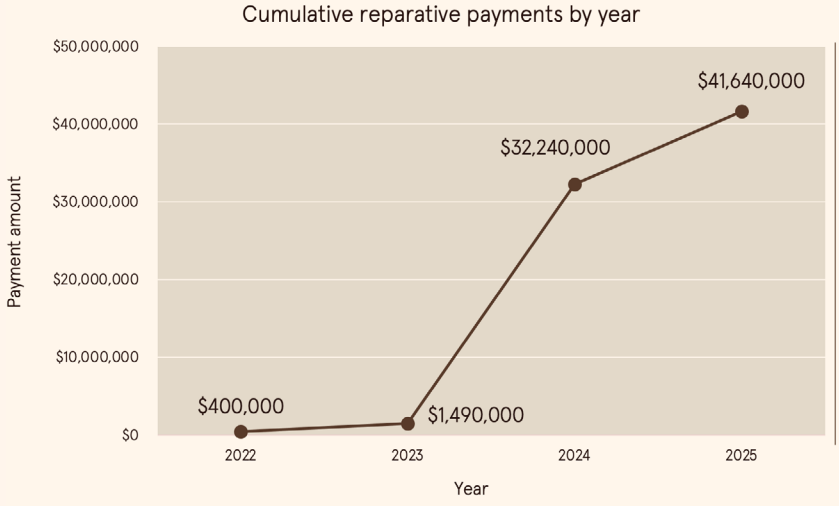


Figure 1: City/county/state reparations efforts as of June 2026

Beyond establishing commissions, local governments across the U.S. have allocated increasingly greater funds to reparations benefits (see Figure 2). These numbers tell an impressive story, one that many would have believed impossible just a few years ago. Looking deeper at the stories behind these numbers reveals a growing body of practice and new learnings that warrant further attention. Collectively, these insights can help guide the path forward.



Location	Amount
Palm Springs, CA	$26.9M
Portland, OR	$8.5M
Evanston, IL	$5M
Hayward, CA	$900K
St. Paul, MN	$340K
Total	$41.6M

Figure 2: Reparations payments as of June 2026

REPARATIONS COMMISSION ROADMAP:

A tool for advocates and officials building a commission, and the commissioners and staff leading one

This roadmap turns the report's findings into a practical guide. The columns show the phases of work, and the rows are areas essential to a strong process. Find the column for the phase you're in or read across a row to see how one area of work develops over time. Adapt the roadmap to your context and for a full-page roadmap with more detail, see the Appendix on p. 56.

TIMING	**PRE-WORK** >6 MONTHS	**PREPARATORY PHASE** 6 MONTHS	**COMMISSION** 2-5 YEARS	**IMPLEMENTATION** ONGOING
COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT	Build broad community support and understanding of reparations. Research and document harms and connections to local government.	Set up an advisory body of impacted community members to guide the commissioners.	Hold listening sessions. Continue organizing community members outside the commission.	Develop calls to action and tools for community members to advocate for implementation.
STAFFING	Design a fair, transparent selection process for commissioners. Identify staff and backstopping support.	Seat 3-5 paid commissioners with an advisory body. Hire a full-time program manager, part-time facilitator and psychosocial expert.	Bring in expertise by phase: research, public engagement, policy development. Set a process to replace inactive members.	Bring in organizers, principled lobbyists, public policy experts, and lawyers to draft bills and advocate for their passage.
FUNDING	Secure operating funds. Require the commission to identify revenue sources as part of its mandate.	Allocate funding for paid commissioners, staff, onboarding retreat, and meeting space.	Fund research and engagement through a reparative procurement process. Identify revenue streams for implementation.	Fund reparations benefits and the infrastructure to deliver them.
CREATING A REPARATIVE PROCESS	Develop outreach materials that emphasize the iterative and long-term nature of this work.	Frame the work as a journey that continues after the commission ends. Compensate everyone fairly.	Engage communities as partners. Create spaces for people to feel dignity and acknowledgment. Share short-term progress publicly.	Keep framing implementation as part of the reparative journey. Create moments of acknowledgment as recommendations advance.
TRUST BUILDING	Write psychosocial support (care for individual and collective well-being) into the commission's mandate.	Dedicate time at the start to develop community agreements and a process of managing conflict. Bring in trained facilitators.	Hold regular trust-building sessions. Offer facilitated debriefs after testimony and psyschosocial support for all involved.	Sustain support for advocates and the follow-up body.
ONBOARDING	Design a week-long learning journey that combines trust building with grounding in reparations.	Host an onboarding retreat: build shared knowledge, cultivate trust, consensus on reparations definition, develop workplan	Hold regular retreats for ongoing learning, relationship maintenance, planning, and deep dives on hard questions.	Onboard the follow-up body with the commission's institutional memory.
CENTERING TRUTH TELLING & TRUTH LISTENING	Learn from truth commissions how to structure listening sessions and sequence the work.	Design a consent process that lets truth tellers keep control of their testimony. Plan how and where stories will be archived.	Give sufficient time for testimony. Release findings, seek input on recommendations from those most impacted and policy experts.	Share findings in accessible formats (graphic novel, audio, video)
CREATING ACCOUNTABILITY STRUCTURES FOR RESPONSIBLE PARTIES	Write accountability into the mandate: open archives, cooperation, testimony.	Map institutions with power and responsibility. Identify allies. Secure signed commitment letters.	Run facilitated parallel processes for responsible parties. Listen first, then move to joint dialogue to identify reparative measures.	Establish an oversight mechanism that holds institutions to their commitments. Advance slavery disclosure laws.
POLITICAL STRATEGY	Build the case for reparations. Identify legislative champions. Pass enabling legislation.	Map decision-makers inside and outside government. Begin educating legislators about reparations.	Develop a long-term roadmap: prioritize which bills to put forward when, based on political feasibility. Consult legal experts early.	Draft bills, whip votes, and build a multiracial reparations caucus to advocate for implementation. Treat setbacks as information.
NARRATIVE AND COMMUNICATIONS	Write a clear description of the commission's purpose and repeat it throughout. Publicize the application.	Build the communications plan: spokespeople, talking points, shared definitions. Train commissioners on communicating with the public.	Cultivate relationships with journalists early. Release information with context to increase understanding of reparations.	Highlight wins as building blocks for full repair. Track recommendations publicly.



First Repair mural in Evanston, IL, Credit Joerg Metzner

FINDINGS

There is a lot to learn from the successful approaches and innovations advocates have developed to advance reparations efforts at the local level. Overall, these findings fall into two broad categories: **structure** and **process**. The structural elements include how much time is allocated to an effort, who will lead and support the effort, and how it will be funded. These elements are often written into the establishing legislation and are crucial for building a strong foundation. Beyond setting up the structure of a task force, more attention needs to be paid to the way these processes unfold. This includes framing the work as a journey that is inherently reparative, taking the time to build relational trust, creating spaces for people to share their experiences in a way that provides acknowledgment and informs recommendations, opening space for responsible parties to be held accountable, and developing a strong political and narrative strategy.

STRUCTURE: HOW THE FOUNDATION IS BUILT

Across the country, as city, county, and state governments decide to advance reparations in response to community demands, the majority have established a government task force or commission. This is a well-established democratic tool used to explore solutions to an issue that requires government support together with community guidance and insight. This is just one way to advance reparations at the government level but given that this is the most frequently used tactic, this report focuses on task forces or commissions.[7]

The 28 existing task forces established at the city, county, and state level offer significant data and experience to learn from.[8] The next section will explore the way these processes have been set up, examining what has worked and which areas need improvement. It will focus on timing, staffing, and funding.

TIMING

There is a real tension between finding the right political moment and acting within a window of opportunity, on one hand, and the need to take the time to consult with and prepare the community, on the other. In Decatur, Georgia, for example, members of the Beacon Hill Black Alliance for Human Rights worked to gather as much evidence as possible before proposing a resolution to the city council. "We didn't rush to the resolution," noted Attorney Mawuli Davis, "We were focused on making the case."[9] Yet, those closer to the political process, including those in city council, were urging the alliance to submit a resolution while the votes were there. Timing is a constant tension that calls for balancing the need to gather community support to build a strong case with a sense of urgency to act while the political window is open and people are focused on the issue.

Reparations task forces are generally allocated between one to three years to fulfill their mandate of documenting harms, engaging communities, and recommending

7 This report uses the terms task force and commission interchangeably to refer to government-supported efforts to reckon with and repair past harms caused by the government.

8 As of July 2026.

9 First Repair monthly strategy session, March 26, 2026.

reparations policies. To date, almost every task force has requested an extension. In most cases, the extensions are granted, but this repeated pattern can discredit and further complicate the work. If the initial timeline is unrealistic and not met, the public may perceive the reparations effort as a failure, even though those closer to the work know it will require more time from the start. There is also a risk that commissioners will be pressured by the public and media to show results before they are ready, which can have lasting negative implications on the overall process.

> "You don't always accomplish more by being in a rush because then you are going to have to go back and tend to the harm you may have caused by not giving the process the time it needs."
>
> - Dr. Joanne Braxton

Several task force members note feeling a constant sense of urgency, to the detriment of their work. "Each step takes more time than you think to do it right," remarked one member, highlighting the time it takes to "build the political will, and to get input from the community."[10] Echoing that sentiment, a former task force member from Detroit noted, "The whole time, we felt we were sprinting to the end. A longer arc gives you more time to engage people outside the process."[11] Not only is more time needed to set up the process and conduct the work, but it is also crucial to avoiding harm. "You don't always accomplish more by being in a rush," cautions Dr. Braxton, "because then you are going to have to go back and tend to the harm you may have caused by not giving the process the time it needs."[12]

One approach to circumvent the time crunch is to permanently embed commissions into the local government structure, as is the case with the Washtenaw Reparations Advisory Council, St. Paul Recovery Act Community Reparations Commission, and NYC Commission on Racial Equity (CORE). According to one reparations leader, "It absolutely needs to be a permanent body. It cannot sunset when the report is done, that is a waste of money and time because there is nobody for the public to follow

10 Interview with Jean-Pierre Brutus, New Jersey Institute for Social Justice, January 2026.

11 Interview with Lauren Hood, former co-chair of the Detroit Reparations Task Force, March 12, 2026.

12 Interview with Dr. Joanne Braxton, The Braxton Institute, March 2026.

up with and hold accountable."[13] However, some raise concern that extending the timeline too long raises a different challenge: keeping the focus on reparations. They note that some level of urgency is needed to get the work done.



