

PUBLIC HEALTH, DETERMINED

Determined to work



JORDY YAGER

19 MIN READ
Monday, May 11, 2020, at 6:30 AM



Salon

Credit: Sahara Clemons

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On March 23, Gov. Ralph Northam stepped up to a press conference podium in Richmond. Flanked by two large signs reading, "Do your part, stay at home," Northam declared thousands of businesses closed. "We are taking additional actions to keep Virginians safe," he said.

At the time, there were 254 cases of COVID-19 in Virginia, and six people had died. Northam said the pandemic was going to hit Virginia hard in the coming weeks and social

DETERMINED

This series uses the Social Determinants of Health as a foundational framework and guideposts to bring you stories of how the COVID-19 crisis has impacted some of our African American communities.

distancing was key. He'd already closed schools and just signed Executive Order 53, listing more than a dozen business categories as "essential" and allowed to stay

open. They included grocery stores, pharmacies, medical and electronic retailers and both of Marcus Jones's jobs.



The Shops at Stonefield in Albemarle County sits nearly empty during Gov. Ralph Northam's stay-at-home order, which could be modified around May 15.

Credit: Lorenzo Dickerson

bills. Even more concerning for him is his multiple sclerosis, an autoimmune disease. His job requires him to be inside customers' vehicles for extended periods.

"You're getting in people's cars, you don't know where they've been, if they've been sneezing, if they're dirty, tissues and stuff all over," he said. "And I have to get right in there behind them and touch things. I have to be super protective of myself. And I'm not getting paid any extra dollars to go risk my life just so I can try to keep up with my bills."

Financial well-being is a major factor in what's known as Social Determinants of Health — the systems and collective societal behaviors that influence what happens to people in life. Studies show that for African Americans, these determinants are uniformly stacked against them, a result of generations of white-led systemic and individual acts of racism.

Quinton Harrell draws the analogy to an angiogram, where a doctor inserts a contrasting dye into a patient to reveal internal structures or bodily behaviors through an X-ray.

"This pandemic and crisis is that soluble dye in the anatomy of our community, and simply accentuating the fault lines that have always been there," said Harrell, who chairs the Charlottesville Regional Chamber of Commerce's Minority Business Alliance.

ABOUT THE ARTIST – SAHARA CLEMONS

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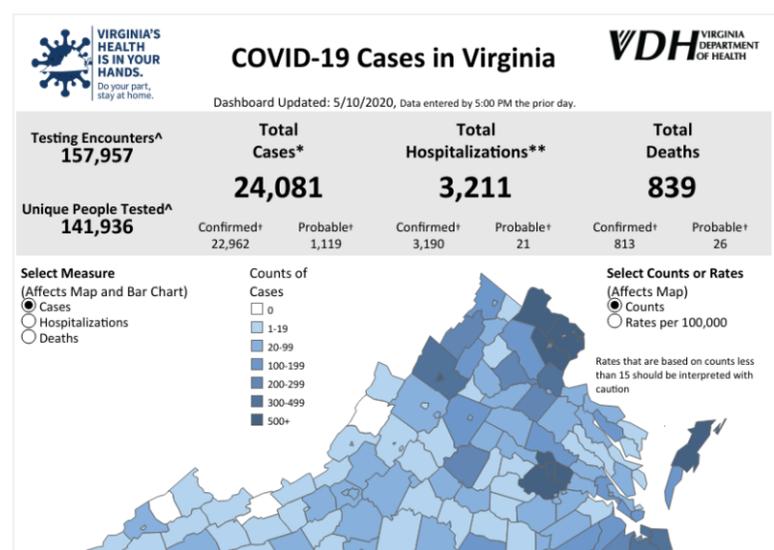
Jones, 48, works two jobs to support his family — one in the day and one at night. And while his night job, a restaurant, is technically able to stay open for takeout service, they did not. "We are temporarily closed due to the coronavirus," says a prerecorded message to anybody who calls.

"My major money came from them," said Jones, who's worked there for 28 years. "That joint make you money, man. I'm in a different tax bracket when I work there."

His daytime job, an auto shop, was also allowed to stay open. But instead of full-time, Jones is now working just three days a week there, not nearly enough to pay his more than \$2,800 in monthly

"Our main means of exchange is our labor"

Throughout the state, more than 24,081 people have gotten COVID-19 as of this article's publishing, and at least 839 people have died from it. As the pandemic has spread, and businesses have stayed open or closed their doors, it's become clear that people with essential jobs are also the most at risk, because they have an increased likelihood of coming into contact with the virus. Some of those local essential jobs are doctors, nurses or hospital staff who make closer to, or even above, the Charlottesville area's median household income of \$58,933.



But many of those essential workers have jobs in grocery and retail stores, restaurants and gas

stations — some of the largest employers here. Most of those workers barely get paid the \$35,000 it takes for a family of three to survive here without any subsidies. At least 1 in 4 area residents don't make this much, [according to financial data](#). And with the COVID-19 pandemic, these jobs take on a new factor: [a high physical proximity](#) to others, coworkers and customers.

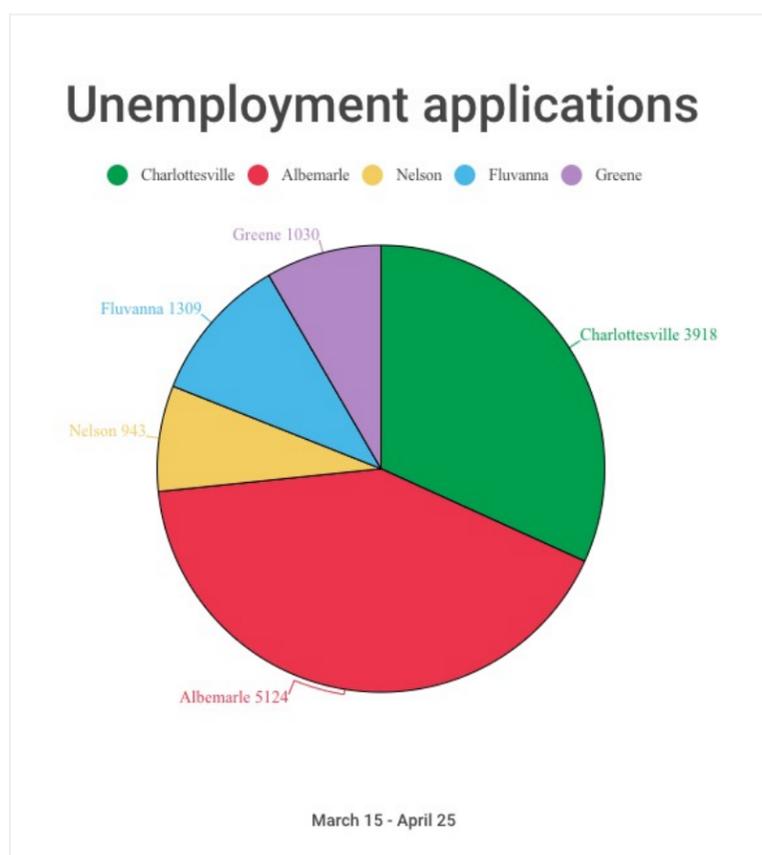
What's more is that Jones is working three days a week at the car shop, so he can't apply for unemployment insurance. Neither will he receive it if he quits. And so, he figures, while it doesn't come close to earning a "living," it's better than nothing.



Customers keep their distance while waiting in line at the Bank of America in Barracks Road Shopping Center.

Credit: Lorenzo Dickerson

2.4% of the area's 125,055-person workforce, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.



Credit: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

common jobs for African Americans in Charlottesville were in the service and labor industries — laborers, servants, cooks and laundresses — according to the Jefferson School African American Heritage Center's study of census records. For white people here, the most common jobs were as business owners and white collar sectors — as grocers, stenographers, bookkeepers or at the University of Virginia.

By 1940, on the heels of the progressive New Deal movement, the most common jobs for African Americans in Charlottesville were as maids, laborers, cooks and waiters, while white people worked most often in office jobs, as salesmen, carpenters and at UVA. Segregation did not simply occur by industry and type of work — it was even more glaring in the income each of these jobs paid.

Virginia's COVID-19 statistics on May 10, 2020.

Credit: Virginia Department of Health

In the wake of near historic national joblessness levels, where [at least 23.1 million people](#) are out of work, and [perhaps as many as 43.2 million](#), are on unemployment so far. Here in the greater Charlottesville region, an estimated 15,435 people, or 12.3% of the working population, are unemployed.

In just the six weeks following the statewide shutdown order, more than 12,324 people filed unemployment claims in our area — 3,918 in Charlottesville, 5,124 in Albemarle County, 943 in Nelson County, 1,309 Fluvanna County and 1,030 in Greene County. Last year, on average, there were about 3,111 people unemployed here, about 2.4% of the area's 125,055-person workforce, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

What is less trackable, however, is how many people like Jones are unable to file for unemployment yet have lost significant amounts of work and are severely underemployed in what work they do still have.

Since Liberation and Freedom Day in 1865, Charlottesville has had Black millionaires, and strong Black middle and professional classes have thrived here, just on smaller scales than in white communities. But this notion of underemployment — being employed at a job that pays an inadequate wage — has remained a constant through line for African American communities over the last 155 years. In fact, the labor market and job sectors here have never fully been racially desegregated.

In the 1920s, during the height of Jim Crow, also known as the Era of Racial Terror, the most

1940 Jobs and Cost of Living



Credit: U.S. Census Bureau

Black maids could expect to get paid \$300-\$500 a year, while Black laborers made about \$300-\$700 a year. Compare that to white office jobs, which paid between \$900-\$2,100, and white salesmen, who made between \$1,170-\$1,700. In 1940, the national median home value was \$2,938, and monthly rent averaged between \$20-\$50, meaning that Black residents who worked in service and labor sectors were spending as much as 80% of their annual income on housing, while white workers in the white collar sectors spent about 30%.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and business shutdowns in Virginia, 28.3% of unemployment claims have been filed by African Americans, whereas 51.3% have come from white residents, according to the Virginia Employment Commission. This is racially disproportionate, as Black residents make up 19.9% of the state's population, and white residents 69.5%. An inflated percentage of Black workers filing for unemployment suggests a greater degree of job loss or less generational savings or wealth to fall back on. Economists have posited this may also be directly linked to a workforce's inability to telework, or work from home, strongly suggesting the types of jobs, and their corresponding value or pay, are still very much segregated by race.



The Charlottesville Downtown Mall during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic.

Credit: Lorenzo Dickerson

"Our main means of exchange is our labor in a market and an economy where your ideas and money can money for you," Harrell said.

“This stuff is really scary”

Nowhere has this pay inequity been more clear than at UVA, the area’s largest single employer, which — having forced enslaved Black people to build it and blocked African Americans from attending for another 125 years — today employs more than 28,000 people, about 16,000 faculty and staff and about 12,000 in the UVA Health System.

As an employer, UVA had some of the most light shed on it in 1996, with the issuance of the “Muddy Floor Report” by the university’s Office of Equal Opportunity Programs. It found nearly 7% of the greater Charlottesville region’s African American population worked at the university, and that they were paid the least and given the fewest opportunities to climb the ladder. African Americans made up 4.5% of the 2,327 employees in higher-wage professional non-faculty jobs at that time, whereas nearly 93% of those employees were white. Meanwhile, 53.2% of the lower-wage service and maintenance jobs were held by African Americans, and 43.2% by white employees.

The 1996 report detailed a culture of disrespect, discrimination and favoritism against African American employees throughout UVA. “There is a palpable feeling among the African American classified workforce that the university does not care about their plight,” it stated.

UVA’s hospital fared no better in the 1996 report, as 73.4% of African American employees earned less than \$35,000, and none of the 128 total African American employees made more than \$50,000 — whereas 135 of the 1,747 total white employees did.

For the last seven years, Marchell, who asked that her last name not be used, has worked at the hospital while for the past three years, her husband has worked at a UVA dining hall, feeding students and faculty. Since last November, they’d been experiencing housing instability and had been living at the Days Inn with their 4-year old child. They don’t own a car, so they needed to live close to work, but their jobs don’t pay them enough money to afford a place big enough on the open market. Since the pandemic, Marchell’s hours have been cut to 36 each week, and her husband, along with more than 800 other contract workers, was laid off. Every day, the 45-year old mother has to face potential COVID-19 exposure at work, and come home to her family. Her coworker just recently caught it and is now intubated.

“This stuff is really scary,” she said.

