June 9, 2020

Senator Christopher Murphy
136 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Representative Joe Courtney
2332 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Representative Rosa DeLauro
2413 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Representative Jim Himes
1227 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Senator Murphy and Representatives Courtney, DeLauro, and Himes:

We write to urge you to join Senator Blumenthal and Representatives Larson and Hayes in calling for a Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African-Americans. HR 40 in the House and its companion in the Senate, S 1083, are not only powerful calls to carefully examine and account for the stain of slavery on our nation, but also a chance to begin to correct the injustices that stem from slavery visited upon not only those enslaved but their descendants and the communities in which they live.

The murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor may have initiated recent protests, but they are propelled by the long history of oppression and unequal treatment of African-Americans in this country. We have never taken the time to have a meaningful truth and reconciliation period. This has to happen in order to address: the abuses of the slavery system that was used to build up this country; the perpetuation of the de jure oppression of Jim Crow laws; the de facto segregation exemplified by redlining, restrictive covenants, and consumer lending practices that discriminated against African-Americans; and gerrymandering of voting districts designed to limit African-American participation in all levels of government. We have also not held members of law enforcement accountable when they violate the civil rights of African-Americans, harassing them, brutally restraining them, or killing them, based on the color of their skin. It is past time for the United States to confront and address the shameful legacy upon which our entire nation was built.

As legal aid providers in Connecticut, we witness first-hand the effects of the practices that continue to brutalize and disadvantage African-Americans as reflected by our clients and our communities. The employment discrimination, unemployment, health disparities, unequal
educational opportunities, mass incarcerations, and poverty experienced by our African-American clients are rooted in slavery. Our failure as a nation to come to terms with the institutional complicity in the unequal and unjust treatment of African-Americans will permit these practices to continue and build upon the years of oppression they have already suffered. Our African-American colleagues can attest and many academic studies have confirmed that such discrimination transcends class. Indeed, the unequal treatment of African-Americans is so ingrained into our culture that it continues to this day. Often “race-neutral” algorithms are biased against African-Americans; zoning laws that appear to be nondiscriminatory on their face are carefully constructed to exclude all but the most advantaged; treatment of the formerly incarcerated, with regard to reentry programs and criminal expungement, are revealed to have a disparate and negative impact on African-Americans. These are but a few of the myriad examples of the codification and institutionalization of racism faced by our clients.

One need not delve too deeply into our own state’s history to reveal Connecticut’s complicity in the system of slavery and the manifestations of its aftermath in the current day. It is long past time for us as a state and a nation to confront this foundational sin and begin to make amends to correct centuries of oppression and deprivation. We urge you to take this important stand on behalf of our state and join as sponsors of HR 40 and S 1083.

Deborah R. Witkin
Executive Director
Connecticut Legal Services, Inc.

Jamey Bell
Executive Director
Greater Hartford Legal Aid

Alexis Smith
Executive Director
New Haven Legal Assistance Association