Pink House Pop up "What's in your attic," Layton Castle - Monroe, LA, Credit: Acts of Reparation

13 Interview with reparations leader, March 2026.

TIMING:
IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Reparations task forces take time. Rushing them can negatively impact their work, both by limiting what they are able to do internally and creating unrealistic expectations externally. It is important to allocate sufficient time from the outset, especially for the preparatory phase. As one former task force member expressed, "We waited 400 years for this, you can't wait a year for the structure to be right? Nothing worth doing can be done in one lifetime!"[14]

- **Allocate sufficient time from the outset, including a built-in preparatory period.** The best practice globally is a six-month preparatory period of closed-door planning time that is away from the critical eye of the media and focused on building internal processes, alignment, and a clear workplan.
- **Advance community-level work before bringing it to the government level.** As the Decatur example demonstrates, building a strong evidentiary and community foundation before submitting a resolution strengthens the process.
- **Create a structure to monitor and implement reparations recommendations within local government structures,** either by creating a permanent structure or establishing a follow-up body tasked with overseeing the implementation of reparations recommendations.

14 Interview with Lisa Holder, former California task force member, February 2026.

LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER: NYC CORE

The New York City Commission on Racial Equity (NYC CORE), is a permanent body mandated to hold the New York City government accountable to advance racial equity in government operations and increase community voice in government decision-making. NYC CORE is simultaneously undertaking work on truth, healing, and reconciliation, and reparations.

Initially the plan was for NYC CORE to establish a task force, but Executive Director Linda Tigani proposed an alternative structure that would provide more independence and support. From her experience working within government, she had seen that "commissions and task forces don't have operational support, so the work becomes secondary to whatever government office is hosting it." To prevent reparations from being sidelined, she advocated for a permanent structure.

Recognizing the central importance of community engagement, NYC CORE recently launched an open call for organizations to apply to join the government sponsored Reparations Organizing Network. NYC CORE will make awards of up to $20,000 per organization to lead community conversations, provide reparations policy recommendations, collect truth testimony from community members, and work with researchers.

Taking lessons from past truth commissions, both global and national, NYC CORE is creating spaces for people to share their stories at gatherings. The unique structure of NYC CORE means its work is not subject to public meeting laws, which limit public comment to a few minutes. At the truth gatherings, nobody is timed; participants can take the time they need to tell their stories.

With full-time, paid government staff moving the process forward and a strong community engagement aspect, NYC CORE is a good example of how to be creative, learn from truth commissions, and work within local government to find the structure best suited to the mandate.

STAFFING

Selecting the right people to lead a task force is critical to its success. Past task forces have faced three recurring challenges around staffing: identifying people with time, commitment, and the right expertise; seating those members once selected; and ensuring adequate backstopping support once work begins.

Overall, task forces lack clear procedures and rigorous standards for selecting members. This stems from several factors: government leaders underestimate the time and expertise the work demands; there is insufficient awareness of existing reparations expertise; and/or there is a lack of political will, resulting in performative support for task forces without a genuine commitment to their success. In some contexts, advocates have raised concerns that candidates are chosen for their public profile rather than their substantive commitment to reparations. One task force member was shocked to find the primary interview question was simply, "Can you come to meetings?" Selection standards should be far higher.[15] Given the significance of these roles, candidates should be required to demonstrate a clear understanding of reparations and be subject to some form of public input or screening process.

In developing a staffing plan, commissions often underestimate the different types of expertise required for each phase of work. Research, public engagement, policy development, and implementation are interrelated but distinct. As one commission leader reflected, "We had folks with expertise in history and policy [all working on each step], but looking back, we should have divided labor — academics documenting harms, policy people focused on policy. I underestimated the different skill sets required, and how each lays the groundwork for the other."[16]

Even after selection, lack of political will and bureaucratic red tape can stall progress significantly. In Atlanta, commissioners named in legislation were in some cases unaware of their appointment, lacked capacity, or were slow to accept — and when they did, paperwork was at times misplaced by the city. The Mayor's Commission on Reparations in Kansas City, Missouri, faced a similar problem, with four seats remaining vacant for several months pending mayoral confirmation despite the commission repeatedly suggesting names and seeking updates. At the state level, it took the Illinois commission six months to seat its commissioners. These delays ultimately reduce a commission's timeline and ability to carry out its mandate.

15 Interview with reparations leader, January 2026.

16 Interview with former reparations commission member, January 2026.

In an effort to assemble a broadly representative body, many task forces have rosters of 15 to 25 commissioners. While including different perspectives is critical, this size creates significant practical challenges. Because commissioners serve as unpaid volunteers — balancing the role alongside full-time jobs and other personal responsibilities — they have little to no time to do work outside their monthly meetings and even finding a time when everyone can gather is a recurring struggle.

The consequences compound over time. When members miss meetings, others must spend valuable time bringing them up to speed rather than advancing the work. Differing opinions, combined with varying levels of familiarity with how government functions, add further complexity to decision-making. One task force, for example, took six months simply to agree on its bylaws and internal governance structures.[17]

Work that might otherwise take weeks stretched across half a year before the group could even begin its substantive mandate.

The commitment to representation is important and should not be abandoned, but without adequately accounting for the real constraints volunteers face, large rosters can undermine a task force's ability to function. Size alone is not representation. When a body becomes too unwieldy to operate effectively, the communities it was meant to serve ultimately lose out.

Reparations task forces can look to truth and reconciliation commissions for models: the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission had just three commissioners guided by an advisory body of Indian residential school survivors and supported by paid full-time staff members; the Vermont commission followed a similar structure of three paid commissioners with an advisory body. In Colombia, Vermont, and Victoria, Australia, commissioners were chosen through a competitive public selection process, which gave the public a chance to ask questions of the candidates and submit any concerns to the selection panel.

Staffing remains an area where deeper inquiry is needed. Gathering insights from government insiders and leaders of past and ongoing task forces would help surface practical strategies for improving both the selection and seating processes. The recommendations below reflect what can be acted upon in the meantime.

17 Interview with reparations leader, February 2026.

STAFFING:
IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Design a fair and transparent selection process.** Commissions should move away from appointment-by-popularity or legislatively listing names without prior consent. Better options include securing commitment and capacity before names are formalized or running an open application process (though the latter requires more time and resources).
- **Opt for fewer, paid commissioners supported by an advisory body.** Large task force rosters create coordination challenges, diffuse accountability, and make seating delays more damaging. A smaller cohort — ideally three to five commissioners — who are compensated for their time are more likely to bring full commitment and sustained focus. Broader community expertise and stakeholder input can be channeled through a structured advisory body, ensuring inclusive participation without overburdening the core commission.
- **Match expertise to phase.** Rather than treating the commission as a single, undifferentiated effort, clearly define the expertise needed for each phase — for example, research, public engagement, policy development, implementation — and recruit members accordingly.
- **Provide administrative backstopping.** Commissioners are often not doing this work full-time, making professional staff support essential. Staff should bring practical expertise across research, policy, logistics, urban planning, evaluation, and facilitation backgrounds. Staff should be people with real implementation experience who can provide infrastructure support and keep work moving between commissioner meetings. A full-time program manager is also crucial to coordinate scheduling and implementation of the work.
    - California's task force is a good example. The establishing legislation charged the Department of Justice with providing administrative, technical, and legal assistance to the task force.
- **Establish clear roles and accountability structures.** Commissioners should receive a clear outline of their responsibilities and commit to actively participating. Equally important is having a defined process for removing and replacing members who are unable to fulfill those commitments so that vacancies or disengagement do not stall the broader effort.

FUNDING

A real or perceived lack of funding is one of the biggest obstacles to implementing reparations. Funding is required at every stage of the reparations process: in the short-term, to resource the task force itself, including hiring experts to conduct research, hold community consultations, and develop strong policy recommendations; and in the long-term, to establish the infrastructure to distribute reparations and ultimately fund the actual reparations benefits.

Many earlier commissions were established with no government funding at all. That is slowly changing, but progress is uneven. Federal budget cuts — particularly around racial justice — and the expiry of American Rescue Plan Act funding in December 2026 have narrowed the field of available revenue sources. Operational funding for task forces now ranges from $25,000 for smaller, city-level efforts to $5 million for larger state commissions, like New York's. In some cases, funding is not allocated upfront, and task forces must lobby for it. The Alameda County Reparations Task Force, for example, received $500,000 from the county after 18 months, which it used to hire a facilitator, research firm, therapist, and childcare support for public listening sessions.

While slow progress is being made around funding commissions' operational costs, there is still a gap around long-term planning. As one advocate recalled, in California, when the task force submitted its final report and recommendations, the most frequently asked question was, "Who is paying for it?" To this, the task force had to answer honestly that identifying funding was not part of their mandate.[18] While task forces are already overburdened, leaving funding to the next undefined phase is problematic and risks jeopardizing the process. "We need to reverse engineer the process," advises a former commission member. "Start with a funding source, look at this as infrastructure investment, and deploy resources to explicitly address ongoing harms."[19] A positive step in the right direction, recent legislation in Maryland requires the commission to make recommendations for reparations and identify funding sources.

Funding reparations is both a political and public opinion challenge. Opponents claim there is no money, but "in the pandemic, we saw how quickly money can move if there is determined to be an emergent need," reflected one former task force member.

18 Public remarks at National Reparations Leadership Assembly, March 2026.

19 Interview with Alize Asberry Payne, former racial equity officer, Washtenaw County, strategist and applied researcher, February 2026.