“They’re not understanding the opportunity cost”

Two weeks after the state-announced shutdown, and nearly five weeks since students left for spring break, UVA President Jim Ryan announced a \$2 million fund for contract workers, also donating an additional \$1 million to the Charlottesville Area Community Foundation’s Community Emergency Response Fund to support contract workers and low-income residents across the region affected by the pandemic. This came after several weeks of internal and external calls for UVA to pay the out-of-work contract workers, including a lengthy article [in C-Ville Weekly by Sydney Halleman](#) detailing the disrespectful way African American employees felt they were treated, as well as a massive pressure campaign waged by faculty, state officials, students and community activists. Marchell’s husband was able to get some of this funding.

The Campaign for a Living Wage — a student, faculty, community and worker-led coalition — launched in 1998, and has been pushing for more equitable incomes ever since, a rich history [detailed in an essay](#) published last year by professor Claudrena Harold, chair of UVA’s Department of History. Last year, Ryan announced that UVA would be raising its employee’s minimum wage to \$15 an hour and moved later in the year to include full-time contract workers. But \$15 an hour, after taxes, sends workers home with about \$967 every two weeks, amounting to \$25,142 a year. This is far less than the minimum \$35,000 it takes to survive here subsidy free — that would actually require a minimum “living” wage of \$21.50 an hour.

Marchell and Jones, whose first job has reduced hours and second shuttered, are some of the more than 3,500 households who have gotten assistance from the Community Emergency Response Fund set up by the CACF. The CERF operated in tandem with the COVID-19 Emergency Resource Helpline, a partnership between the city of Charlottesville, Albemarle County, the United Way of Greater Charlottesville and Cville Community Cares — an activist network rooted in organizing resistance to the 2017 white terrorist attacks — to give an average of \$750 to area households experiencing hardship. All told, the CERF paid for whole months' worth of rents for Southwood and public housing residents, given \$680,000 to 22 non-profit organizations doing frontline work, and \$3.1 million in direct payments, more than 65% of which went to African Americans, said Eboni Bugg, director of programs for CACF.

This is a perfect example of the opportunity cost that results from not fostering an equitable system, said Harrell, the chair of the Charlottesville Regional Chamber of Commerce's Minority Business Alliance. He used a business analogy to look at historical and systemic racism.

"A common mistake of business owners is concentrating on the income of the revenue statement, and ignoring the balance of the assets and liabilities," said Harrell. "In Charlottesville, the affluent, white business and power structures have historically benefited from the revenues of the system that has predominantly tilted towards them. Comfortably, they've not fully understood the opportunity costs of systematically relegating a significant economic contributor — African Americans — to the sidelines of prosperity.

"There's been tremendous opportunity costs over the hundreds of years in our history because of a certain business interest that believes they're due all the spoils, at all costs."

A [2018 report conducted by the non-profit research firm Altarum for the W.K. Kellogg Foundation](#) found that by reconfiguring U.S. housing, education, healthcare, criminal justice and employment systems to be racially equitable, the nation would produce an \$8 trillion gain in gross domestic product.



Credit: W.K. Kellogg Foundation

"Raising the average earnings of people of color to match those of whites by closing gaps in health, education and opportunity would generate an additional \$1 trillion in earnings," the report stated. "Where will these additional earnings come from? They will come from the economic growth that a more productive workforce brings to meet growing global demand, and the growth that families of color themselves support with greater spending power and more financial security."

"And then, boom"

For as many people as the CERF has helped, there are those like Tina who didn't apply because she felt others were in more need. For three decades, Tina's worked for a local-area government and, between her and her husband, who's a maintenance technician, they've always been able to make ends meet. But last September, her husband was injured on the job, and after a surgery and a recovery period, finally got a new job in March. For six months, they had been surviving on just one income, and it had been tough, but they'd done it.

"And so then you're thinking, 'Finally, a breath of fresh air, he's going back to work,'" said Tina, who asked us not to use her real name. "And then, boom."

The COVID-19 pandemic hit. And because he was one of the most recent hires, her husband, not even two weeks back at work, was laid off. And it's not just them — they take care of Tina's elderly parents, on top of the regular bills, car payments and rent — the struggle and determination is all around them.

"I have church family that have been impacted by it," she said. "They lost their job or got laid off. They

went into work and basically were told that was their last day. I have a few neighbors that have been impacted, too, they don't have work.”

Many African Americans, like Marchell's husband, work in the food world, one of the largest industries in Charlottesville. To date, the state has processed more than 80,000 unemployment claims from this industry alone — 23% of all claims. But according to the Virginia Employment Commission, it provides the lowest wage of any industry in Charlottesville, at \$421 per week. The average overall weekly wage for all industries here is \$1,028. What's more, according to Antwon Brinson, owner of Culinary Concepts AB and creator of the city's GO Cook program, the highest paid sous chef positions earn on average \$18-\$24 an hour. Everyone else on the line — pantry, hotline, junior sous chefs — get paid roughly \$11-\$18 an hour, he said. Lowest on the scale are dishwashers, typically getting paid \$10.50-\$12 an hour.

In the first week of the shutdown, several Charlottesville GoFundMe efforts were immediately set up, some streamlining the sale of gift cards and certificates, while encouraging people to order takeout and delivery, and some that even connected restaurants directly with frontline workers, helping two key causes at once. Collectively, they raised more than \$130,000 and facilitated many thousands more in

communitywide purchasing. They included long lists of area restaurants, but noticeably absent were popular Black-owned restaurants: Mel's Cafe, Royalty Eats, Pearl Island, Angelic's Kitchen and many others. All of these crowdsourced initiatives were started by white residents. When this lapse of inclusion was brought to their attention, they added the food establishments to their lists. But this delay or afterthought when it comes to support for African Americans is one that has permeated much of white Charlottesville's pre-COVID economic actions, as well.



A man sands wood on Third Street Northeast near the Charlottesville Downtown Mall.

Credit: Lorenzo Dickerson



Sober Pierre, owner and operator of Pearl Island Foods, and Executive Chef Javier Figueroa-Rav

In the period between 1904-1916, there were a dozen Black-owned barbershops, 11 Black-owned grocery stores, and scores of other Black-owned businesses. Today, according to research and data collected by local business owners and entrepreneurs Destinee Wright and Cordell Fortune, there are more than 150 Black-owned businesses in our area.

In the immediate days following the COVID-19 crisis, the city's Office of Economic Development launched its Building Resilience Among Charlottesville Entrepreneurs grant program with about \$85,000. It awarded up to \$2,000 to small businesses experiencing hardship. But of the 149 businesses to apply, only 19, or 12.7%, were African American-owned. Minority groups overall, however, were well represented, and the BRACE program ended up giving 69 grants out. About 40% went to African American-, Latino-, Asian- and white women-owned businesses.

Hollie Lee, the city's chief of workforce development strategies was stumped about the low Black participation. Lee has led the creation of the city's successful GO job training and placement programs, helped to launch both the Business Equity Fund and the Home to Hope program and has provided staff support for the Minority Business Commission. She's one of the most tapped-in city staff members when it comes to connecting with African American businesses.

"I really wish more Black-owned businesses had applied — I feel like I know so many of them," said Lee, who emailed, called and contacted a lengthy roster of Black-owned businesses. "I do think that sometimes, with us being a government, people think there's a lot of red tape attached to it. And that's one thing that I have really worked hard on over the years, to try and eliminate so much of that, because I know that could be the thing that makes someone say, 'forget it' and move along, like it's more headache than it's even worth. But if people would just go through the process, they'd know it's really not that bad."

Lee said they even revamped the grant application process to try and get rid of some of that red tape. They put it all online and made it mobile friendly so people could use their phones to apply. They also eliminated the formal interview process and the requirement for vendor registration with the city of Charlottesville. These efforts have come forward in no small part because of the city's past — between 2012-2017, the city awarded less than 2% of contracts to minority-owned businesses. Last year, former Councilor Wes Bellamy led the creation of the Business Equity Fund for minority and women-owned businesses. And so, to ensure more opportunity for minority-owned businesses to get access to capital, Lee launched a 1%-3% interest loan program as part of the BEF, awarding \$55,000 to 11 businesses — eight Black-owned, one Asian-owned and two women-owned.

In the coming weeks, Lee said she's readying another round of loans to help with business recovery efforts. Further, every fall, the city hosts a minority and women-owned business expo, which they're in the process of adapting to a virtual online platform to unveil in the coming months to get those businesses more exposure and publicity.

For Harrell's part, he's using this time to evaluate, self-educate, and reflect on where he's come and where he still wants to go. The system can work better if you have more of the right people contributing to the system, and key to that is collaboration, prioritizing Black-run initiatives and exchanging ideas, goods and supports, he said.

"We can take this opportunity to better understand the game, which has been ruled by a certain few people," he said. "We could accomplish things that have never been seen or done before that will be historically magnificent."

Back to Determined.

PUBLIC HEALTH, DETERMINED

Determined to Be Nourished



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The Meal Plan

Credit: Sahara Clemons

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Determined to be Nourished



Every Friday since Charlottesville started responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, Rosa Key has been on Hardy Drive. “Come get a bag of groceries!” she hollers. Key knows most of the Black residents or their parents. “Oh, you’re Mary’s boy,” she says when a young man tells her his last name.

ABOUT THE ARTIST - SAHARA CLEMONS

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Key, 64, grew up in Charlottesville, spending some of her youth in Albemarle and Nelson counties, but mostly in the city. Her aunt and uncle worked for J.F. Bell Funeral Home. Her daughter and grandson live in Westhaven. And ever since schools and businesses shut down, Key has helped the PB&J Fund and Charlottesville City Schools (CCS) distribute thousands of bags of food to residents here. She’s been involved in the city’s food justice movement for more than two decades and was a part of the Urban Agriculture Collective of Charlottesville (UACC) when it formed in 2007. Now she works as a Community Advocate for the Food Justice Network (FJN).



Shantell Bingham, the program director of the Food Justice Network.

Credit: Lorenzo Dickerson

Shantell Bingham, FJN’s program director, lives down the street from Key. This is what food justice looks like, she said — having Black lifelong residents in positions of power and listening to them. Too often, local organizations are run by white people who, well-meaning though they may be, are not in touch with the communities they try to serve. When it comes to food, Bingham said, this can be perilous.

“Who holds the keys to the food holds the power of the people,” she said.

In her life, Key has worked nearly every physically demanding job — carpentry, construction, heating and cooling repair, security, waiting tables, even a couple office jobs. At one point, she ran a small child care business, taking care of 15 kids, and in the 1980’s she worked at Venable Elementary School, preparing hundreds of meals for students. “We made everything from scratch,” she said. “Not like today, where they have all these canned foods and prepacked stuff.”

Several weeks ago, PB&J shifted from using one main distribution site in the center of Westhaven to delivering food directly to people’s front doors. It’s safer that way, and it means Key’s help is no longer needed. The next Friday though, as usual, Key drove up in the cream-colored 1993 GMC Sonoma — “Betsy” — she bought from a city auction, only instead of handing out groceries, she had a bed full of freshly cut peonies.

“Want some flowers?” she asked everyone, even those driving by. She loves flowers — marigolds and

zinnias the most. “Give them to your Mama!” she told people on the Friday before Mother’s Day.

Like her stepfather, Key’s always had a green thumb. In her front and side yards are dozens of potted plants — tomatoes, potatoes, collards — sprinkled throughout, like blueberries in a cobbler. On the new Cultivate Charlottesville’s website — the umbrella organization launched last month that combines the FJN, UACC and City Schoolyard Gardens (CSG) — [there’s a quote of Key’s beneath her photo](#): “Food justice is about having access to your own land to grow food,” she said. “It’s about owning the food you grow and eat at all times.”



Rosa Key, a community advocate with the Food Justice Network, hands out flowers with her grandson.

Credit: Lorenzo Dickerson



A plaque celebrating John West in the 10th and Page neighborhood.

Credit: Lorenzo Dickerson

A block away from Key’s house is the city’s plaque commemorating the life of John West, an African American man born in 1850 to a mother enslaved by a white professor at the University of Virginia. West became one of the area’s wealthiest residents, buying and selling hundreds of properties in his lifetime, including Key’s. It’s one of many in the area that West sold to other Black families, slowly growing what’s now known as the historically Black 10th and Page neighborhood.

