

The idea of slavery reparations has stalled in Maryland. Local campaigns could change that.

[Rick Hutzell](#)

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Wes Moore and his son, James Moore, arrive at the Kunta Kinte-Alex Haley Memorial to lay a wreath and say a prayer before the governor-elect is sworn in as the first African American governor of the state of Maryland in January 2023. Moore has not taken a position on the idea of reparations in Maryland. (Kaitlin Newman/The Baltimore Banner)

Ask a Black person about reparations, and you might hear a story about the generational impact of slavery and racism. Ask a white person and you may hear some variation of, “Why should I pay for this? I didn’t own slaves.”

There’s never been a consensus on reparations in Maryland — should we make them, what they might look like, who should qualify or how we pay for them. Legislation to create a commission on the concept — just study the idea — has died twice in the Maryland General Assembly in the past two years.

But the word continues to percolate. Supporters like to point to the historic accomplishments of Gov. Wes Moore, House Speaker Adrienne A. Jones and State Treasurer Richard Dixon, the first Black people to hold their respective offices, as a sign that the time has come.

Moore’s election in particular often gets cited as the crucial turning point. He has never publicly supported reparations though even if he expresses sympathy for the way it resonates — “because the consequences that we saw from the transatlantic slave trade still continue to be real in people’s lives now,” as he told [the Associated Press](#) in March.

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Maybe statewide reparations aren't possible right now. It seems more likely to happen in cities and counties. But no matter where supporters pursue it, widespread support for the basic concept has to come first.

"This is just an unapologetic approach to address the harm done to the Black community," said Robin Rue Simmons, a former alderwoman in Evanston, Illinois, told a video conference that drew people from across Maryland on Monday.

Rue Simmons led efforts to pass the nation's first municipal reparations program in 2019. It focused on fixing the legacy of redlining laws in the 20th century that limited where Black people could buy homes in the city just north of Chicago. Qualifying people got grants for mortgage payoffs and home down payments, but in March the city expanded the program to include a cash option.

That same legacy exists in Maryland, where homeownership is significantly lower among Black men and women than their white peers, according to a University of Maryland study presented to the General Assembly in March. That gap is a barrier to a key part of personal wealth, and removing barriers features heavily in Moore's agenda.

"I also know that we have to move now to be able to address the issues of housing insecurity and food insecurity, the racial wealth gap, the educational disparities — the things that we know right now we can get done," Moore told the AP. "We have an obligation to move with a sense of urgency, so we don't continue watching how families who have oftentimes historically ... been disadvantaged continue to be disadvantaged by policies that we still continue to put in place."

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A Maryland discussion of reparations will be harder than one in Illinois because it's not just the legacy of redlining. Maryland was a slave state for 200 years until Nov. 1, 1864. Segregation, discriminatory housing policies and openly accepted racism added another century of harm.

Reparations have been part of mainstream political discussion since Baltimore journalist and author Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote about it while he was at The Atlantic magazine in 2014.

It was propelled by the Black Lives Matter movement that emerged in response to the high-profile police killings of Black people and it came up during the 2020 Democratic presidential primary campaign as well. Six candidates expressed some level of support, although not the eventual election winner, President Joe Biden.

The argument goes something like this.

The nation denied Black Americans opportunities for centuries while providing white people with government-sponsored benefits to build wealth through the ownership of businesses, land and homes. Payments may be the only way to repair the damage, that's the meaning of the word — a payment or action to repair damages.

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But reparations might mean tuition grants or credits toward homeownership. It could include an apology. The concept is too untested to be precisely defined.

Private institutions have advanced this idea. In 2021, the Jesuit Order of the Catholic Church agreed to pay \$100 million to the descendants of 270 enslaved people that it sold from its Maryland plantations in 1838 to keep Georgetown University going. The Episcopal Diocese of Maryland has provided three rounds of grants to community groups, hoping to address its role in supporting slavery.

Congress has rejected attempts to set up a federal commission, and [courts as recently as Friday](#) have said no to judicial remedies.

Then in May, a California task force called for a state apology and a fund that would pay billions to the descendants of enslaved people. Lawmakers there will decide what, if any, actions to take.



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A newspaper advertisement from 1848 seeks the capture of Cinderella, an enslaved woman in Anne Arundel County who fled with her husband, a freeman who lived nearby. They were captured and imprisoned. The idea of reparations for the harm done by slavery continues to resonate in Maryland. (Courtesy photo)

Around the nation, a handful of cities are following a similar path. And it's not just the cities you might expect, such as San Francisco.

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Asheville, North Carolina, and Providence, Rhode Island, are on board, too.

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In 2021, Greenbelt became the first city in Maryland to vote for setting up a commission that will study paying reparations. Baltimore followed suit in May.

Will this spread in Maryland? Not at the state level. Even with overwhelming Democratic control in the House and Senate, lawmakers know many of their constituents oppose the idea.

Monday's video conference, organized by the Caucus of African American Leaders of Anne Arundel County, was a small step toward getting around that roadblock through local action.

Rue Simmons told the group that winning approval in Evanston, a city of nearly 80,000, required three steps: a public education campaign to build support, a study identifying the harm reparations would address and the people eligible for them, and then figuring out how to find the money.

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Annapolis has its own history of doing damage to Black Americans. It was a slave port, and after slavery, it marginalized its Black residents politically and economically. The word “grandfathering” originates in an early 20th-century city law that limited voting by Black men — women couldn’t vote yet — to those who could prove their grandparents had been free.

Starting in the 1960s, [city officials passed policies](#) aimed at breaking up historic Black neighborhoods as part of urban renewal efforts that created much of the modern state government complex, a federal investigation found. Today, the city

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complexes whose residents are largely Black, allowing health and safety standards to lapse.

Annapolis probably doesn't have the financial strength to create a reparations fund, but Anne Arundel County does. There's history there, too.

The county has been home to segregation, Ku Klux Klan chapters and its own redlining laws. County Executive Stuart Pittman has acknowledged that his ancestor built the family fortune through slave labor on a tobacco plantation where he and other family members now live.

If Monday's meeting was the start of a grassroots campaign, that was the hope of its organizer, Carl Snowden.

A former alderman and special assistant for civil rights to the state attorney general, his career as a community organizer started with his 1970 expulsion from Annapolis High School for demanding a Black studies curriculum. There have been successes, failures and controversies.

He sees an opportunity in Annapolis, and similar ones in cities such as Salisbury, Cambridge and Elkton with their own histories.

"I think this issue will resonate across the state of Maryland," he said.

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Rick Hutzell is the Annapolis columnist for The Baltimore Banner. He writes about what's happening today, how we got here and where we're going next. The former editor of Capital Gazette, he led the newspaper to a Pulitzer Prize for coverage of the 2018 mass shooting in its newsroom.



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