"We are seeing that now with ICE. If there is a will to do it, money can move quickly."[20] Evanston has used cannabis and real estate transfer taxes to fund reparations. Others are exploring progressive taxation more broadly, though this faces public resistance, particularly when many people are already struggling financially. Some states are exploring a narrower approach: taxing institutions that directly benefited from slavery and discrimination. In Maryland's 2026 legislative session, advocates introduced a bill that would impose an excise tax on private institutions with endowments of at least $2 billion, directing that revenue into a dedicated Reparations Fund.[21] Though the bill was not expected to pass, advocates advanced it as part of their long-term strategy to lay the groundwork for future efforts.

There is a recent, growing trend of governments and task forces issuing RFPs for research teams to prepare harm reports. The infusion of resources into this work is a welcome development — rigorous, well-funded research is essential to building the evidentiary foundation that reparations demand. But money also changes incentives, and the shift warrants careful attention. Competitive RFPs risk attracting applicants who are drawn to the funding rather than the work itself. What reparations research demands is a rare combination: methodological rigor and deep community rootedness. Without clear guardrails and specifically designed selection criteria, the procurement process risks undermining the work. As one advocate warned, reparations lose credibility when the process meant to deliver justice reproduces the very exclusions it was designed to correct.[22]

---

20 Ibid.

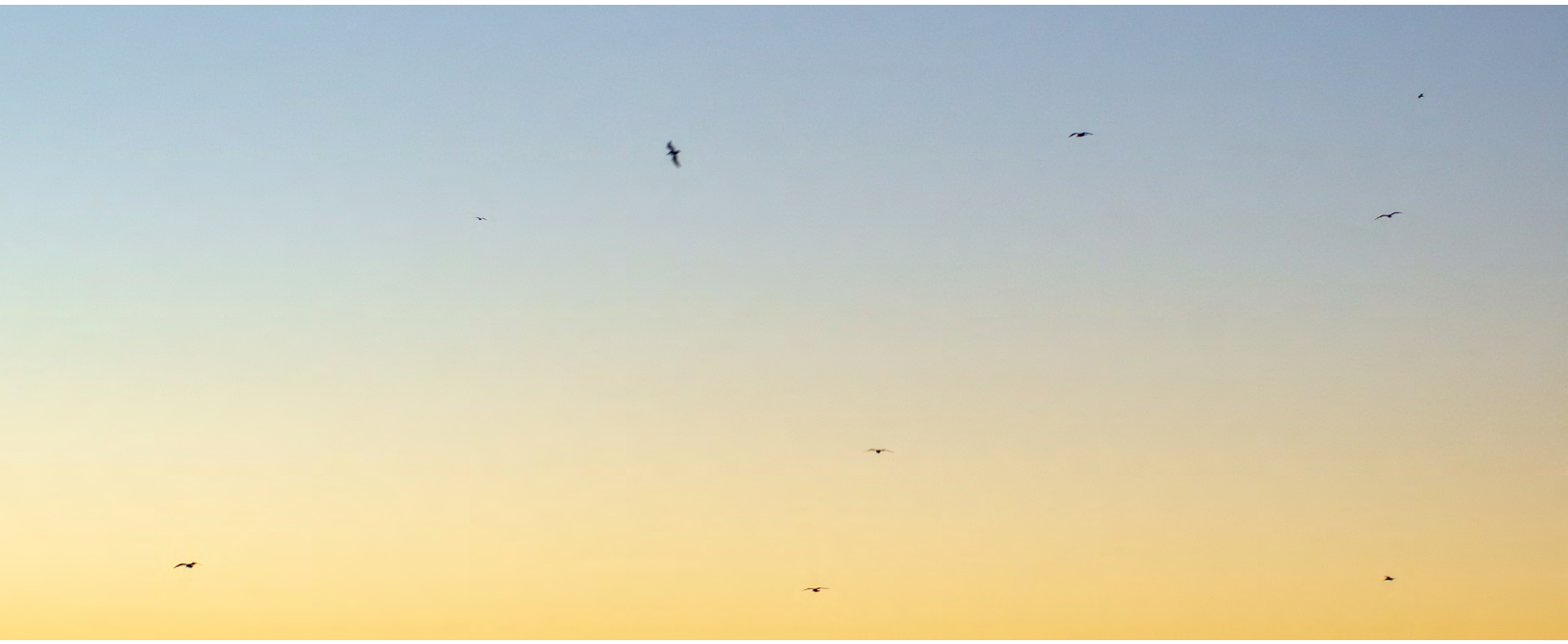
21 Maryland General Assembly, "HB 1271: Reparations — Board, Fund, and Excise Tax on Endowments," 2026 regular session.

22 Comments made during public discussion on reparations, February 2026.

FUNDING:

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Identify funding sources from the start.** Revenue planning should run in parallel with the work to document harms and develop remedies, not deferred until after recommendations are submitted.
- **Treat reparations as infrastructure investment.** Framing reparations funding as a long-term economic infrastructure investment — rather than a one-time expenditure — can help promote sustainability.
- **Explore dedicated revenue streams tied to harm.** Mechanisms like the Evanston cannabis and real estate transfer taxes or proposed endowment taxes on institutions that benefited from slavery offer possible models for funding reparations in ways that are politically defensible and directly connected to the underlying rationale for repair.
- **Ensure the funding process is itself reparative.** The way money flows into this work should reflect the values of the work itself. Governments and funders should consider community-led procurement processes or participatory grantmaking that centers affected communities in decisions about resource allocation.
- **Establish clear selection criteria that recognize the need for rigor and community connection.** Governments and task forces issuing RFPs must be deliberate about what they prioritize: not only technical competence, but also demonstrated commitment to reparations, genuine relationships with affected communities, and expertise built through sustained engagement with this work.



PROCESS: HOW THE JOURNEY UNFOLDS

CREATING A REPARATIVE PROCESS

The term reparations can lead people to see them as a finite destination: there is a harm, it is repaired, and the process is finished. However, as both global and national experience demonstrates, reparations for legacies of systemic harms and violations that have occurred over centuries cannot be repaired with one single program, action, or piece of legislation. Like democracy, reparations is a verb that calls for continued action.[23] To fully repair the harm caused by slavery and its legacies, every responsible level of government must pass policies to address these multiple layers and transform the structures that continue to perpetuate harm. It is therefore crucial to understand reparations as an iterative process and a long-term journey. For those concerned about the fiscal impact of reparations, the iterative nature of this work means the weight is distributed across time.

Long-term framing is also crucial to set realistic expectations and put much-needed

23 Remarks by a reparations advocate at a coalition meeting, February 2026.

focus on how the process itself is run. Since reparations will take time and ongoing work, it is important that the process feels inherently reparatory. In this way, we can see meaningful, measurable short-term progress. In Evanston, for example, even though reparations programs are ongoing, residents are already noticing their broader positive impact on the entire community. A survey of Evanston residents in 2023 revealed overwhelming support for the program, with over 70% of white respondents viewing reparations as "good public policy" for the city and leading to "double-digit net increases in trust in city government across all nine of the city's wards and among all ethnic and racial demographic groups."[24]

> "It's not the result that produces the difference — it's how we treat each other in the process."
>
> - Dr. Karlos K. Hill

Drawing from restorative justice, one advocate noted, "It's not the result that produces the difference — it's how we treat each other in the process."[25] This speaks to both the macro nature of reparations as part of an effort to transform the relationship between citizens and the state, as well as its microlevel implications for how we begin to manifest that new relationship at the interpersonal level. Crucially, this involves taking the time to build trust internally, within the commission itself. A solid foundation is essential to the sustainability of the process, but there is a lack of clarity about how to build that foundation. The "setting up of these processes is one thing," notes reparations advocate Dreisen Heath, "but there's no real guidance or reparative principles we have collaboratively come up with in the ecosystem to protect the process as it goes along."[26] As part of an effort to fill that gap, the Why We Can't Wait Reparations Network is looking to "develop specific organizing, intervention, and evaluation plans around these reparative processes and procedures."[27] As noted in the previous section, time is a major challenge, with commissions feeling rushed and pressured to deliver results. Yet, as has become clear from task forces around the country and globe, the enormity of the task and the weight of the mandate require time and patience. Success depends on "intentionally moving at the speed of trust."[28]

24 "Overwhelming Support for Evanston Reparations Program, Survey Finds," Northwestern Now, October 24, 2023.

25 Interview with Dr. Karlos K. Hill, February 25, 2026.

26 Dreisen Heath, Why We Can't Wait Reparations Network meeting, February 2026.

27 Ibid.

28 Interview with Dr. Joanne Braxton, March 12, 2026.

CREATING A REPARATIVE PROCESS:

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Framing reparations as a process, not an endpoint, is crucial for internal alignment and external expectation setting. In practice, that framing demands attention to how the work is done, not only what is produced.

- **Build repair into the process from the outset.** The way task forces are set up, research is conducted, and communities are engaged should all begin to embody repair. Examples include:
  - Fairly compensating the time and expertise of all involved and recognizing the added harm inherent in asking those who have already borne the weight of harm to carry the additional burden of repair without adequate support.
  - Designing listening sessions so people feel truly heard and acknowledged. These should draw on the models developed by NYC CORE and the Maine Wabanaki commission.
  - Approaching communities as partners, not subjects, in the research process.
  - Ensuring that those leading the work — commissioners, staff, and advocates — are themselves supported and cared for along the way.
- **Develop guidance on what a reparatory process looks like in practice.** Each new task force should not have to start from scratch. Clear, accessible guidance rooted in the experiences of past and ongoing efforts can help ensure the process consistently centers and responds to those it means to help heal.
- **Communicate clearly and consistently that progress can be felt in the short term, even as the full arc of repair is long.** Each policy passed, each commission established, each harm documented and acknowledged is a meaningful step. As Evanston demonstrates, even while reparations programs are ongoing, residents can experience the broader positive impact on their community.

TRUST BUILDING

At the global level, when a truth or reparations commission was established, there were groups of technical experts ready to support the new entity with guidance on statement taking, research, and public outreach, but almost never on building the internal relational infrastructure needed for this work. When conflict would erupt among members of a commission, it would often be attributed to an unfortunate mix of people or the lack of a transparent selection process. In the U.S., where so many task forces are underway and struggling to manage internal conflict, it has become clear that the source of tension cannot be attributed solely to the people or the process. The incredible challenge of trying to craft reparations for centuries of harm within a system that continues to perpetuate it must also be an underlying cause.