As affordable properties become more coveted and scarcer in the city, Key has seen more affluent, often white, residents move into her neighborhood. Two blocks away, the Dairy Central is on track to finish building 175 apartments by 2021 — 140 priced for people earning at least \$65,755, and 35 for those making at least \$52,600. Many long-term Black residents wonder, and worry, how these new residents will change their neighborhood.

These are interconnected, Bingham said — food justice isn’t just about food. “Doing food justice,



The Dairy Central development, slated for completion in 2021.

like, real food equity work — isn't about giving people food at the end of the day," she said.

Credit: Lorenzo Dickerson

"That's the charity mechanism that's important for a social safety net. But the real work of food justice is building better education outcomes, and better wage opportunities. People have a right to self-determine their own access in our food system, in our healthcare system, in our housing community. People should be able to decide where they want to live. It shouldn't be a choice they have to make because of the crappy wage they're paid."

"The type of stuff that makes my stomach turn"

Access to healthy and affordable foods — or food security — is an essential piece of the broader Social Determinants of Health, impacting everything from physical health and mental development, to one's educational, financial and employment outcomes. In Charlottesville, before the pandemic, 1 in 6 residents, or about 7,350 people, had trouble getting or affording food, according to the [nonprofit organization Feeding America](#). In Albemarle, about 1 in 10 residents experienced this food insecurity, or 9,520 people. That's a total of about 16,870 people.

As evidenced across the country, the pandemic has exacerbated nearly every existing pattern of inequity. By the end of March, the city's Department of Social Services processed 137 more applications for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) than it had in 2019, and 27 more families applied for the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. In April, 300 more people applied for SNAP, 167 for Medicaid and 54 for TANF, according to Assistant Director Sue Moffett. In Albemarle, Director of Social Services Phyllis Savides said the department has processed more than 572 new SNAP applications and more than 68 new TANF applications since March 13.

"At our peak, [we] experienced a 382% increase in applications for a two-week period," Savides said.



The Blue Ridge Area Food Bank's Charlottesville warehouse.

Credit: Lorenzo Dickerson

By the end of April, the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank had distributed [2.9 million pounds of food](#). As of this article's publishing, the local Loaves and Fishes Food Pantry had given out more than 248,500 pounds of food to 10,000 people in 3,500 households.

"Daily, I'm getting calls from people saying, 'I've heard about you, can I come get food?'" said Executive Director Jane Colony Mills. "I think we're seeing about 30% new households. I've gotten people from the service industry calling. Some people are incredibly uncomfortable because they've never had to do this before."



A Cville Community Cares team member distributes meals at Venable Elementary.

Credit: Lorenzo Dickerson

All this is in addition to the thousands of grocery deliveries done by the Cville Community Cares team, the daily meals offered at the Haven, the Salvation Army, Keevil & Keevil, the weekly pick-ups at other area food pantries and scores of other food-related efforts.

Yet, people are still going hungry, said Bingham. She's heard about people going to area hospitals feeling faint, lightheaded or drowsy.

"It's the type of stuff that makes my stomach turn," said Bingham, recalling some of the stories.

"There's food out there, but everyone's getting to it

quicker than they can. They may be disabled, they may not have a car to get them to where they need to be, they may not have heard the information soon enough.”

And it’s not just hunger. Food insecurity frequently occurs as less healthy foods — calorie-rich, and nutrient-deficient — are often more affordable and easier to get. And though they’re less nutritious, they’re more filling, so people with less money can stave off hunger for longer. But the cumulative effect of this can be catastrophic — high blood pressure and cholesterol, diabetes, obesity — all of which occurs at disproportionately higher rates in African American communities, and [all of which leaves people with weakened immune systems and more vulnerable to other illnesses and diseases, such as COVID-19.](#)

“You will still have to ask”



Meal delivery coordination at Charlottesville High School.

Credit: Lorenzo Dickerson

Of the 4,340 students in the CCS system, about 2,470, or 57%, are enrolled in its free and reduced-cost meal program. These children come from lower-income households and depend on it for daily nutrition. Since schools shut down, CCS has delivered tens of thousands of meals — about 700 a day — to hundreds of the hardest hit families, and the PB&J Fund has distributed another 3,000 bags of food, or 48,000 meal servings, according to Executive Director Alex London-Gross.

In Albemarle, officials initially [designated six locations](#) for meal delivery — the furthest south was Walton Middle School, about 15 minutes from the B.F. Yancey School Community Center, the former Esmont school that closed in 2017 and continues to be the community hub for hundreds of Black families in southern Albemarle. The following week, school officials [added two new locations](#): Red Hill Elementary School and the Boys and Girls Club in Scottsville. Nearly three weeks after the first food deliveries began, [Yancey was added](#) as a location.

“It started out in the white communities of Scottsville and Red Hill until there was a push,” recalled Peggy Scott, an Esmont resident. For years, Scott has worked at UVA’s Cancer Center, but recently she’s helped organize care for residents of color in Albemarle as part of the Health Equity and Access in Rural Regions working group focused on creating clear and powerful feedback channels to better ensure quality services for rural residents. “This group got together and continually emailed and called and begged, pleaded and finally their School Board representative and some others in the county were very helpful and made it

many their school board representative and some others in the county were very helpful and made it happen at Yancey,” she said. “Now they have the biggest distribution location at Yancey.”

Phil Giaramita, strategic communications officer for the school system, said it was a matter of timing and logistics, and that officials moved as fast as they could to get immediate food delivery sites up and running, eventually expanding to respond to as many needs as possible.

“We knew some families might not be able to get to a site, so in all of our communications starting with March 15, we added a phone number that people could call if they were unable to get to a site,” said Giaramita. “Its purpose was to allow us to bring the food to their location or open a site closer to their location.”

For Scott though, this speaks to a deeper truth. Black people have always cared for one another — she points to the monthly Yancey Community Food Pantry that’s operated for more than two years and is now helping more than 100 people a month, or the long and rich heritage of Black community educators in Esmont stretching back more than a century — but when it comes to outside resources, they’re often the last to gain access, she said, especially those in rural areas, where many people remain cut off from urban-centered resources. This is by design, she said.

“These people are in the same struggles they were in from the outset,” said Scott. “We may not be going around saying the word ‘master,’ but we are going around now saying, ‘Can I please get this resource?’ We’re still asking from the hands that took the helm and said, ‘You will not have ownership of this — you will still have to ask.’”

“That’s a big deal to me”



Feed

Credit: Sahara Clemons

In recent years, FJN, CSG, and UACC have chronicled the area’s many immediate local [food inequities](#), namely affordable access to quality food. And great strides have come about: a massive Food Equity

Initiative funded in-part by the city that coordinates dozens of food organizations, Black-run urban farms, schoolyard gardens, regular fresh produce delivery systems for people with the lowest incomes and highest health risks, and much more.

But, Bingham said, the term “food equity” is really just a euphemism for “food apartheid.” That is, a majority of the decision-makers in food systems are white. They have often directly or indirectly benefited from inequitable systems and have, willfully or ignorantly, helped perpetuate, or in some cases create, unjust food systems.

“White advocates can play a real critical role in shifting the narrative and decision-making power, because of where they sit,” said Bingham. “So when they start turning to people of color for advice and leadership in a way that’s not extractive or tokenized, because they understand that’s actually how you fix the problem, that’s a big deal to me.”

Last month, in this vein, a new partnership emerged between Cultivate’s FJN, Frontline Foods Charlottesville, and the World Central Kitchen (WCK), an international food distribution organization. Through WCK and Frontline, 11 of the 19 locally enrolled restaurants have been paid \$290,000 to prepare and deliver 29,000 meals to first responders and frontline workers. Knowing that white-led networks traditionally steer resources towards their own communities, Cultivate’s FJN formed a steering committee to intentionally prioritize minority-owned restaurants. Currently enrolled are 10 white-owned restaurants and nine minority-owned — four Black, three Latino and two Asian.

Bingham thought, “This is great, but it’s not enough. What if CCS could also be enrolled as a meal provider?”

Currently the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) [reimburses public schools \\$2-3 per meal under the free and reduced-price program](#). And school meal systems are often expected to be self-sustaining, meaning they have to try to keep themselves afloat with only these USDA reimbursements and full-price paying students. This limits how much money they can invest in the quality of meals, the wages for employees, and the dining experience for students.

“Everybody wants an amazing lunch program for their children,” Bingham said. “But the school system, like any system, has to make sacrifices. And sometimes being a supportive partner means understanding that and innovating new pathways.”

As proposed, over a six-week period, at \$10 a meal, WCK would have reimbursed CCS nearly \$250,000 — \$175,000 more than the USDA reimbursements. Jeanette Abi-Nader, the executive director of Cultivate, has led City Schoolyard Gardens for the last seven years.

“If we were able to be creative with the program and enroll CCS as a vendor, the influx of funds from this would have given the school system the chance to make significant investments in revamping their model to a place where they could potentially increase participation in the meal program and become self-sustaining in the future,” Abi-Nader said.

Neither WCK nor CCS returned requests for comment about why the proposed partnership didn’t work, but Frontline Foods Charlottesville’s co-founder John Kluge, who was instrumental in bringing WCK to Charlottesville and has worked closely with Bingham, said the WCK model is set up for restaurants only. WCK offered to pay restaurants to provide the kids with meals, he said, but the school system itself couldn’t be enrolled as a provider.

“Their model, which is very effective for the shorter term emergency work, isn’t designed to fix long-term issues,” said Kluge. “It’s designed to provide immediate food relief when communities are hurting. It’s not a replacement for systemic change. Our community’s going to need to be the one to carry the torch of equity on the other side of this crisis.”

Over the last 18 months, Bingham, Abi-Nader and others in Cultivate’s network have worked with CCS students to develop a five-year “Health School Foods” plan that focuses on students of color gaining access to healthy foods, improving supports for kitchen staff and equipment, sourcing foods and meals locally, centering the voices and choices of students in meal development and educating students about nutrition.

“Why shouldn’t we be a city that provides free, healthy, locally-sourced meals to all of our students?” Abi-

Why shouldn't we be a city that provides free, healthy, locally sourced meals to all of our students?" Nader said. "We have the community resources that could be invested to bridge the large disparities that are present in our student population and build food equity."

That work, which focuses on amplifying the voices of those directly impacted, goes beyond just food. It involves figuring out ways for people to provide for themselves, which means addressing inequities in education systems, employment systems, health systems, transportation systems and housing systems, Bingham said.

"We're looking at 400 years of policy and financial investment that went into creating inequities, so it's not enough to organize, and have activities lined up — you really have to come up with creative regenerating financial models to complement that work. And that stuff, when I say it's rare, it's once-in-a-blue-moon that that type of investment comes around."

And so, Bingham and many others are looking towards the rewrite of the city's Comprehensive Plan, its zoning rules and strategic housing plan that is currently underway.

"We need to have community voices in these documents," she said. "At the end of the day, these are localized visions for what we want to develop in our community — the rules of our environment, our land, our fabric, our space. These things are directly related and having voices of folks of color and low-wealth communities engaged in that is essential. This is how we're going to do it."

[***Back to Determined.***](#)

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WRITTEN BY:
Jordy Yager

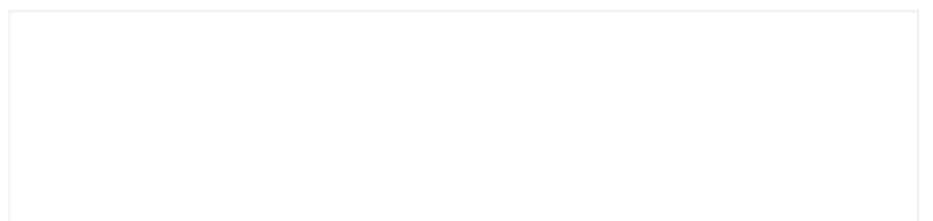
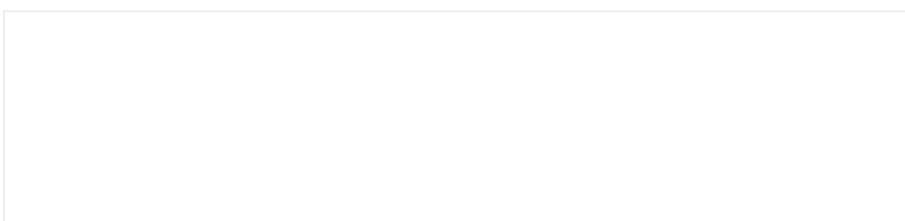
Jordy Yager is a freelance journalist raised in Charlottesville, who earned his M.A. in journalism from Boston University. For six years, he covered Congress and the federal government in Washington, D.C.. Since 2013, Jordy has focused on issues of equity and racial disparities in his hometown.

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JORDY YAGER

18 MIN READ
Thursday, May 28, 2020, at 6:30 AM



Tired of Healing My Wounds. Homelessness and the threat of homelessness have taken on new meaning in the wake of COVID-19 and stand in stark relief when those situations pose an immediate public health risk to those experiencing it and the people they interact with. Eviction Notice explores the fear and grief that arise due to unstable housing, often caused by market pressure and gentrification. As unemployment continues to rise, we anticipate the further destabilizing of Black neighborhoods and other vulnerable communities. This piece asks, “what will it take for us to be unburdened by this cycle?”

Credit: Sahara Clemons

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DETERMINED

This series uses the Social Determinants of Health as a foundational framework and

guideposts to bring you stories of how the COVID-19 crisis has impacted some of our African American communities.

Determined to Stay



Matthew Murphy needed to clear his head. The week before the response to the COVID-19 pandemic hit Charlottesville, the 43-year old took a job as a housing navigator at The Haven day shelter. All day every day, he has worked the phones, trying to find housing for people without any. The Haven finally has funding to pay for peoples' first month's rent and security deposits. Now, they have a different problem: landlords.

"You see, but don't hear people's reservations," said Murphy about his conversations with landlords. "They're never going to say, 'No, we won't do that for these people' or 'We don't want to rent to these people.' But that's basically what they're saying. We're seeing it."

For years, just one block away at the Downtown Job Center, Murphy helped many similar people try to find work. There too, when he'd call, employers found excuses not to hire people or not to pay them close to a living wage. "It's frustrating," said Murphy. "You see what's out there. You see what could be."

After weeks of this landlord rejection, which has largely played out along racially-woven economic lines — almost all his clients are Black — Murphy went for a drive. He drove through primarily Black areas of the city — Friendship Court, Westhaven, 10th and Page. It was quiet. Not many people were out. Then, he drove down Wertland Street, the University of Virginia's transition into commercial businesses and student housing. Tons of people were outside, he said, jogging, hanging out in yards. Then, he drove home. He lives off East Rio Road, down the road from the new Lochlyn Hill subdivision, where homes have been selling for between \$500,000 and \$830,000.

"There are these beautiful, modern eco-friendly, million-dollar houses with no curtains," he said, comparing them to homes in Friendship Court and Westhaven, both built on the heel of local urban renewal projects in the 1960s and '70s. "It's hard to explain, but you can feel the difference. Imagine sitting in this 3,000- or 4,000-square-foot house with 6-foot windows and sun flooding into the

ABOUT THE ARTIST - SAHARA CLEMONS

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The Haven in downtown Charlottesville.

Credit: Lorenzo Dickerson



room. You’ve got a yard with a fence, and the kids are outside playing.” He paused. “I drove though



The Lochlyn Hill subdivision, which straddles the border between Charlottesville and Albemarle County.

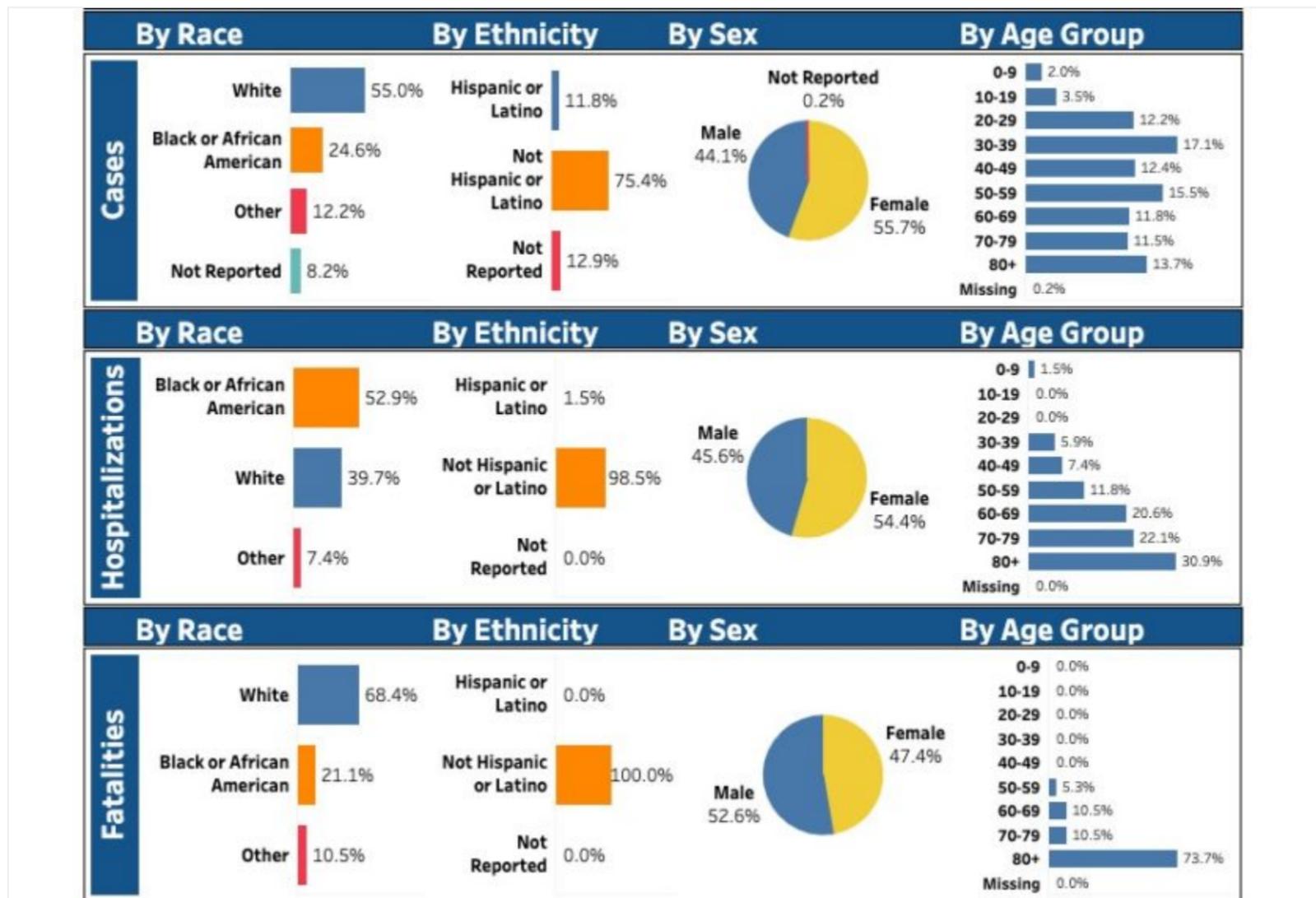
Credit: Lorenzo Dickerson

Westhaven, and was like, damn, do they even get sunlight?”

“No property in this subdivision”

Study after study has shown that quality affordable housing is one of the most vital social determinants of health. It directly affects what happens to people at every stage of life: their educational outcomes, the types of jobs they get and how much they pay, their ability to access and afford quality food, their physical and mental health, their children’s safety and future.

Charlottesville has been in an affordable housing crisis for years now, made more imperative because of longstanding racial and economic systems of segregation that have denied successful life outcomes to many generations of Black residents while gifting many white residents with wide-ranging structural and policy supports.



Credit: Virginia Department of Health

This correlation between housing and health is most glaringly evident right now, as Black residents make up 12.4% of the health district’s population, but 26.5% of the 429 total people with COVID-19 and 21% of those it has killed. White residents are being infected and dying at disproportionately smaller rates. This is no anomaly. Pre-COVID, throughout the entire health district — which includes the city of Charlottesville and the counties of Albemarle, Fluvanna, Greene, Louisa and Nelson — life expectancy for Black residents was 74.7 years White residents lived to an average of 81.2 years old — 6.5 years longer.

On a more local level, this disparity becomes more stark. In the Locust Grove and Martha Jefferson neighborhoods, where 90% of the population is white, life expectancy is 81.3 years. In the Venable and Rugby neighborhoods, where 82% of the population is white, life expectancy is 82.6 years. Compare this to the Fifeville, Forest Hills and Orangedale neighborhoods, where 57% of the population is Black, life

expectancy is 76.4 years — 6.2 years less than white residents a mile away. In the Ridge Street area, which includes the Sixth Street and South First Street public housing neighborhoods, where 40% of the population is Black, life expectancy is 73.7 years — 8.9 years less.



The Martha Jefferson neighborhood.

Credit: Lorenzo Dickerson

These primarily white neighborhoods have existed for more than a century. Earlier this month, the American Political Science Review [published a paper](#) showing that, throughout the country, the more white a city's population is, the more likely it is to restrict land use. Charlottesville's predominantly white neighborhoods have almost all contained racist covenants within their housing deeds, ensuring variations of "No property in this subdivision is to be sold to any person not of the Caucasian race." And when, in 1968, the Fair Housing Act rendered these illegal, the racial segregation tools shifted to using restrictive single-family zoning, which today prevents more people from living on [70% of the city's residential-zoned land](#).

"I know firsthand what it feels like to lose everything"



Yolunda Harrell

Credit: Lorenzo Dickerson

Yolunda Harrell is currently the CEO of the [New Hill Development Corp.](#), but on September 11, 2001, she was working for a major airline. After the terror attacks, she immediately found herself among tens of thousands of people in the industry without a job. She'd never before been unemployed.

"I didn't know how to deal with that at all," she said. "I was not financially prepared."

She didn't have any savings. She hadn't invested in her company's 401(k) retirement plan. "I just didn't take all of those things into consideration because no one had ever explained it to me," she said. "As a result, I learned a lot of hard painful lessons."

She lost nearly everything, and set out to not just rebuild, but also learn more about financial health. By 2008, when the financial crisis hit the U.S. and she was working for a major hotel chain, she was in better shape.

“By that point, I had personally put money away and knew that if I did lose my job, no big deal, I could find a job and find a way to survive, versus the last time,” said Harrell.

But whereas in 2001 Harrell was just taking care of herself, in 2008 she was managing dozens of staff. “I had to think about how is this going to play out in their life,” she said. “What was this going to mean for them — if they need insulin and their insurance goes away? What are the local resources that could potentially help this person?”

She looked back on 2001 and found inspiration. “Had I not experienced that hardship, I don’t know that I would have had that level of thought for my team members,” she said. “I’d like to believe I would, but when you know what it’s like to be evicted and have cars repossessed, you don’t wish that on anybody.”

Like most crises, the one in 2008 hit Black homeowners harder than white ones. In the preceding years, Black borrowers were [30% more likely](#) than white ones to receive higher-cost subprime loans. And in 2008, when the housing bubble burst, Black borrowers were 76% more likely than white borrowers to lose their home. What’s more is that in the following years, between 2009-2012, Black households that did hold onto their homes lost an estimated [\\$194 billion in indirect capital](#) as adjacent properties depreciated in value.

In 1970, less than two years after the 1968 Fair Housing Act’s enactment, after generations of racist housing policy designed to prevent Black homeownership, [42% of Black households](#) nationally owned their homes. Today, 50 years later, the current homeownership rate for Black households is [44%](#) — in 2004, it spiked to 49.4% — whereas now, 73.7% of white households own their home. Furthermore, a 2017 analysis found that [19.3% of Black prospective homebuyers](#) had loans denied, compared to 7.9% of white ones.

Now, with more Americans on unemployment than ever before and the economy in complete disarray, African Americans are being the [hardest hit](#) yet again. Harrell looks back on her own education and how it’s helped her weather storms. She wants to help others prepare for the next one.

“Crisis is going to come back again, whether it’s this or something else,” she said. “So let’s get people to better manage their position, no matter where they are on the economic spectrum.” Harrell and local affordable housing advocates are closely watching for the nearest sign of market collapse. This time, they said, they’re better equipped. This time, they have a plan.