The interviews conducted for this report further confirm that trust building is often lacking from reparations efforts but must be a key element of the work. Several former task force members acknowledged they learned the hard way. One noted that when trust building is absent, "it can really derail things — penny wise, pound foolish."[29] The leader of another initiative acknowledged that while they initially engaged in limited trust-building work, it was not sustained, explicit, or intentional. As a result, they were having recurring disagreements about how to define reparations through the end of their process. In retrospect, this person reflected, "We would have saved a lot of time had we done [trust building] from the start."[30] Trust building is not a one-off event; it should be centered throughout a process.

At its core, trust building begins with developing a minimum foundation of mutual respect — enough to allow people to discuss differences and disagreements in a way that leads to greater clarity rather than roadblocks. Built on that foundation, trust enables a commission to work more efficiently, leveraging each person's respective skills, expertise, and capacity. It helps maintain internal unity in the face of external pressures and critiques. And it is key to building a shared sense of purpose and direction so that disagreements do not rupture relationships. With trust and respect, people can hold multiple truths at once, and everyone can see a fuller picture.

Understanding why trust is so difficult to build in this context requires looking beneath the surface of interpersonal dynamics. Group relations theory offers an important lens for doing so. It holds that when people come together in a group, they bring with

29 Interview with Lisa Holder, February 2026.

30 Interview with former task force leader, January 2026.

them the roles, identities, and power dynamics of the broader society and will tend to reproduce those same dynamics within the smaller group, often without realizing it. In the context of reparations work, this means the very inequities the commission is working to repair can resurface in the room — not only along lines of race, but also age, gender, education, and class — and affect who speaks, whose expertise is valued, and who holds authority. Until those dynamics are seen, named, and interrupted, they can derail even the most well-intentioned process from within. As psychologist Lynne Layton notes, "The things that cause pain in the first place — results of sexism, of racism, of classism — tend to get unconsciously reproduced, even as they're being resisted against."[31]

The concept of "wounded leadership," articulated by South African psychologist Nomfundo Mogapi, adds another crucial dimension. It calls for recognition that the people expected to lead justice and reparations processes often carry historical and collective trauma. If left unaddressed, that trauma can negatively affect their ability to lead. "At the end of the day," she cautions, "you can have the most well-designed programs, with the most well-designed strategic plans, but if the people who are responsible for driving those are wounded, they will sabotage that."[32] It is therefore crucial to not only support leaders of reparations efforts with technical tools and training, but also attend to their well-being and work to heal the patterns of discrimination that persist in the broader society.[33]

Liberation psychology offers a complementary framework that is particularly relevant for the U.S. Psychologist Ignacio Martín-Baró noted that trauma and the reactions it triggers "can be a normal consequence of a social system based on social relations of exploitation and dehumanizing oppression."[34] Countering the tendency toward individual pathologization, Martín-Baró reframed the approach to care in unjust societies by highlighting that it is not the individual who is somehow broken and needs to be fixed, it is the societal norms and structures themselves that are broken. This is precisely where reparations come in: to bring about a transformation of society and its institutions.

In recent task forces where attention to these dynamics was absent, the consequences

31 Kieran Keohane and Lynne Layton, "An Interview with Lynne Layton, Harvard Medical School," Irish Journal of Sociology, 30(2), 124–130, 2022.

32 Nomfundo Mogapi, quoted in Virginie Ladisch, "The Search for People's Well-Being: Mainstreaming a Psychosocial Approach to Transitional Justice," ICTJ, September 2024, p. 8.

33 Ibid., p. 32.

34 Ignacio Martín-Baró, quoted in ibid., p. 8.

were severe. One former task force member recalls, "As tensions escalated, I often found myself asking whether the process itself was embodying the repair we claimed to be pursuing. If repair isn't present in how we work together, it's difficult to imagine it emerging from what we ultimately produce."[35] The difficult reality is that commissions are working within systems of government that continue to perpetuate harm. As one former task force member reflected, "We were trying to run a repair-based program on a harm-based operating system."[36] In that context, it becomes even more critical to slow down and take intentional steps to avoid retraumatizing people. Dr. Braxton reminds us, "Folks need to recognize that just because they have been harmed, they can also cause harm — you're not immune from causing harm because you have experienced harm."[37]

Alongside trust building, advocates called for more intentional focus on health, restoration, and mindfulness as elements critical to emotional healing and sustained capacity for reparations work. As Brenda Reynolds, the psychologist accompanying the Canadian reparations and truth commission process, put it plainly, "If you don't look after yourself, you are not going to last in this work."[38] But the responsibility for that care should not fall on individuals alone. Reparations commissions must build awareness of and structures for member well-being into the process itself. Care should not be an afterthought, but a core element of how the work is designed and carried out.

This learning is already being reflected in more recently established commissions. In Maryland, for example, the establishing legislation reserves one position for a mental health expert.

35 Interview with Lauren Hood, March 12, 2026.

36 Ibid.

37 Interview with Dr. Joanne Braxton, March 12, 2026. For more information, see: Joanne M. Braxton, Eric M. Busse, and Cynda Hylton Rushton, "Mapping the Terrain of Moral Suffering," Perspectives in Biology and Medicine, 64(2), 235-245, Spring 2021; and Margaret Urban Walker, Moral Repair: Reconstructing Moral Relations After Wrongdoing, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

38 Brenda Reynolds, quoted in Virginie Ladisch, "The Search for People's Well-Being," p. 32.

TRUST BUILDING:
IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Advocates agreed that taking the time to build trust at the start of a process will go a long way toward making a commission's work smoother and more impactful. To that end, task forces should:

- **Prioritize internal trust building from the outset and center it throughout as a sustained practice rather than a one-time event.** This includes putting in place clear processes to address conflict when it arises. Specific ways to do this include:
  - Dedicating time at the start of the process to establish a minimum foundation of mutual respect, including community agreements and processes for how the group will navigate disagreement and conflict.
  - Building in regular trust-building sessions throughout the life of the commission, not only at the beginning.
  - Including trained facilitators with expertise in group dynamics to help the commission see, name, and interrupt patterns that can derail the process (including dynamics of race, age, gender, education, and class). These facilitators should be brought in from the start, not just for conflict management.
- **Center healing and psychosocial support throughout.** Reparations commissions should include experts in trauma-informed approaches and trust building to provide ongoing support and help create the infrastructure needed to manage conflict. This may include:
  - Providing space for individual or group debriefing led by a trained facilitator or psychosocial expert, particularly after difficult sessions or public testimony.
  - Staying attuned to signs of burnout among commissioners, staff, and advocates, and responding proactively.
  - Building awareness of and structures for member well-being into the commission's design from the outset.
  - Including psychosocial support in the establishing legislation and in the core team.

ONBOARDING

In addition to laying a solid foundation for a task force through ongoing trust building, it is essential to prepare an onboarding plan to foster a shared base of knowledge to ground the commission's work. Several commissioners noted a key challenge is a lack of shared knowledge or understanding of reparations. "Everybody came in thinking they knew everything, [but] everybody was reading separate articles, following different thinkers across the country,"[39] said one former commissioner. Advocates highlighted the need to create a learning journey for task force members, so everyone is guided by the same understanding throughout the process. There "have to be some objective truths, some throughlines that everyone signs up for and agrees to as a task force."[40]

The Alameda County Reparations Commission did just that. The 15 commissioners spent the first year listening to speakers, reading reports, and learning about U.N. principles so there was a shared base of information. According to Debra Gore, the commission chair, everyone came in with their own information, so "we had to level-set to agree to the same language and build an understanding around the definitions of reparations. We had to educate ourselves with existing reparations work, which took about a year of getting alignment."[41]

While examples like this show some positive progress, to date, these efforts have been largely ad hoc. Each new task force is left to determine for themselves whether and how to onboard their members. One task force member captured this point clearly, "I know we are not the first people to do this, but it does not feel like there is a road map."

Specifically, many current or past task force members requested clear, digestible onboarding materials. As one leader said, "An airtable with 5,000 lines is not helpful. Don't give me a huge database because I'm just starting a huge process and don't know what I'm looking for, and don't give me nothing."[42]

39 Interview with Lauren Hood, March 12, 2026.

40 Ibid.

41 Interview with Debra Gore, Founding Chair for Alameda County Reparations Commission, March 2026.

42 Interview with reparations commissioner, March 2026.

ONBOARDING:

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Taking the time to build a shared foundation of knowledge at the start of a process is essential to making a commission's work more coherent and effective.

- **Embed an orientation into the work and timeline of a task force from the outset.** Ideally, this would include a week-long learning journey for task force members, combining trust building with substantive grounding in reparations, followed by regular retreats as needed. Key elements of that orientation should include:
    - Structured introductions that go beyond names and titles — take at least half a day to learn what brings each person to this work, through paired and full-group exercises.
    - An introduction to reparations in the global context, including the U.N. definition and insights from past reparations programs globally.
    - Information about past and ongoing reparations efforts in the U.S., with a focus on lessons learned, through readings and direct testimony from people who have led other efforts.
    - Information about debates within the field of reparations, giving people time and information to reflect and discuss the implications of different positions before trying to come to a consensus.
        - For example, on the topic of eligibility, it is important to acknowledge the debate and provide information about how this question has been handled by different commissions without aiming to come to immediate agreement.
- **Develop clear and accessible onboarding materials for newly established task forces.** Task force members consistently report feeling as though they are starting from zero, without a road map to guide them. There are several calls for creating a guidance note or toolkit that task forces can draw on from day one, rather than starting from scratch each time. This should be digestible, open-source, and rooted in the collective wisdom of past and ongoing efforts.
- **Establish a communications plan and internal communications agreements during onboarding.** Before the commission begins its public work, task force members should agree on who will speak to the media, when, and on what. The communications plan should also include a compilation of agreements made during the onboarding process, including a definition of reparations and key talking points. This is also the moment to learn about common narrative roadblocks — such as the "just the cash" framing — and develop shared language for getting ahead of those critiques.[43]

43 For more information, see: Reparations Narrative Lab, "Narrative House," www.reparationsnarrativelab.org/

CENTERING TRUTH TELLING AND TRUTH LISTENING

Reparations task forces have a core responsibility to document violations, and their enduring impact and consult affected communities on the remedy — essentially serving a truth-seeking role. While there have been several truth commissions in the U.S., and many more globally, they tend to fall outside the scope of reparations discussions. This is a missed opportunity. Looking at truth commissions can provide helpful insights and inspiration for reparations efforts in the U.S., especially around sequencing and how to set up effective listening sessions.