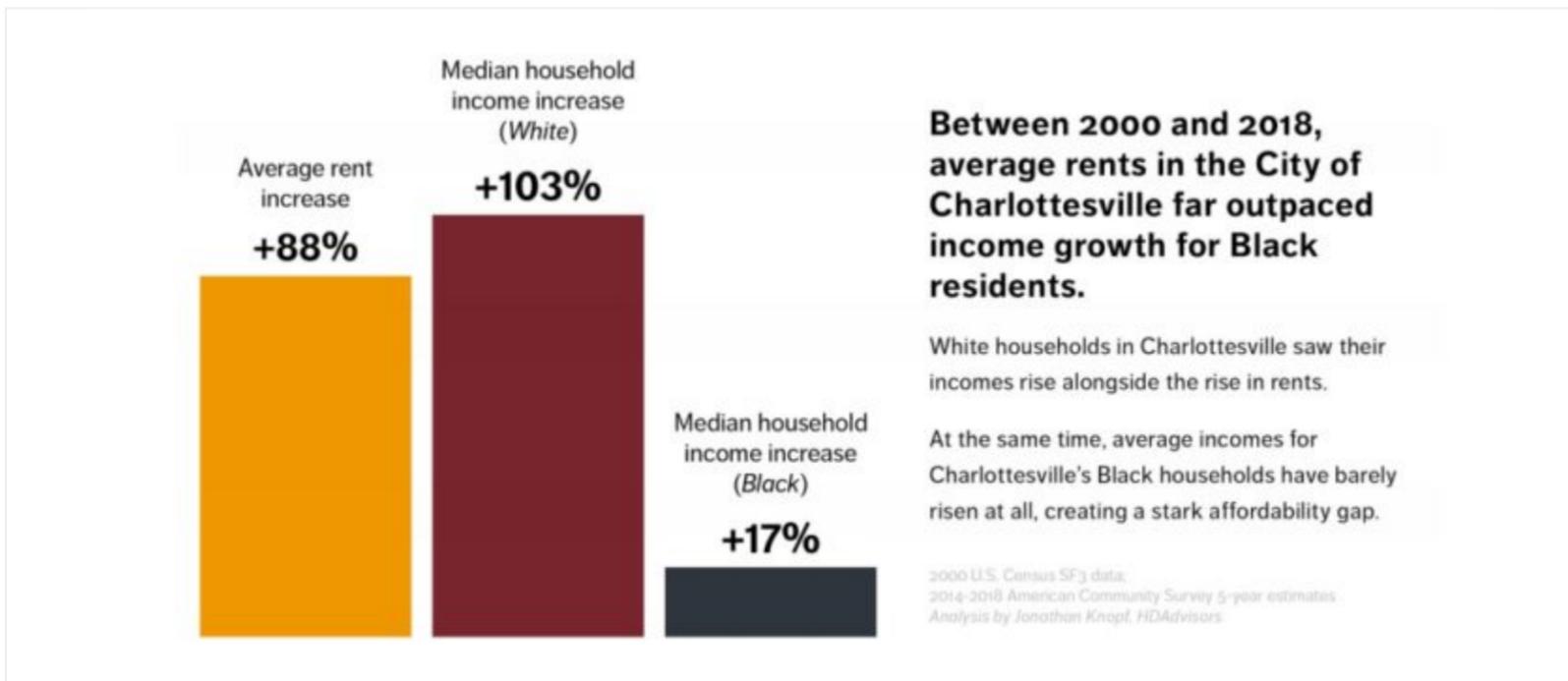
“It impacts your worldview”

In March, the Charlottesville Low Income Housing Coalition (CLIHC) released a much-awaited [100-page report](#) extensively detailing the region’s history of racist housing policy, connecting it directly to today’s affordable housing crisis. Between 2000-2018, the report found, the average cost of rent in Charlottesville increased by 88%. But, over this same period, the median income for white households increased by 103%, allowing them to keep pace with rising costs of living, the median income for Black households increased just 17%. Much of this is due to [racially segregated](#) and biased job sectors.

The report also contains the results of perhaps the most comprehensive survey on gentrification and displacement ever conducted within Charlottesville’s Black communities. One of the 129 survey respondents noted this income and cost-of-living divide, saying: “Sixty years later we are still being treated like we’re prisoners, but our only crime is that we didn’t invest our money, because we didn’t have any money to invest.” Another respondent called attention to the illusory signs of gentrification: “It looks more diverse, but in fact families of color are getting pushed out. [It’s a] cloak and dagger process of actually becoming less diverse.” And one resident took note of the surrounding landscape and the messages it sends: “There used to be Black-owned businesses. Bike trails don’t benefit us.”

Lacking affordable housing options, renters and homeowners alike are forced to move. From 2000-2018, the rate of Black homeownership in the city fell by 24% (from 982 to 745), meaning that one in four Black

homeowners either moved or lost their home, while white homeownership increased by 20% (from 5,739 to 6,906).



The report also shows how this housing disparity affects people's financial health — 9% of Black city residents make more than \$100,000, whereas 88% of white residents make that much. As with all things, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this reality. Since Gov. Ralph Northam declared a state of emergency in March, at least 147 homes have been sold in the city — 64 of those, or 42.9%, sold for more than \$400,000. Thirteen properties, or 8.8%, sold for more than \$900,000 — 10 of these are in areas that were restricted for the first half of their history by racist covenants, including the most expensive: a \$2.6 million, five-bedroom, [7,652 square-foot house](#) in Meadowbrook Hills. Today, these houses are restricted by R-1 single-family zoning, and as assessments continue to balloon, so does their value.

“From racial covenants to single-family zoning to small area plans, Charlottesville has always found ways to keep wealth and power in the hands of a largely white minority of wealthy residents,” the CLIHC report states.

Homeownership is the primary U.S. tool for accumulating wealth, and a major reason behind the vast racial wealth disparity. In 2016, [the federal reserve found](#) that median wealth for Black households was \$17,100, whereas for white households it was \$171,000.

During a pandemic, Matthew Murphy said the effects of this wealth disparity are obvious. Many white residents are able to work from home during a stay-at-home order — keeping themselves safe and financially healthy. Or they're able to temporarily reduce their work hours, while having savings to rely on. Or they simply don't have to worry about mortgage or rent payments. And there's a deeper, psychological effect too, he said.

“If you've got 300-plus years of people never having the pressure of coming up with money to pay rent every month, and never not knowing if they're going to make it or not — never feeling that, never breathing that, never seeing it in their parents faces, never having to put your kids through that — it impacts your worldview,” said Murphy.

“Don't be afraid of that”

Growing up in Alabama, Harrell said her mother stressed to her the importance of volunteering — that, despite living in public housing themselves, they should always look for ways to help those less fortunate. It was part of what drove her to start New Hill, an African American community development initiative focused on building [“pathways of upward mobility](#) in a city where wealth and prosperity abounds yet is

secluded in plain sight.”

Harrell has structured New Hill — an homage to the Vinegar Hill neighborhood where Black businesses and dozens of Black-owned homes thrived and were destroyed by white city officials — around [three pillars](#): financial literacy and coaching, economic development and affordable housing. Each of these, said Harrell, is deeply tied to every other social determinant of health.

“Wealth building is not just about money,” she said. “Wealth building is also about connection building. It’s about emotional health. It’s about physical health. It’s hard to focus on those things when you don’t have capital resources.”



Yolunda Harrell stands in the Starr Hill neighborhood, which contains a parcel the New Hill Development Corp. developed a small area plan for.

Credit: Lorenzo Dickerson

With that in mind, and an eye towards impending foreclosures or home sales driven by financial hardship, New Hill is turning its attention to preservation — specifically, finding ways to prevent Black-owned homes from “getting gobbled up by those who have the means,” said Harrell. If a Black homeowner, particularly a senior homeowner, wants to sell their home, and if their family doesn’t want it, Harrell is creating ways to ensure it stays Black-owned, while also guaranteeing that the seller doesn’t lose money in the sale. “How do we get them to be willing to sell that property to a nonprofit that then sells it back to a first-time homebuyer?” she said, adding that the approach needs to intentionally focus on African American residents. “Don’t be afraid of that.”

Sunshine Mathon is the executive director of [Piedmont Housing Alliance](#), which manages and oversees more than 600 units of housing in Charlottesville and the surrounding counties reserved explicitly for low-income residents. After the 2008 crisis, he said, the cost of land and homes plummeted, and he realized it would have been the perfect time for affordable housing advocates to buy properties and create a land bank. Now, he’s trying to do exactly that.

“We’re exploring every possibility to enable investment, whether direct or indirect, on behalf of communities to ensure affordable opportunities in the future,” said Mathon.

A land bank is a smart idea, Harrell said. Less clear is where the initial capital to purchase properties will come from and who controls the properties once they’ve been purchased. Whatever the design though, it needs to be cooperative, she said.

“I think right now we’re at the point where people are realizing that collaboration is gonna be key to long term success,” said Harrell.

In April, Mathon [wrote an op-ed](#) imploring people, who can afford it, to donate their stimulus checks to frontline organizations helping people, saying that if they did not, they would actually be harming themselves and their own families because of how interconnected society is.

“As COVID-19 so clearly illustrates, by simply hunkering down and shaking our heads at the injustice, we actually perpetuate the condition, compromising our own health and safety in the long run,” Mathon wrote. “We have never, as a society, had such a universal opportunity to honestly calculate the impact of our choices, to align our instinct for self-preservation with our moral conviction.”

This is what Yolunda Harrell’s husband, Quinton Harrell, the chair of the Charlottesville Regional Chamber of Commerce’s Minority Business Alliance, [calls the “opportunity cost.”](#) And it’s why many housing advocates argue that adding housing stock at higher price points, above \$500,000, does not deter the wealthy from buying homes in the \$300,000 price range, which they have been doing, taking them away from people with lower incomes. But rather, advocates say, it just entices more wealthy people to buy here and furthers existing inequities.

“A decision to fund beautification in predominantly affluent white neighborhoods rather than invest in basic amenities in predominantly Black neighborhoods is a racist choice” states the CI IHC report. “Given

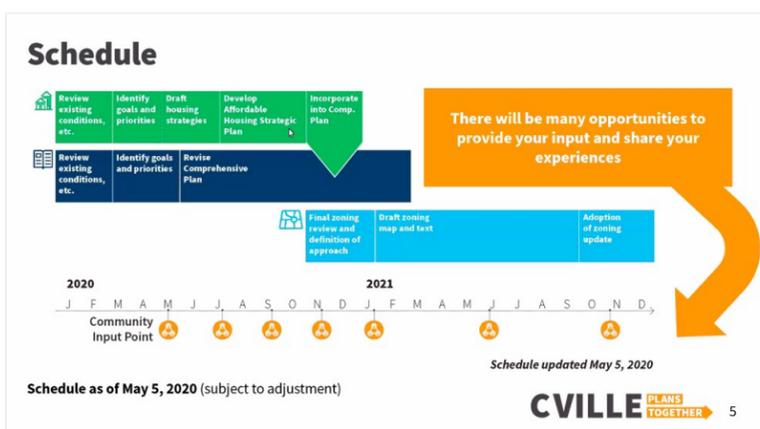
basic amenities in predominantly Black neighborhoods is a racist choice," states the center report. "Given the demonstrated correlation of economic and racial inequity, choosing to invest in middle-income housing over low-income housing means choosing to continue displacing Black people from Charlottesville."



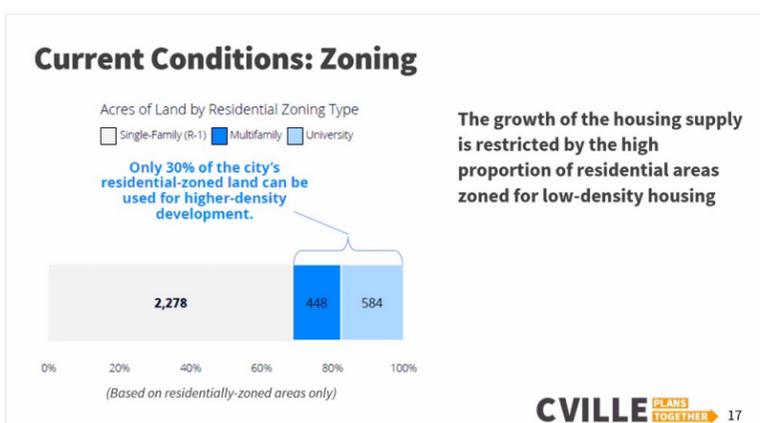
Credit: Lorenzo Dickerson

Elaine Poon, a lead author of the report and managing attorney for Legal Aid Justice Center's Charlottesville office, pointed to the dozens of recommendations it details towards creating more equity: to better fund public housing, the city's voucher program and the Charlottesville Affordable Housing Fund; to provide more tax relief for low-wealth homeowners; and to use taxes to disincentivize gentrification, to name a few. But more than anything, Poon said, she hopes the city listens to the voices of the historically ignored communities in creating future plans.

Six months ago, [the city selected](#) the firm Rhodeside and Harwell Inc. to lead a complete rewrite of the city's Comprehensive Plan, affordable housing strategy and zoning rules. So far, the group has held dozens of meetings with area stakeholders, and recently launched a series of webinars to get further community engagement. By the end of 2020, it plans to unveil a new affordable housing strategy, and by March 2021, a revised Comprehensive Plan, which will then direct a rewrite of the city's zoning rules by the end of 2021.



In its first webinar, RHI shared a slide deck with about 45 participants. "Land use planning and zoning have historically been used to create and maintain racial segregation," stated one slide. Another read: "The growth of the housing supply is restricted by the high proportion of residential areas zoned for low-density housing." It was the first time a consultant hired by the city had stated so frankly a racist and inequitable past that many have talked about for generations.



Yolunda Harrell is hopeful, too. Economic connectivity is starting to happen, she said, and the more it does, the more crises will be able to be weathered. Last year, with \$500,000 from the city, New Hill waded into the collaborative environment, holding focus groups and community engagement sessions to complete a [77-page small area plan](#) for the 47-acre Starr Hill neighborhood, prioritizing African American culture and community desires

“Collectively, we can accomplish a lot more than if we’re all fighting individual battles on our own,” she said. “It has to be very intentional. We have to look at the bigger picture and connect these dots.”

It’s Harrell’s hope that the plan, which centers Black-owned and Black-run resources, can be a pillar of these citywide overhauls and reimaginings, but that it won’t end there.

“I think we can start to work at it from all fronts, understanding that sometimes relationships and social capital are what help you get to that financial capital,” said Harrell. “Once you get there, you can then help others and it becomes a ripple effect around the community, and we can start to see significant changes in the way we eat, the way we sleep, the way we interact with each other, the way we support one another.”

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WRITTEN BY:
Jordy Yager

Jordy Yager is a freelance journalist raised in Charlottesville, who earned his M.A. in journalism from Boston University. For six years, he covered Congress and the federal government in Washington, D.C.. Since 2013, Jordy has focused on issues of equity and racial disparities in his hometown.

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Credit: Sahara Clemons

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FREE NEWSLETTER

Last September, Rachel Gregory went to the doctor. She was working at a local assisted-living facility and for months her left hip had been hurting. Since she was 17 years old, Gregory, like her mother before her, has worked in nursing and geriatric care.

“I love the joy of seeing their faces when I get them up in the morning or put them to bed,” she said of her patients.

“The satisfaction of taking care of someone else, making sure they’re clean, they’re fed, they’re taken care

DETERMINED

This series uses the Social Determinants of Health as a foundational framework and guideposts to bring you stories of how the COVID-19 crisis has impacted some of our African American communities.

of — it's what I would want someone to do for my family.”



Rachel Gregory

Credit: Lorenzo Dickerson

Gregory's work is incredibly physical, she's on her feet almost all the time. Ten years ago, she had her right hip totally replaced — she'd worn down all the cartilage until it was just bone rubbing on bone. So she was worried about the pain her left hip had recently been giving her. She was in so much pain that she couldn't stand for longer than 10 minutes. But she dreaded what bad news might come from a doctor's visit. "I love my work," she said. "I didn't want to stop working. I've got some years left; I don't want to retire at 48. I want to retire at 68 or 78."

The doctor said the pain was coming from a torn labrum, the cartilage that protects her hip socket. OK, she thought, I'll have surgery to repair it. But there was a catch, it would require drilling into her left hip. "They said my hip bones are so fragile that they'll just crumble if I have surgery," she said. OK, she thought, I'll get this other hip replaced first, and then repair the torn labrum. But again, a catch. "I still have cartilage in my hip, so my doctor won't do the hip replacement," she said.

Gregory broke down crying in the doctor's office. "Please," she said. She needed to work, to pay her bills. The doctor said that without private insurance, and with active cartilage still there, he couldn't approve a hip replacement. Instead, for the last nine months she's lived with the pain, slowly wearing down the cartilage until she can replace her hip, to then repair her labrum. She takes Tylenol for the pain.

"But it doesn't help," she said. "It's like taking a Tic Tac."

So, unemployed, she applied, for the first time in her life, for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, which helps, she said, but it's not enough. On the 21st of the month, the \$6 remaining on her card had to last her nine more days. She also applied for disability benefits, but her initial application was denied. She had a letter from her doctor saying she couldn't work, but the Social Security Administration (SSA) argued that she could work. She appealed the denial, but with the pandemic, the SSA has been slow responding, so she enlisted the help of a private disability advocacy firm. They are currently fighting for her appeal.

Gregory said all of this feels incredibly uncomfortable. She's never reached out to organizations for help before. "I've always worked, I've never needed them," she said.

This was before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Then businesses closed and grocery store aisles emptied. It made the already difficult task of looking for work that she could physically do all but impossible for Gregory. It made it impossible for her to afford private insurance to get her hip replaced to fix her labrum to go back to work. It further delayed her disability benefits.

"Day to day is rough," she said. "It's been like hell. I'm at my wits end."

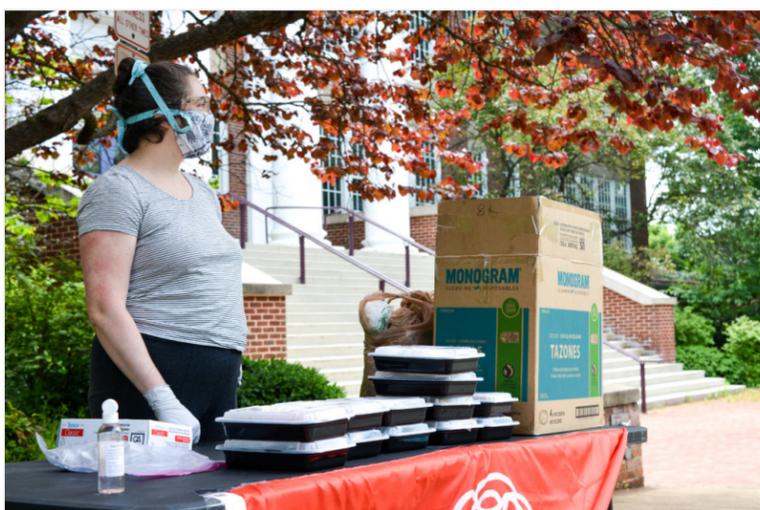
"It was meant to be a bridge"

On the afternoon of March 12, the day Gov. Ralph Northam declared a state of emergency, Eboni Bugg walked the two blocks to CitySpace from the Charlottesville Area Community Foundation's (CACF) offices. Bugg, who is CACF's director of programs, joined a room of city and county staff, first responders, journalists and concerned residents as the Health Department [told everyone what to expect](#) from the coming COVID-19 pandemic and to not panic.

The next day, CACF created the Community Emergency Response Fund (CERF). “As a region of interconnected people, we have the opportunity and responsibility to care for one another,” said Brennan Gould, CACF’s president and CEO, [in a press release](#). Thousands of people were about to lose work, hundreds would soon apply for SNAP benefits and visit food pantries and many would plead with landlords and banks to accept late or reduced housing payments. The CERF would help all these people, and more.

Within a week, the CACF had raised more than \$2 million from more than 150 donors and it needed a way for people to get the money. So it launched the CERF’s household grant program and, in an unprecedented move, [formed a five-way partnership](#) with the community organizing group Cville Community Cares, the United Way of Greater Charlottesville, Albemarle County and the city of Charlottesville.

The city and county had staff who weren’t working and could answer calls over the specially created COVID-19 Emergency Response Helpline. United Way and Cville Community Cares could process and disburse a high volume of payments. And Cville Community Cares was deeply connected to communities being hardest hit and had an army of active volunteers. (Before the partnership, the group of organizers and activists provided financial support to more than 130 households in just five days.) And then, of course, CACF had the money — the CERF.



Within a week, the CACF had raised more than \$2 million from more than 150 donors and it needed a way for people to get the money. So it launched the CERF’s household grant program and, in an unprecedented move, formed a five-way partnership with the community organizing group Cville Community Cares, the United Way of Greater Charlottesville, Albemarle County and the city of Charlottesville.

Credit: Lorenzo Dickerson

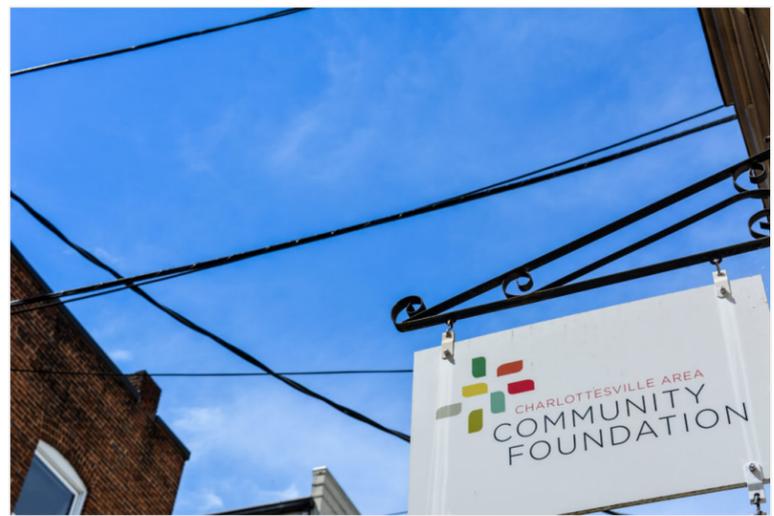
protective equipment or pay for rent or childcare. This was really about triage.”

But the need was vast, Bugg said, and the donations kept coming. Over the eventual eight weeks it was active, the CERF raised more than \$5 million from 830 donors — 82% of whom gave \$500 or less and 68% of whom had never before given to CACF, according to Brendan Wolfe, CACF’s communications manager.

Though African Americans make up just 12.4% of the combined population in the city of Charlottesville and the counties of Albemarle, Fluvanna, Greene, Louisa and Nelson, they made up the majority — 56% — of applicants to the household grant program, Bugg said.

The average payment was \$750, and the vast majority of applicants used the funds to cover housing and food costs. In total, the CERF gave \$4.56 million to the COVID-19 Emergency Response Helpline, funding more than 5,000 household requests, and helping more than 18,000 people, Wolfe said.

One of those people was Rachel Grearv. With nowhere else to turn, she applied to the CERF and in April



The Charlottesville Area Community Foundation

Credit: Lorenzo Dickerson

Any household in the city and surrounding counties could apply. They could only receive one payment, but it could be for as much as \$1,000, depending on its need and size. An applicant would call the helpline or fill out an online form, detailing their circumstances and needs, and after a time-consuming verification and de-duplication process, they received a payment.

Initially, the program was only supposed to last 14 days.

“It was always meant to be a bridge to get people through a two-week quarantine period without feeling like they had to take unnecessary risks with their lives to work,” said Bugg. “It was meant to be a bridge to unemployment payments or stimulus checks. And it was for other folks who didn’t have a choice, to at the very least help them buy

...one of these people... she said. "I never have had to ask for help before," she said. "But now with COVID, I needed it."

"We have to trust them"

More than 5,000 applicants brought an enormous amount of data, and one of the conditions that Cville Community Cares had before partnering with the other four groups was that CACF would hold that data, not the city, not the county and not the United Way.

Over the last three years, CACF, one of the largest community foundations in Virginia, has shifted from being a majority white organization to majority Black, with two Black women at its helm. With that, has come a fast and direct shift towards principles of racial and economic equity that have been implemented across the board, from its eliminating barriers to application process to doing intentional outreach and encouraging specific groups to apply for funding.

Cville Community Cares' request was an acknowledgement that the organization had, more than others, been pushing the greater region towards dismantling white supremacist structures and practices.

"The folks who are running the largest philanthropic endowments in the country are overwhelmingly white, and there is just no way that those foundations and funds are going to be able to have a lens into our Black and brown communities if they don't look like, and come from, those communities," said Christina Rivera, a Cville Community Cares member.

In Charlottesville, data has been misused again and again. With more than 200 nonprofits in the area — only a handful led by people of color — there are frequent reports of white-led organizations using data to track and police applicants, telling them how they can and can't use resources they have been given.

The CERF, Bugg said, was deliberately set up to not do that. "It was important to us to respect the fact that people know best how to apply their resources in the ways that they need them the most," Bugg said. "We have to not make people jump through five zillion hoops to get whatever it is they need, and we have to trust them. We have to get rid of notions that by giving you have the power to decide how somebody uses a resource."