Most government-sponsored reparations task forces are limited by rules of procedure that restrict public comment to just a few minutes. With a topic as complex as reparations, that is not enough time for people to feel genuinely heard and acknowledged, which is a core element of the process. Truth-seeking efforts offer helpful guidance in this regard. For example, NYC CORE took inspiration from the Maine Wabanaki-State Child Welfare Truth and Reconciliation Commission to design their truth-gathering sessions in a way that allows people to take the time they need to share their stories and experiences. Building on the Maine experience, NYC CORE also developed a nuanced consent process that allows truth tellers to maintain control over their testimony through the ability to provide or retract consent at any time.

Another common challenge is balancing the need for broad consultation and research on harms with the need to allocate sufficient time to consult on and develop strong policy recommendations. A former member of the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission noted that they spent most of their time documenting and uncovering the history and then rushed to come up with recommendations. In retrospect, she reflected, they should have allocated more time to prepare the recommendations. For example, they could have released the initial findings to the public and then sought input about recommendations from those impacted by the documented violations.[44] Without sufficient buy-in, people will not be invested in the recommendations and are less likely to carry on the necessary advocacy to get them implemented. The Fulton County task force and the Illinois state commission are trying out this tiered approach by first releasing their harm reports and then opening space for people to provide feedback and recommendations on reparative policies.

44 Interview with former Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission staff member, February 2026.

State-supported reparations efforts also suffer from a lack of trust in government. There is a risk that some of the bureaucratic safeguards meant to protect the process actually perpetuate harm by not making space for a trauma-informed healing process. In Alaska, the Truth Tribunals led by the First Alaskans Institute provide a source of inspiration on this point, specifically around how they adapted the framework to fit their context. They centered healing and self-care throughout the process by carefully preparing participants before the truth-telling sessions and having healers present and available for anybody who needed support at each session. The healer would interject breathing or movement breaks when things got tense and follow up with individuals needing extra support.

The First Alaskans Institute also created specific roles to intentionally guide the process in a way that resonated culturally and spiritually. Those giving their testimony were called "truth providers," a term they felt was more affirming than the court term, "witness." "Story guardians" listened to what was being shared and reflected it back to the larger group. Artists also attended the sessions, weaving what they heard into their artwork as another way to honor and acknowledge what was being shared. They also created "accountability partners" to provide a role for institutions involved in harms, which will be explored in the next section.



Pink House Pop up "Circle of Repair," Ebenezer Baptist Church - Atlanta, GA, Credit: Acts of Reparation

CENTERING TRUTH TELLING AND TRUTH LISTENING:

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important to look beyond reparations-specific precedents for design inspiration. Truth commissions offer directly applicable lessons and should be treated as a resource rather than a separate, unrelated field.

- **Restructure public comment to allow for meaningful testimony and acknowledgment.** Task forces should design listening sessions that give participants the time they need, drawing on models like the Maine Wabanaki-State Child Welfare Truth and Reconciliation Commission.
- **Phase the work to avoid rushing recommendations.** Task forces should release initial findings publicly before finalizing policy recommendations and explicitly invite those most affected to help shape them. It is also important to consult with public policy experts and government officials to ensure feasibility and build institutional support.
- **Be intentional about designing in-person public engagement.** Public engagement is a core element of the reparations process. Task forces should think carefully about how to make those opportunities genuinely interesting, relevant, and accessible. Bringing in artists, educators, and visual storytellers can help make reparations more accessible to different audiences.
- **Center trauma-informed, culturally resonant design throughout.** Task forces should adapt frameworks to their specific community's cultural and spiritual context, including reconsidering the language used for participants (for example, truth providers rather than witnesses).

LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER: DECATUR, GEORGIA

In May 2025, the Decatur City Commission unanimously approved a resolution put forward by the Beacon Hill Black Alliance for Human Rights. It offers a formal acknowledgment of the city's past role in the systemic oppression of people of

African descent, a public apology, and the establishment of the Decatur Reparations Task Force. The Beacon Hill Black Alliance began its research on reparations in 2022 and was able to deepen that work in 2024 when the city commission approved a funding request of $25,000. With the help of local residents, professors, and college students, their research uncovered critical evidence that urban renewal was part of an orchestrated effort to destroy Black neighborhoods, providing solid evidence for reparations.

Several national reparations advocates have highlighted the strong foundation upon which the Decatur task force is built, noting how much can be learned from its community-rooted approach.[45] What distinguishes the task force is the way the Beacon Hill Black Alliance, the community coalition behind the effort, has a clearly defined role through its two designated seats in the task force, while it also continues its community engagement and awareness raising work outside the task force structure. Simultaneous to the Decatur Task Force beginning its work, the Beacon Hill Black Alliance continues to meet every second Tuesday to engage community members in the process.

Another innovation, the resolution notes the Decatur Reparations Task Force will continue to operate "until full redress has been achieved or until the Task Force agrees by consensus to dissolve." It calls on the city of Decatur to "review, consider, and incorporate the recommendations of the Reparations Task Force into its policymaking, budgeting, and strategic planning processes and will work to ensure lasting change and material redress for its African American residents, past and present."[46]

---

45 The Beacon Hill Black Alliance for Human Rights was a recipient of an award at the First Repair Symposium in December 2025.

46 City of Decatur, Georgia, "Resolution Acknowledging the Historical Crimes and Ongoing Injuries Inflicted Upon Black Residents of Decatur, Georgia, and Establishing a Reparations Task Force to Study and Develop Recommendations for Redress."

CREATING ACCOUNTABILITY STRUCTURES FOR RESPONSIBLE PARTIES

Perhaps one of the most important, and most difficult, elements of reparations is non-recurrence: breaking the cycle of harm and reforming institutions so violations do not continue. This transformative aim is difficult to articulate and even harder to implement. It requires disrupting the status quo, which inevitably generates resistance from those who fear losing power. To date, task forces have primarily focused on centering impacted communities, which is central to the success of reparations work. But equally necessary is opening space for those who bear responsibility — at different levels and in different ways — to acknowledge the harms they and their institutions have caused and begin to take steps toward repair.

In Atlanta, for example, reparations advocates caution the "Atlanta Way" is a significant obstacle in the path toward meaningful repair. A strategy of urban governance that stresses cooperation between Black and white political and business elites,[47] the Atlanta Way reflects a history of Black power brokers working with their white counterparts to ensure things do not descend into chaos, often to the detriment of redistributive reforms.[48] There are similar challenges in cities and states across the country where those who benefit from the status quo may put up roadblocks to reparations. Without the support and buy-in of at least a portion of key power holders and an explicit power analysis, reparations are likely to continue facing obstacles and limited implementation.

One reparations advocate emphasized that corporations and other public institutions that have benefited from slavery and the legacy of discrimination should be brought into the process early on, so they become stakeholders rather than opponents. However, the process needs to be carefully structured so power holders and responsible parties are brought into the process but cannot dominate or take it over. She noted, "It has to be a tandem process...we're not in the same room together. We have to start the work separately and then, once people feel healthy and strong, they can come together."[49] The model of the accountability partner developed by the First

47 "The Atlanta Way: Repression, Mediation, and Division of Black Resistance from 1906 to the 2020 George Floyd Uprisings," Atlanta Studies, October 4, 2021.

48 Interview with racial justice expert and academic, January 2026.

49 Interview with Lisa Holder, February 2026.

Alaskans Institute for their Truth Tribunals can serve as a source of inspiration for how to widen the circle of responsibility.

Australia's Yoorrook Justice Commission offers another relevant model for how accountability of responsible institutions can be built into a commission's mandate. Established in Victoria in 2021, Yoorrook's mandate explicitly required government bodies and other institutions to provide evidence about their past and current practices and policies.[50] Yoorrook convened institutional hearings in which government ministers, public servants, and senior officials were questioned about their institutions' role in perpetuating harm. As commission chair Eleanor Bourke described it, these hearings were a "historic moment" of an Aboriginal-led inquiry "asking questions to people in positions of authority, people who should be accountable about why things have happened and how certain policies remain."[51] Yoorrook's recommendations called for establishing an independent oversight body with the resources and authority to hold responsible government ministers, departments, and institutions to account for the success or failure of the programs they develop and deliver.[52] Future U.S. reparations task forces should consider similar ways to hold institutions accountable as part of their work.