This devotion to human dignity, and CACF's intentional listening to Black and low-income residents, is an example of what's increasingly being referred to as "solidarity, not charity." It's perhaps most clearly seen in the structure of mutual aid, where groups of people look after one another.

"The goal of mutual aid is to not wait around for governments, to not wait around for traditional nonprofits, and to take the lead and model what a supportive social system looks like," said Ibbey Han, a Cville Community Cares member.

In the face of relentlessly racist and discriminatory practices, Black residents have been looking out for one another for centuries. Mutual aid is an old and revered practice in the greater Charlottesville region's African American history from the Piedmont Industrial Land Improvement Co. that served as a shareholding, credit lending, community organizing and property purchasing organization to the myriad social clubs and fraternal and benevolent organizations, such as the Prince Hall Masons at Jefferson Lodge #20 or the Order of the Eastern Star.

Formerly organized in March, the Cville Community Cares group points to the terror attacks of 2017 as its most recent origin point, when those who would come to form the group helped organize hundreds of activists, providing them with food, water and medical supplies and services.

"The relationships and trust that have been built over time is a large part of what continues to make this successful," said Rivera, who is also a member of Congregate Cville, which works closely with Cville Community Cares.

Over the last three years, members of what is now Cville Community Cares have held multiple community actions. many focused on providing aid and shelter to people seeking asylum. who. denied legal U.S.

documents, are forced to remain hidden.

“There are crises in our community all the time, it just might not be so apparent,” said Han. “I think of mutual aid as a muscle, it’s an infrastructure that we exercise whenever a need or a gap arises.”

Their work would not be possible, said Han, if the group wasn’t guided directly by those most affected. Many predominantly white charity organizations and nonprofits are increasingly hiring people of color in an effort to get a more diverse-looking staff, but Han said it can’t stop there. “It’s not just a matter of hiring a representation from those communities, it’s about actually taking direction from them,” she said.

Bugg agreed, saying there needs to be a fundamental shift in how people think about their roles. That power and control is at the center of the current structures. “Solidarity-not-charity really focuses on listening to the wisdom and experiences and suggestions of people who are most proximate to an issue,” Bugg said. “It’s really about recognizing that we are all interconnected, and that we’re all givers and receivers in the system.”

“Somebody really needs to do something”

All week, Jay James and the team at the Bridge Ministry have been interviewing men at the Albemarle-Charlottesville Regional Jail (ACRJ), where African Americans are overrepresented and more at-risk for contracting COVID-19. They’re trying to find 25 to 40 men with non-violent and non-sexual charges who could be released into the nonprofit group’s care. For the last 25 years, the Bridge has operated an 18-month recovery and skills-training program for men just getting out of jail and prison on its 17-acre campus in Buckingham County. “With the threat of the virus, we’re working as hard as we can to get as many individuals out of that jail as possible, as soon as possible,” said James, the Bridge’s assistant director.

According to a study of the justice system released in January by the MGT Consulting Group, from 2014-2016 more than 51% of the people booked in ACRJ were African American men in Charlottesville, though they make up just 8.5% of the city’s population. That’s a rate of more than six times what is racially proportionate. Even more disproportionate is in Albemarle, where Black men make up 4.4% of the population, but 37.5% of the people booked into the ACRJ. That’s a rate of 8.5 times what is racially proportionate.

The Bridge has an 86% success rate of men who complete its program never going back into jail or prison again, James said. Part of the success is the group’s staff, including founder William Washington, being able to listen to and relate to its program participants. They’ve battled with addiction; they’ve been incarcerated.

“This should be one of the first places that is thought of, from what it offers these men to empower them to take back their families, to employ them with a guaranteed 100% chance of a job and then to get treatment for their addiction, to acquire new skills, to be on a 17.3 acre property that is secure, that is safe,” he said. “This definitely should be the norm because you can’t lose. You just can’t lose.”

The Bridge was able to do this with a grant from CACF. It was one of 28 it facilitated through the CERF, supporting nonprofits with a total of \$847,195.70, according to Wolfe. The majority, 52.2%, went to funding housing needs, helping nearly 1,000 households, including \$143,748 to cover two months of rent for Habitat for Humanity of Greater Charlottesville’s Southwood residents, and \$101,000 to cover a month’s rent for Piedmont Housing Alliance’s Friendship Court residents. Other grants paid for food distribution, social distancing and quarantine measures, prescriptions and telehealth services. “The criteria were very specific,” said Bugg. “They had to be filling an essential need to a vulnerable population that exceeded their current capacity to do so.”

Several weeks into the pandemic response, Myra Anderson was glued to the news. Every day, new catastrophes emerged and it became immediately apparent that COVID-19 was disproportionately

catastrophes emerged, and it became immediately apparent that COVID-19 was disproportionately affecting Black people.

“I’m seeing people that look like me, look like my brothers, look like my aunties, dying from this in alarming numbers,” said Anderson.

One night, she went to bed feeling helpless and frustrated that many Black people were having difficulty getting masks, a piece of equipment essential to their protection.

“Somebody really needs to do something,” she remembered thinking. “By the next morning, I’d resolved that perhaps that somebody was me.” She put out a call online for partners to help her distribute 5,000 masks to Black communities in the area, and the response was overwhelming. Soon she had partnered with the National Coalition of 100 Black Women and launched the Mask Up effort, which, with a grant from CACF through the CERF, has been distributing masks ever since.



Myra Anderson has partnered with the National Coalition of 100 Black Women and launched the Mask Up effort, which, with a grant from CACF through the CERF, has been distributing masks ever since. Credit: Lorenzo Dickerson

Anderson also leads the Black-centered, Brave Souls on Fire mental health resource group, which in May also received a CERF grant to distribute 300 “Bags of Hope,” each containing a face covering, stress ball, journal, fidget gadgets, Play-Doh, tea, snacks, gum, candy, self-care advice, adult coloring sheets, word searches, affirmations, humor and other local mental health resources.

Bugg said many larger local nonprofits successfully received funding through the federal Paycheck Protection Program, which freed CACF up to better leverage the CERF funds for grassroots, citizen-led and nontraditional groups, which the foundation intentionally kept in mind as it structured the grant’s application process to be as easy as possible, reducing potential barriers.

“That means an all-capital-on-deck approach”

As CACF has been working to change the way financial supports are structured and how people access them, there is another key component to the equation of equity and massive system change: the wealthy.

The year before he died, in 2010, John Kluge had a net worth of \$6.5 billion. After his death, Kluge instructed that much of that money be given to health research efforts, scholarships and a foundation that had to spend its funds in 10 years, said his son John Kluge II.

“Everything has been sold except for the medical companies that he funded to do research,” said Kluge, who inherited a piece of property and a last name.

“It’s a blessing and a curse,” he said of the Kluge name. People assume he’s a millionaire, he said, but it also gives him access to people he might not otherwise have — specifically, wealthy people. “There are too many inactive participants,” said Kluge of wealthy, largely white, Virginians he knows. “They’re living in their bubble, or their world, and not engaging at all. We can’t afford to not engage. The challenges we’re facing at a very local level, and at a macro-global level, are complicated. They’re difficult. And they really require an all-hands-on-deck approach. And that means an all-capital-on-deck approach as well.”

White Virginia wealth tends to be quiet and reserved, he said. Maybe, he posited, this comes from an old notion of what’s polite, but the effect is that the wealth remains fractured and isolated, and it can’t be operationalized to support people’s needs in significant, large-scale, ways. Typically too, wealth is given to a university or major research initiative and not people on the ground who are actively supporting the most discriminated and oppressed. Kluge said that in order for system change to occur, people who are most

impacted need to be in the driver's seat.

Bugg said traditional philanthropic models give a lot of control to donors rather than thinking about how communities themselves want to solve their own problems. Sometimes that control takes the form of parameters and rules, and sometimes control is exerted in the very idea, the very desire to create a nonprofit, for example, or the belief that they know best how to solve a problem — food insecurity, affordable housing, over-policing. In those cases, privilege and hubris can overshadow solving the actual problem.

“It’s not about having an idea and bringing it to a community to see if you can get them on board,” said Bugg. “It’s about the idea being generated in the community and then people leveraging their resources to support it.”

Towards the end of March, Kluge approached Shantell Bingham, the program director for the Food Justice Network, about partnering with Frontline Foods Charlottesville, which he co-founded, and World Central Kitchen to pay local restaurants to provide food to frontline workers. Initially, most of the restaurants that were tasked with preparing the meals were white-owned and white-run, but Bingham pressed him to require a 1-to-1 ratio of white and people of color-owned eateries. As of two weeks ago, white-owned restaurants still made up 72% of meal allocations, with 28% going to minority-owned restaurants, said Kluge. But that’s changing.

“This week, 60% of meals are going to minority-owned restaurants, and 40% to white-owned,” he said. “Next week, 70% of meals will be going to Black- or minority-owned restaurants, and we will keep that 70% as our baseline going forward.”

Kluge said it’s been enlightening to take direction from Bingham, and that he’s bringing this model to the national Frontline Foods board, which he recently joined.

“This is very much a work in progress, and we still have a lot of work yet to do,” he said. “Bias has showed up even within an effort that is intending to be equitable. We need to do better.”

And now, Kluge is hoping to help shape the beginnings of something currently being called the Virginia Funders Network. It hasn’t launched yet, but the goal is to create more ways for funders to learn from and collaborate with communities across the state as well as each other, while also learning how to better leverage state resources with national partners and advance impact-focused policies, said Kluge. His personal hope for the network is to use it to mobilize Virginia’s wealth for social justice causes, and as it forms he is pressing the network to bring more people from impacted communities to the table to help craft it. “There has to be a sustainable way to make sure that communities are part of the design and whatever is being created — that it’s part of the DNA from the very beginning. Community direction can’t be something that gets dropped in every once in a while.”

“There has to be a sustainable way to make sure communities are part of the design and whatever is being created — that it’s part of the DNA from the very beginning,” he said. “Community direction can’t be something that gets dropped in every once in a while.”

“This shows the extent of what’s possible”



On May 8, after eight weeks and millions of dollars, CACF closed the Helpline and its household grant program. Thousands of people, including Rachel Gregory, were able to eat and support themselves and their families because of the fund. For the last three years, Gregory has been staying with her adult daughter and two grandchildren, but it’s crowded and she’d like her own place so she can



Rachel Gregory stands in Friendship Court.

Credit: Lorenzo Dickerson

crowded, and she'd like her own place so she can give them back their space. "I just want to move up a step, just one time," she said.

For Gregory, this experience has affirmed some of the things she knows about Charlottesville — that organizations who help people play favorites,

giving certain people preferential treatment.

"If you know somebody who knows somebody, then you're OK," she said. "But if you don't know anybody, you're screwed. And I'm one of those who knows nobody, so I'm just struggling by myself."

Part of the reason for this reality, she said, is because nobody calls attention to it. People who get overlooked, or given the run-around, don't have time to make a stand. "They say, 'OK, I'll just figure out another way,'" she said.

Bugg knows this reality, too. It's part of why, before CACF shut down the Helpline, it reached out to elderly, undocumented, rural and people of color communities through groups like Sin Barreras, Cresciendo Juntos and the Buckingham Mutual Aid Collective to ensure that people who didn't feel safe asking for funds, or who didn't know about the program or who otherwise fell through the cracks, still got access to the fund.

And though this most recent round of grants to nonprofits has finished, the CERF is still functional and taking donations. And Bugg said there is an upcoming round of grants CACF expects to announce in the next couple weeks that will focus on three main themes: "restore, sustain and build."

"Restore" for people and organizations that experienced emergencies and now need assistance getting back on their feet; "sustain" for those getting by but need support to keep going; and "build" for people and groups in a position to create new and better realities. If ever there was a time for system change, said Bugg, it's now.

"I think we'll all need to stretch our imaginations," said Bugg, adding that she'd personally like to see a major investment in rural broadband connectivity and a reexamination of the employer-based healthcare system.

Since the beginning of the pandemic response, local criminal justice officials ended pretrial detentions and released 90 people, or about 15% of the ACRJ's incarcerated population, to house arrest, [according to C-Ville Weekly](#). The move was an attempt to reduce the risk of inmates contracting COVID-19. And so far, not only has it worked — no prisoners have gotten the disease — but none of those released have been charged with new criminal offenses. Also, officials waived the fees typically charged to people on house arrest for the ankle monitors, said Bugg.