Slavery disclosure laws are another way to create accountability structures that bring responsible institutions into the process. Several are already in effect across the country.[53] In September 2026, California became the first state in the nation to require corporations to disclose slavery profits when Governor Gavin Newsom signed Assembly Bill 2599, the Truth in Disclosure Act. The law requires companies doing business in California with more than $100 million in annual worldwide gross receipts to search their records and submit sworn affidavits on whether they or their predecessors bought, sold, insured, or financed enslaved people. Once funded, a public database maintained by the state's Civil Rights Department will make those filings searchable, giving journalists, researchers, and reparations advocates an unprecedented tool to trace historical profits to present-day corporate wealth. Part of a multiyear strategy, slavery disclosure laws lay the foundation for several core

50 Yoorrook Justice Commission, "Letters Patent Summary," November 28, 2022.

51 Maxim Shanahan, "Yoorrook Commission: The Government Admits 'A Shameful System,'" JusticeInfo.net, May 2, 2023.

52 Yoorrook Justice Commission, "Recommendations," www.yoorrook.org.au/reports-and-recommendations/recommendations

53 Reparations United, "Slavery Disclosure and Redress Ordinance Toolkit," March 2024.

LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER: THE FIRST ALASKANS INSTITUTE TRUTH TRIBUNALS

As part of a process of truth, racial healing, and transformation, the First Alaskans Institute created the category of accountability partners, which comprise any "entity, organization, person or groups of people" with a history of doing harm to Alaska Native people but whose work now demonstrates a willingness to reflect, learn, and change and "to work alongside our people to ensure true healing and transformation."[54]

Accountability partners undertook a one and a half-day training on the process, context, and expectations, followed by ongoing trainings and check-ins throughout the process. Accountability partners were asked to commit to:

- Participate in a preparatory dialogue
- Examine the political and racial legacy of your institution and commit to examining and sharing this story.
- Lift up truths, share hidden or untold stories, and dismantle half-told or false narratives that are critical to transforming inequitable systems
- Participate fully during truth-telling spaces.
- Commit your time and resources to work proactively with our communities to advance desired policy and narrative outcomes.[55]

54 Accountability Partner Invite, First Alaskans Institute, September 2020, on file with the author.

55 Accountability Partner Invite, First Alaskans Institute, September 2020, on file with the author.

Accountability partners included universities, faith communities, resource agencies, and public media. As a representative of the Quakers recalls, "We were to listen and to hear how people's lives had been impacted by our way of operating — 'our' being mostly white institutions — and to commit to healing and change."[56] Following the tribunals, accountability partners gathered together at a summit to process what they had heard, with the support of the First Alaskans Institute. Then, everybody came back together on equal footing to identify the key issues raised and discuss the essence of what needed repair and how to do so. The rationale was, "The more of us in the room sharing ideas and resources from our different perspectives, the better ideas we might come up with."[57]

One of the accountability partners was the Alaska Friends Conference (Quakers). As part of their engagement, they issued a formal apology in 2022 for their role in the boarding schools, noting, "It is not the responsibility of Alaska Native people to help us to transform our behavior. At the same time, we see that our acting without first listening has led to great harm. We seek your guidance and input to ensure reparations are done on your terms that will help your communities heal. We ask for forgiveness and pledge to walk beside you as we work together for healing and transformation."[58]

The commitments made by the Quakers are ongoing and lifelong. So far, they have allocated financial support for a cultural healing center and committed to sharing the true history with other Quakers and lobbying for a boarding schools truth and healing bill at the federal level. They also support a group of Alaskan Native Wellness Healers with their time and financial resources.[59]

---

56 "A Conversation With Jan Bronson," Southern California Quarterly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, June 11, 2024.

57 Interview with a member of the Alaska Friends Conference, March 2026.

58 "Learning Our True History," Friends Journal, www.friendsjournal.org/learning-our-true-history/

59 Interview with Quaker leader, March 2026.

components of reparations: truth telling, by painting a fuller picture of the range of entities that benefited from chattel slavery; accountability, by requiring corporations to acknowledge on the record how they benefited; and reparations, by establishing a potential basis for funding by officially compiling a record of corporations who profited from chattel slavery.

Beyond institutions, reparations efforts should also encourage participation of individuals who are not directly culpable but have benefited from white supremacy. As members of the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland noted, "It's not about guilt, it's about responsibility." For transformative change to occur, it is crucial to encourage as many people and institutions as possible to step into the circle of responsibility. In confronting the country's history of violence, racism, and injustice, "it is necessary to link the individual's sense of personal responsibility to the collective sociopolitical, moral, and ethical responsibility that we carry."[60] This requires "creating opportunities where beneficiary communities go beyond the simple acknowledgment of historical knowledge and reconsider their roles towards structural inequalities and legacies of violence that continue to exist."[61]

60 Paulette Regan, Unsettling the Settler: Within Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada, University of British Columbia Press, 2011.

61 Nadia Jmal and Virginie Ladisch, "A Voices-Centered Approach to Transitional Justice: Youth-led Activism and Artistic Initiatives Open Spaces for Broad Community Engagement," International Journal of Transitional Justice 16(1), 118–132, March 2022.

CREATING ACCOUNTABILITY STRUCTURES FOR RESPONSIBLE PARTIES:

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As reparations commissions move from the establishment phase to report writing and implementation, it is important to bring responsible parties and institutions into the process in a meaningful and carefully structured way. The following strategies are worth considering:

- **Conduct a stakeholder mapping of institutions with power and responsibility.** Identify allies within those institutions who are ready to acknowledge the harms committed and explore ways to repair them. Secure their commitment to a clear set of guiding principles — including a signed commitment letter — before bringing them into the process.
- **Use caucusing and parallel processes to bring responsible parties in without causing harm.** Members of responsible institutions should meet separately with a facilitator to reflect on what they have heard before coming into dialogue with those who have been harmed. Within those separate processes, prioritize listening before exploring possible forms of reparations together.
- **Include accountability provisions within the task force mandate.** Drawing on the Yoorrook model, task forces should consider requiring key institutions to open their archives, cooperate with the task force, and provide testimony. Another possibility is creating an oversight mechanism to hold institutions accountable for the implementation of their commitments after the commission concludes.
- **Advance slavery disclosure laws as part of a multiyear strategy.** These serve multiple purposes simultaneously: painting a fuller picture of the range of entities that benefited from chattel slavery, requiring corporations to acknowledge on the record how they benefited, and establishing a basis for reparations funding.
- **Widen the circle of responsibility beyond direct culpability.** Consider designing structured processes that invite power holders and responsible institutions to move from acknowledgment to active participation in repair.

POLITICAL STRATEGY

Over the past several years, there has been significant focus on strategies to establish task forces. However, now that many more have been created, several advocates highlighted the need to focus more on coalescing around a strong political strategy during the task force's operations and, even more importantly, once the task force issues its recommendations and concludes its work.

One leader noted how they underestimated the big leap of moving from the task force report to policy implementation. After years of lobbying together for a task force, it was harder than anticipated to find consensus around a unified strategy once it was time to build a coalition behind a specific set of legislative proposals.[62] Not only does the advocacy message shift at this stage, but a whole new set of expertise is needed to move from recommendations to reality. This includes organizers, individuals with substantive expertise and relationships with legislators, and principled lobbyists committed to the work who are not also involved with conflicting issues.

In some cases, instead of building bridges, advocates have taken adversarial positions vis-à-vis legislators. Ultimately, notes one reparations leader, "legislators are our allies; we need them in this work."[63] However, many legislators lack the political education necessary to see reparations efforts through to implementation. They need support to be effective allies, especially around identifying viable funding sources.[64] It is therefore important to keep developing an inside-outside strategy by supporting and growing the number of reparations champions working within government structures, while also supporting reparations leaders and organizers outside government to develop recommendations grounded in the lived experience of community members and push insiders to act more boldly. Each reinforces the other, and together, they build the conditions for transformative change.

Rather than jumping to criticize elected officials when something does not pass, it is important to approach it as a chance to improve the work and then celebrate "incremental wins that are building towards something larger."[65] In Decatur, advocates emphasize the importance of having patience during the legislative process by taking "what might have sounded as a no or resistance as information on how to tighten up."[66]

---

62 Interview with former task force leader, January 2026.

63 Interview with reparations leader, January 2026.

64 Ibid.

65 Interview with aide to California Governor Gavin Newsom, February 2026.

66 First Repair strategy session, presentation by Mawuli Davis and Lesa Fronk, March 26, 2026.

This message was reiterated by advocates in California. "Just because a bill gets vetoed doesn't mean it will not be back and will not be better," notes Lisa Holder, "I am actually astonished by how healthy and robust the process is this year."[67]

Once a task force issues its report and recommendations, the next challenge for advocates and legislators is to determine what to focus on first and how many bills to put forward. In the first year following the end of the California task force, there were different views about what recommendations to prioritize and what legislation to put forward. This led to divisions within the California Legislative Black Caucus, which were amplified by the media. A representative from Governor Gavin Newsom's office suggested it is more effective to have a few pieces of targeted legislation rather than an overly ambitious package without strong coalition backing. Over the past two legislative cycles, California advocates have been working with the Black caucus to build a stronger strategy. In the latest cycle, one advocate noted progress, with members more willing to put forward fewer bold, impactful, and strategic bills and coalesce around them.[68] This requires thinking about stepping-stones and establishing a foundation that will lead to bigger and better legislative packages in the future. Overall, the recommended strategy being tested in California is to push for big, bold change through a smaller overall number of bills.[69]

While increased unity within the California Legislative Black Caucus is important, several advocates highlighted the need to develop a political strategy beyond it, especially in states like California where a Black elected official may not necessarily be representing a Black community.[70] Furthermore, the caucus only has 12 members out of 120 legislators. "We need more than them who are pushing for reparations," reflected one advocate working to engage beyond the group.[71] These demographic dynamics highlight the need to continue building broad coalitions of support for reparations both within and outside of government. Darris Young has suggested that instead of focusing solely on the Black caucus, there should be a reparations caucus that is multiracial and multicultural. He says, "Reparations is not a Black issue, it is an American issue. Being an American, you inherited the burden that has always been there. We need a reparations caucus in California so that the burden is not solely on the Black caucus."[72]

---

67 Interview with Lisa Holder, February 2026.

68 Interview with reparations advocates in California, February 2026.

69 Ibid.

70 Interview with reparations advocate in California, March 2026.

71 Interview with reparations advocates in California, February 2026.

72 Interview with reparations advocate in California, March 2026.

POLITICAL STRATEGY:
IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A significant challenge with state and local work is that it starts in a different political moment than when it ends. It therefore requires careful planning and regular reevaluation to adapt to the changing political landscape.

- **Invest in the political education of and support for legislators.** Many legislators lack the necessary knowledge to see reparations efforts through to implementation, including how to identify viable funding sources. Provide targeted support — through closed working sessions, peer learning, and direct accompaniment — to help legislators become more effective allies.
- **Support ongoing peer learning among legislators across jurisdictions.** Create structured opportunities for legislators involved in reparations efforts in different cities and states to learn from each other, building on the work of organizations like First Repair and the Why We Can't Wait Reparations Network.
- **Work with legislators and embrace the legislative process to strengthen proposals.** Rather than taking an adversarial position, treat each legislative setback as information about how to strengthen a bill or policy proposal.
- **Develop a long-term roadmap for repair.** As part of a bold vision of repair, prioritize what recommendations to put forward and when, taking political realities and feasibility into account.
- **Anticipate legal challenges and prepare a narrative response in advance.** Legal attacks on reparations efforts are a real and growing risk. As part of developing a long-term political strategy, task forces and their allies should work early on with legal experts, such as the Charles Ogletree Reparative Bar Association, to understand potential vulnerabilities and develop clear, accessible messaging about the legal basis for the work.
- **Build a cohort of skilled political strategists and organizers with the necessary knowledge, relationships, and commitment to advance reparations policy.** This includes principled lobbyists, campaign managers, political organizers to educate lawmakers and whip votes, lawyers to write the actual bills, compliance and legislative assistants to ensure bill drafts comply with and interact well with existing laws, and public affairs specialists with connections to political journalists.
- **Identify, support, and celebrate incremental wins** as building blocks toward full repair.
- **Build a reparations caucus** — a broad, multiracial, multicultural coalition — so the burden of advancing reparations legislation does not fall solely on the Black caucus.

NARRATIVE AND COMMUNICATIONS

Increasingly, reparations leaders are identifying the need for a strong communications and narrative strategy. Part of a narrative strategy needs to focus on bringing more people on board with the idea of reparations and making them common sense and commonplace. Task forces must also communicate effectively and cultivate nuanced media relations to ensure that their purpose, process, and messages are accurately conveyed to the public.

Terminology is frequently raised as a key challenge when seeking to bring more people onboard with the reparations agenda. In some contexts, advocates reflected that once they use the word "reparations," the door closes for many people and the conversation ends. Others insisted on using the word, even if it raises challenges. For example, two filmmakers who codirected the film, "Acts of Reparation," noted, "It was important for us that the word reparations was in our title. It meant that the choices we made were not fear based; instead, we were showing up and seeing who might be responsive."[73] The choice did have implications for their broader distribution: PBS would not air the film unless they removed the word reparations from the title.

Beyond the use of the word, research is proving that some messaging is more effective at increasing support for reparations while others can actually decrease it.[74] Storytelling is a helpful tool that can encourage people to be more open to the idea of reparations. For example, with the film, because the storytelling strategy was personal and local, codirectors Selina Lewis Davidson and Macky Alston found that in post-screening discussions, people overcame their sense of intimidation around reparations, what they are, whether they are doing them right, and if they are even possible.[75]

Liberation Ventures' Reparations Belief Arc and audience segmentation research currently under development aim to provide additional guidance on what messaging moves specific people up the belief arc and specifically, what messages help build support for reparations.

---

73 Interview with Selina Lewis Davidson and Macky Alston, co-directors and co-producers, "Acts of Reparation," February 2026.

74 Liberation Ventures, "Reparations Belief Arc Toolkit," January 2026, https://docsend.com/view/vv8zpginuibx7we6

75 Interview with Selina Lewis Davidson and Macky Alston, February 2026.

The other key element of a narrative strategy is establishing a strong relationship with the media to ensure accurate reporting of a commission's purpose, process, and messages for the public. Most reporters hold the same misconceptions as the general public about reparations, and today's fast-paced, low-capacity newsrooms will often report dramatic or sensational events at face value, without undertaking the kind of investigative work that allows for nuanced reporting. Several advocates highlighted how important it is to be intentional about what information is released and to include clear, concise context whenever releasing new information. One advocate from California urged caution, especially about releasing numbers or dollar amounts without context, warning that "every time a number is put out there, the media is going to run with it, and you can't take it back."[76] As the first state to undertake this work, Californians learned the hard way. Upon reflection, a former task force member acknowledged they "were not very effective in controlling the flow of info [in part due to lack of internal consensus], and it is coming back to bite us every day."[77] This highlights the need to anticipate and proactively mitigate existing negative narratives when releasing new information to the press or the public.

Too often, the media has framed reparations efforts using existing tropes and negative messaging, contributing to misconceptions and resistance. Commission messaging should make it hard for a reporter to repeat misconceptions like "reparations is just the cash," "reparations is a one-time event," or "reparations is too expensive" by providing clarity on terminology, process and cost in fast and easily digestible ways.[78] As one former California task force member shared, people outside the state say, "I'm sorry for what happened with reparations in California."[79] This comment overlooks the fact that the 115 recommendations issued require around 300 different pieces of legislation to be implemented. Highlighting the need to reframe the narrative, this person reflected, "I feel extremely proud of what happened in California...We have passed 14 of 115 recommendations in just two legislative cycles. Several of those are critical infrastructure pieces that will be the infrastructure to implement reparations in a fulsome way. That's what makes reparations sustainable, creating an infrastructure around it. That has never happened before, and it's happening in California."[80]

---

76 Interview with reparations advocates in California, February 2026.

77 Interview with former task force member, February 2026.

78 For more information, see: Reparations Narrative Lab, "Narrative House," www.reparationsnarrativelab.org/narrativehouse.

79 Interview with Lisa Holder, February 2026.

80 Ibid.

NARRATIVE AND COMMUNICATIONS:
IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The central importance of narrative cannot be understated. As one advocate remarked, "The prize in this moment is communications; that's what's going to make this work. Getting info out that is accurate and positive." As part of developing a strong narrative strategy, reparations advocates and task force members should aim to:

- **Frame reparations as a journey.** Clearly communicate that reparations work takes decades, and each step is a significant building block toward full repair.
- **Build a narrative strategy within the reparations movement.** Develop and provide communications training for task force members and reparations advocates. Agree on speaking roles and identify approved spokespeople before news stories are pitched or reported.
- **Amplify creative work happening at the local level.** Narrative projects have a key role to play in focusing on the culture change required for legal and policy changes to take place.
- **Encourage responsible reporting on reparations.** This includes proactively cultivating relationships with journalists and media outlets before a final report is released, not after. Consider organizing media learning opportunities, such as media junkets supported by philanthropy, that give journalists background and context to report on reparations accurately and with appropriate nuance.
- **Carefully consider terminology.** Each context is different and reparations advocates need to decide what works best for their constituencies. At the start of their work, commissioners should agree on definitions and when to use specific words. As a movement, it is important to align on the long-term objectives and make room for each entity to use the tactics, including terms, that work best locally.



Alameda County Reparations Commission (ACRC) received commendations. Credit: Courtesy of ACRC

OVERALL HIGH-LEVEL TAKEAWAYS

Setting up a reparations task force is not a bureaucratic exercise. It is the beginning of a long journey, and the structural and procedural choices made at the outset are crucial to building a strong foundation. Several key insights emerged from the experience of task forces across the country.

Allocate sufficient time for reparations initiatives, likely 2-5 years, including a preparatory period. Almost every existing commission has requested an extension because initial timelines were unrealistic. Build in a six-month preparatory period with closed-door planning time away from the media that is focused on building internal processes, shared agreements, and a clear workplan. Advance community-level work before bringing it to the government level. Consider setting up a permanent body or follow-up mechanism embedded in the government.

Get the structure right before you start. Select commissioners for their substantive commitment to reparations, not their public profile. Opt for a smaller cohort of three to five paid commissioners supported by an advisory body, rather than a large

and unwieldy roster of volunteers. Match expertise to the phase of work: research, public engagement, policy development, and implementation. Provide administrative backstopping including a full time program manager and staff that brings practical expertise across research, community engagement, policy, logistics, urban planning, evaluation, and facilitation.

Identify revenue sources from the start. Leaving revenue planning to an undefined next phase is one of the most common and costly mistakes. Planning for how to fund reparations policies should run in parallel with the work to document harms and develop remedies. Treat reparations as an infrastructure investment, not a one-time expenditure. Explore dedicated revenue streams tied to harm that reflect the values of the work itself.

Prioritize trust building and onboarding. Commissioners consistently arrive without a shared knowledge base, and commissions often skip the relational work needed to function. Invest in an initial structured retreat that builds both shared knowledge and internal trust, followed by ongoing mini-retreats or check ins. Make trust building a sustained practice throughout, not a one-time event. Conflict will arise; it is therefore crucial to develop and embed conflict resolution mechanisms into the process.

Design the process to be inherently reparatory. The process is not just a means to an end. Communities should be engaged as partners and those leading the work should be supported and fairly compensated. Commissioners must communicate clearly and consistently about short term progress and milestones even as the full arc of reparations is long. The process must not replicate the very inequities reparations are meant to correct.

Center truth telling, acknowledgment, and healing. Take steps to facilitate a process for people to be heard and acknowledged. The First Alaskans Institute's approach, where healers are present and testimony is honored, shows what this looks like in practice. Acknowledgment and healing are critical components of repair. Commissions should build these practices into the process by design, drawing in part on truth commissions, which offer some of the clearest models for how to do this well.

Develop a clear media and communications strategy. Cultivate relationships with media outlets before you have anything to share publicly. Agree internally on messaging and who speaks to the media and be strategic about what you share with the overall goal of increasing public understanding and support for reparations. Develop and provide communications training for task force members and reparations advocates.

Look beyond reparations-specific precedents for design inspiration. Truth commissions — both in the U.S. and globally — offer directly applicable lessons that are often overlooked. In particular, they offer models for how to create space for people to be genuinely heard, how to sequence the process so that findings are shared publicly before recommendations are finalized, and how to design processes that are trauma-informed and culturally resonant. This is a resource the reparations movement should be drawing on more intentionally.

Bring responsible parties into the process — carefully and early. Non-recurrence is one of the most important and most difficult elements of reparations. Corporations and institutions that have benefited from slavery and the legacy of discrimination should be engaged early so they become stakeholders, not opponents. The process must be carefully structured, so they do not dominate or subvert it. Build accountability provisions into the mandate from the outset — drawing on models like the Yoorrook Justice Commission — and consider advancing slavery disclosure laws as part of a longer strategy to build the evidentiary and accountability foundation that reparations demand.

Plan for implementation before the commission concludes. The leap from a commission report to policy implementation is consistently underestimated. Build your political strategy in parallel with the work, not after it. Identify legislative allies early and invest in their political education. Develop an inside-outside strategy that supports champions within government and organizers outside it. Build a broad, multiracial coalition of support so the burden does not fall solely on the Black caucus. And develop a long-term roadmap that prioritizes what to put forward and when, based on political realities and feasibility.

Take the long view. Frame reparations as a journey, not an endpoint. This framing has implications for the process on many levels, including how the process is designed and whether realistic expectations are set. A commission is one step in a longer journey that will require several policies passed at every level of government. Build in structures, coalitions, and oversight mechanisms that will carry the work forward after a commission concludes.



TOWARD NEW IDEAS AND MODELS

Reflecting on where we are and looking ahead to the next several years, two key questions emerge: 1) Is the task force the right approach? and 2) How can we reimagine the current task force model to be more effective?

A few advocates have raised concerns that reparations task forces are becoming roadblocks rather than stepping-stones to actual reparations policy. This invites a reflection on whether the task force model is the most effective way to advance reparations policy at the government level. Some argue the task force model is a stalling tactic or that it supports academics and researchers talking to each other when the data already exists. As one county level equity officer noted, "We have the

data, we've had it for a long time, conditions are getting worse, so [the task force approach] feels academic and performative...When are we going to put some financial resources in a real way?"[81]

Some advocates suggest moving directly to legislation rather than continuing to create study commissions. Others point to civil rights or class action lawsuits as an alternative approach. While this was a successful strategy in Palm Springs, there are some important limitations to a legal approach. One is the statute of limitations, which excludes historic violations from this avenue. Another is the high standard of proof required to win a legal case. Furthermore, the legal approach must focus on a single harm, individual, group, or incident, making it more difficult to advance repair for broader systemic violations and ongoing harms.

Despite critiques of the task force model, several reparations advocates noted the importance of having an official government body document and acknowledge past harms. This is crucial both to gather political support to pass legislation and withstand legal scrutiny. Another value of the task force model is its potential to serve as a bridge between community and government. As one former task force member noted, "There are other research processes that can be used but doing it with a task force with public comment has more transparency, openness, and accessibility. For those reasons, a well-resourced task force with transparency, with public participation is a good way to proceed."[82] Even among those committed to the task force model as an effective way to build political power and develop recommendations rooted in community consultations, there is broad agreement on the need to critically reflect on the model as it has emerged and improve it together.

The central question, therefore, is not whether or not to have a task force but rather, how to refocus our attention to build on, innovate, and reimagine the current task force model.[83] With over 28 commissions at the state and municipal levels, it is time to critically evaluate the impact and success of task forces to date, reflect together on what is working, and identify creative approaches to addressing ongoing gaps.

Part of that reimagining calls for creative problem solving within existing government structures to find the best set up to support the process. For example, while it is

81 Interview with Alize Asberry Payne, February 2026.

82 Interview with Lisa Holder, February 2026.

83 For a more detailed discussion of this idea, see: Emma Merritt-Cuneo, Virginie Ladisch, Linda J. Mann, Alize Asberry Payne, Jessica Cruz and Sydney Tunstall, "Toward a Reparative Approach: Reflections for Municipal Reparations Efforts in the United States," 2026.

considered the norm to establish volunteer-led task forces, it is worth looking to other models that include government resources, community leadership, a strong mandate, and staffing structures that allow the work to advance. It could be helpful to look to other models within government used to address infrastructure challenges or other complex issues to find ways to permanently embed reparations initiatives and grant them the necessary powers to effectively carry out the work. This could start with a move away from a large, all-volunteer commission model, in favor of a fully staffed initiative with subpoena powers.

One example worth following is the Baltimore Community Reinvestment and Repair Fund Commission.[84] Established under Maryland's Cannabis Reform Act of 2023, the fund directs a portion of cannabis tax revenue to local jurisdictions to support communities disproportionately impacted by past cannabis prohibition enforcement. What distinguishes Baltimore County's approach is the model of community decision-making they developed around how those funds are allocated, putting the power in the hands of those most affected.

Another approach worth considering is to reverse engineer the process. In contexts where advocates have already carried out consultations and have a clear idea of possible reparative policies, commissions could build on that foundation and focus their work on public consultations to fine tune the policy recommendations and build community support and political power for their passage and implementation.

The rapid expansion of reparations task forces marks an important moment of institutional innovation. Yet, as Dr. Marcus Anthony Hunter reminds us, "Every blueprint carries assumptions. As certain practices become standardized, we must remain creative enough to ask what they reveal, what they obscure, and what new possibilities they may unintentionally close off."[85] The future of reparations depends not on imitation, but on continuous learning, innovation, imagination, adaptation, and courageous experimentation. This report is a first step in that direction — an attempt to surface the collective wisdom of a growing movement and use it to shape what comes next. Liberation Ventures is committed to ensuring that reflection happens collectively, with the partners, advocates, and task force leaders who have built this movement and will carry it forward.

---

84 Baltimore County, Maryland, "Community Reinvestment and Repair Fund," www.baltimorecountymd.gov/departments/budfin/CRRF#about

85 Comments by Dr. Marcus Anthony Hunter, Why We Can't Wait Coalition meeting, February 11, 2026.

APPENDIX

REPARATIONS COMMISSION ROADMAP

A tool for advocates and officials building a commission, and the commissioners and staff leading one

LIBERATION VENTURES

		PRE-WORK >6 MONTHS	**PREPARATORY PHASE** 6 MONTHS	**COMMISSION** 2-5 YEARS	**IMPLEMENTATION** ONGOING
TIMING	Allocate sufficient time, including a preparatory period and a structure to carry implementation forward.				
COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT	Advance community-level work before bringing it to government, and keep organizing alongside the commission.	Build broad community support and understanding of reparations. Research and document harms and connections to local government.	Set up an advisory body of impacted community members to guide the commissioners.	Hold listening sessions. Continue organizing community members outside the commission.	Develop calls to action and tools for community members to advocate for implementation.
STAFFING	Build a core team of paid commissioners, guided by directly impacted community members and supported by staff who know how to get things done in government.	Design a fair, transparent selection process for commissioners. Identify staff and backstopping support.	Seat 3-5 paid commissioners with an advisory body. Hire a full-time program manager, part-time facilitator and psychosocial expert.	Bring in expertise by phase: research, public engagement, policy development. Set a process to replace inactive members.	Bring in organizers, principled lobbyists, public policy experts, and lawyers to draft bills and advocate for their passage.
FUNDING	Identify revenue sources from the start, and treat reparations as an infrastructure investment funded through revenue streams tied to harm.	Secure operating funds. Require the commission to identify revenue sources as part of its mandate.	Allocate funding for paid commissioners, staff, onboarding retreat, and meeting space.	Fund research and engagement through a reparative procurement process. Identify revenue streams for implementation.	Fund reparations benefits and the infrastructure to deliver them.
CREATING A REPARATIVE PROCESS	Design a process that is itself reparative and does not replicate the inequities reparations are meant to correct.	Develop outreach materials that emphasize the iterative and long-term nature of this work.	Frame the work as a journey that continues after the commission ends. Compensate everyone fairly.	Engage communities as partners. Create spaces for people to feel dignity and acknowledgment. Share short-term progress publicly.	Keep framing implementation as part of the reparative journey. Create moments of acknowledgment as recommendations advance.
TRUST BUILDING	Prioritize trust building as a core part of the work, sustained throughout the entire process.	Write psychosocial support (care for individual and collective well-being) into the commission's mandate.	Dedicate time at the start to develop community agreements and a process of managing conflict. Bring in trained facilitators.	Hold regular trust-building sessions. Offer facilitated debriefs after testimony and psychosocial support for all involved.	Sustain support for advocates and the follow-up body.
ONBOARDING	Build shared knowledge before public work begins, and keep learning together throughout.	Design a week-long learning journey that combines trust building with grounding in reparations.	Host an onboarding retreat: build shared knowledge, cultivate trust, consensus on reparations definition, develop workplan	Hold regular retreats for ongoing learning, relationship maintenance, planning, and deep dives on hard questions.	Onboard the follow-up body with the commission's institutional memory.
CENTERING TRUTH TELLING & TRUTH LISTENING	Create space for people to be genuinely heard, with acknowledgment and healing built into the design.	Learn from truth commissions how to structure listening sessions and sequence the work.	Design a consent process that lets truth tellers keep control of their testimony. Plan how and where stories will be archived.	Give sufficient time for testimony. Release findings, seek input on recommendations from those most impacted and policy experts.	Share findings in accessible formats (graphic novel, audio, video)
CREATING ACCOUNTABILITY STRUCTURES FOR RESPONSIBLE PARTIES	Bring responsible parties in carefully and early, so they engage without dominating the process.	Write accountability into the mandate: open archives, cooperation, testimony.	Map institutions with power and responsibility. Identify allies. Secure signed commitment letters.	Run facilitated parallel processes for responsible parties. Listen first, then move to joint dialogue to identify reparative measures.	Establish an oversight mechanism that holds institutions to their commitments. Advance slavery disclosure laws.
POLITICAL STRATEGY	Plan for implementation before the commission ends, building political strategy in parallel with the work.	Build the case for reparations. Identify legislative champions. Pass enabling legislation.	Map decision-makers inside and outside government. Begin educating legislators about reparations.	Develop a long-term roadmap: prioritize which bills to put forward when, based on political feasibility. Consult legal experts early.	Draft bills, whip votes, and build a multiracial reparations caucus to advocate for implementation. Treat setbacks as information.
NARRATIVE AND COMMUNICATIONS	Develop a communications strategy at the start to increase public understanding and support for reparations	Write a clear description of the commission's purpose and repeat it throughout. Publicize the application.	Build the communications plan: spokespeople, talking points, shared definitions. Train commissioners on communicating with the public.	Cultivate relationships with journalists early. Release information with context to increase understanding of reparations.	Highlight wins as building blocks for full repair. Track recommendations publicly.

LEARN MORE AT:

liberationventures.org