It has many people, including Ibby Han with Cville Community Cares, posing the question: Why did we do this in the first place? "I think this shows the extent of what's possible," said Han. "This shows the arbitrary-ness of incarceration. It was so easy to release people. We have the opportunity to define what the new normal is now, and not go back to the status quo."

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The Lesson

Credit: Sahara Clemons

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FREE NEWSLETTER

Stacey Washington feels blessed these days. She's 41 years old, has six healthy children — five adults and an 11-year old — and three grandkids. She works for the city of Charlottesville's Office of Economic Development and makes a decent amount of money. She's got some savings and a place to live.

"Don't get me wrong, I won't complain because I have a place to live, but I would like a nicer place," said

DETERMINED

This series uses the Social Determinants of Health as a foundational framework and guideposts to bring you stories of how the COVID-19 crisis has impacted some of our African American communities.

Washington. “I feel I deserve it, and I can afford it.”

ABOUT THE ARTIST – SAHARA CLEMONS

But it’s not that simple. Townhouses, apartment complexes, private landlords — each time, she pays a fee, submits a rental application and they tell her it looks good.

ABOUT THE ARTIST: SAHARA CLEMONS

“But as soon as they run my criminal background they say no” she said.

Washington has several past larceny convictions. So she explains this to prospective landlords. “They say, ‘Well, OK, we’ll see what we can do,’” she said. Then, she gets an impersonal email from them saying her application was denied.

What’s worse is that now she makes too much to qualify for low-income subsidized housing, and if Washington’s current landlord decided to sell her place, which she could do at any time, she’d be homeless. “With all of my money, with my good job and everything, I’d be homeless, because I don’t have the option to just go and rent a place,” said Washington.



Home to Hope Peer Navigator Stacey Washington
Credit: Lorenzo Dickerson

Washington is a peer-navigator for the city’s recently created Home to Hope, a resource program for people returning home from jail or prison. She sees these barriers at almost every juncture — housing, jobs, access to healthy food. It’s part of why Home to Hope exists — to give a fighting chance to people whose pasts are constantly held over and against them, said Washington.

“I’m very intelligent, I’m articulate, I just come with a little bit of baggage,” she said. “I can put that baggage down if you allow me. But you’re the one that keeps making me pick it up every time you ask me these questions.”

Washington also knows that if she, with all her success, still faces these barriers, that it’s much harder for program participants who haven’t made it this far yet.

“I know what my participants go through, because I’m going through it myself right now,” she said.

Growing up in Charlottesville, the only resources people told her about were the Department of Social Services and the Women, Infants and

Children program. Washington said she’s been incarcerated in every women’s prison in the state, and none of them offered her resources.

“They don’t tell you about them,” she said. “They keep them hidden and they give people preferential treatment. A lot of resources are through nonprofit organizations, but if it’s not-for-profit, why do I have to be so privileged to know about the resources? Why are agencies not telling me?”

While Washington was incarcerated, her daughter connected with Ridge Schuyler, the dean of Piedmont Virginia Community College’s community self-sufficiency program, who also helped found the [Network to Work](#) job skill training and placement program. There, her daughter trained to become a certified nursing assistant. The program is amazing, she told her mother.

When Washington was released, her daughter introduced her to Schuyler and Frank Squillace, the director of Network to Work. She was interested in the weeklong program but needed a job immediately. Nobody would hire her, though, because of her criminal record. But she knew the manager at Panera Bread, and got a job there. Schuyler would come in for lunch ordering the strawberry nonnseed salad every time

get a job there, because there would come in for lunch, ordering the strawberry poppyseed cake every time. “From that day forward we built a relationship,” she said.

Now, Home to Hope has a seamless partnership with Network to Work, as they work with some of the 90 program participants to lay out their path forward. Life is like driving a car, Washington said. It’s important to check the mirrors to make sure the past doesn’t creep up from behind. “But if you drive your car looking through your mirrors, you’re going to crash,” she said.

“You could not bring him back with you”

As a child, Mayor Nikuyah Walker went with her great-grandmother to state prison to visit her youngest son, Walker’s grandfather. Back then, they were allowed to bring picnic baskets of food.

“I remember her heart breaking each time she was preparing the food, and when she had to leave him there, because while you could take him all of his favorite foods, you could not bring him back with you,” said Walker. “And I remember just that quiet, intense sorrow.”

As a teenager, Walker watched cousins, her same age, get incarcerated, spending more than a decade in prison. She remembers sitting in a Charlottesville courtroom and seeing the judge call her cousin “garbage.”

“From the bench, this white judge said, ‘You’re garbage’ and no one did anything,” said Walker.

Walker has been the main driving force behind launching Home to Hope, drawing inspiration from these memories, though the program’s real genesis, she said, is owed to former City Councilor Holly Edwards, who died in 2017 but first saw the need and envisioned it.



Mayor Nikuyah Walker
Credit: Lorenzo Dickerson

Walker wanted the program to do two things. She wanted the peer navigators, who themselves have been locked up, to be the first people participants see when they’re released — to build relationships and trust and advocate for them. There are other re-entry programs in the Charlottesville area — Healthy Transitions, the Offender Aid and Restoration program — but Home to Hope is the only one whose entire staff has experienced incarceration.

Walker also wanted the program to allow navigators and participants to learn that, on their own journey of healing from deep levels of trauma, they could help others heal as well, while also earning close to a living wage with a starting hourly salary of \$18 an hour, she said.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, at least twice a week Home to Hope staff went to the Albemarle-Charlottesville Regional Jail (ACRJ) to talk with inmates about their upcoming release — to develop short and long term goals, and discuss what’s called a Wellness Recovery Access Plan (WRAP).

“We are not only asking people with Home to Hope about jobs, but we are asking them about careers and those dreams they have probably given up a long time ago,” said Walker. “It’s been something that I have hoped for a long time someone would fix.”

“It feels very deflating”

Whitmore Merrick, a Home to Hope peer navigator, said much of Home to Hope’s efficacy lies in its ability to connect one-on-one, and in-person, with participants. But since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ACRJ, to prevent an outbreak, has not let outside visitors other than attorneys in, making it more difficult to connect with people in jail, he said.

Merrick would also normally have spent the last two months introducing participants to outside partners, helping them build their own networks. Peer navigators had planned to host a giant in-person event called “Hope Starts Here” to do exactly that, but with the pandemic, they switched to a virtual Zoom version.

Several dozen people showed up, including area housing and resource providers. Washington relayed some of her life experiences, explaining how rules and regulations have prevented her from moving forward. Merrick agreed, saying there needs to be more ways to hold boarding house landlords accountable. The units are old and neglected, having not been renovated in decades, but because housing is scarce, they get away with it.

“We’re dealing with slumlords, to be quite honest,” said Merrick.

Peer navigator Ramanda Jackson raised another key issue. When people return from jail or prison, they often go back to whatever support structures they have — family, close friends — especially to find a place to live. But, she said, it’s almost impossible to get a person with a criminal record added to a lease.

One participant in the program currently lives at the Salvation Army, she said. He’s working and has a housing voucher.

“He went to all these different landlords, and even though he had the money to move in, and the voucher to back him, because he also had a record, they denied him,” said Jackson. “I don’t care what kind of money or voucher you have; you cannot live in this neighborhood in Charlottesville.”

Jackson told him to keep trying, that all he needs is one person to say, “yes,” but it’s hard, she said. “It feels very deflating,” said Jackson, who has a felony conviction from 26 years ago. “I paid my debt to society, and now you’re telling me that I still have to fight this just to have somewhere to go?”

Shadeé Gilliam, also a peer navigator with the program, said he’s talked with some landlords who have had outrageous requirements for prospective tenants, imposing rules on when and how often they can have guests or the hours they have to keep.

“It made me question whether the landlord even saw the participant as a human being,” said Gilliam. “You’re not outright telling me no, but you’re putting me in a position where I definitely don’t want to be here.”

All navigators agreed that housing, especially for those with criminal records, who also don’t have savings or living-wage jobs, is nearly non-existent in Charlottesville, especially with the pandemic cutting down on the number of people moving.

Washington said that despite these obstacles, she sees participants’ determination. She’s been working with a woman she was incarcerated with. She was released from jail into Region Ten’s Women’s Center at Moore Creek, a residential substance treatment facility, where she stayed until her insurance ran out. She had nowhere to go, though, so Washington and the Home to Hope team got her a hotel room until she was able to move into one of the homes maintained by Oxford Houses, another recovery program.

Now, she’s in drug court and passing the drug screens, she has a job and is doing well, said Washington. “She could have gotten high and given up after the Women’s Center but she didn’t she contacted me ”



(From left to right) Home to Hope Peer Navigators Whitmore Merrick, Stacey Washington, Ramanda Jackson and Shadeé Gilliam.

Credit: Lorenzo Dickerson

she could have gotten high and given up after the Women's Center, but she didn't, she contacted me, she said. "She didn't have to go to the Oxford House, but she did. That's a success."

Eddie Harris, the head of Ready Kids' [Real Dads program](#), has worked with incarcerated fathers for years, and serves as a mentor for many Home to Hope participants and peer navigators. As good as these outcomes are, Harris said, the work isn't done until the system is changed.

"Until there are opportunities for everyone, I think it's really hard to point success out," said Harris.

"That's the problem"

Years ago, Harold Folley applied for a job at the University of Virginia Medical Center to clean rooms at the hospital. He was acing the in-person interview, but the interviewer's body language shifted when he saw Folley had checked the box asking if he'd been convicted of a felony. His interviewer paused, and told Folley, "I don't think we're going to hire you, because the nurses will probably think you'll steal some drugs off their carts," recalled Folley.



Legal Aid Justice Center community organizer Harold Folley

Credit: Lorenzo Dickerson

For the last two years Folley has worked as a community organizer with the Legal Aid Justice Center's Civil Rights & Racial Justice program. For the last three years, he's worked as a facilitator with the People's Coalition, a grassroots organizing group that pushes for transparency and accountability in the criminal justice system.

Since the pandemic, Folley's been crafting a series of recommendations to the City Council in response to a 135-page study released earlier this year by the MGT Consulting Group that looked for racial disparity in a 2014-2016 chunk of data from the ACRJ. At almost every juncture, the study [found disparity with how Black inmates were treated as compared to white inmates](#) — they serve twice as many days in jail when convicted for comparable crimes with similar criminal histories and similar accompanying charges; they are 31% more likely to be found guilty for the same charge; they are more likely to be charged with accompanying crimes; they are more likely to be denied a bonded release.

TABLE 3-22. SUMMARY OF DISPARITY STUDY FINDINGS FOR ALBEMARLE COUNTY-CHARLOTTESVILLE – 2014 THROUGH 2016, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

	RESEARCH QUESTIONS	EVIDENCE OF RACE-BASED DISPARITY?
1	Was there a relationship between race of the arrestee/defendant and the "seriousness" of the "most serious" violation with which he/she was charged?	Yes
2	Was there a relationship between defendant's race and the total number of companion charges associated with the most serious arrest charge?	Yes
3	Pending further adjudication of a given case, was there a relationship between a defendant's race and bail-bond/release decisions and decisions to hold defendants in confinement without bond?	Yes
4	Was there a relationship between a defendant's "Length of Stay" in Albemarle-Charlottesville Regional Jail and the defendant's race?	Yes
5	Was there a relationship between a defendant's race and guilty vs. not guilty case outcomes?	Yes
6	For individuals who were sentenced for a crime, was there a relationship between the defendant's race and the duration of their sentence?	Yes*
7	For individuals who were sentenced for a crime, was there a relationship between the defendant's race and the duration of their actual time-served?	No

*For African American females.

Credit: MGT Consulting Group

The study showed what happens to people after they are charged, convicted and incarcerated, but Folley

The study showed what happens to people after they are charged, convicted and incarcerated, but Folley wants to know about the front-end — what about the American legacy of policing, and criminalizing race and economics?

There are multiple points along the criminal justice system where the discretion of law enforcement officials is key — police, magistrates, commonwealth attorneys, judges, probation officers — they all have leeway to make a range of decisions, inevitably informed by their worldview. But officials who oversee many of these critical junction points did not provide the research team with data.

“That’s the problem, the first contact in the criminal justice system is the police department,” said Folley.

In 2016, however, a [city-funded study](#) of the juvenile criminal justice system revealed [significant levels of racial disproportionality](#). Black children were reported, arrested, placed on probation, sent to court, and stopped and frisked more often than white kids.

To shed more light on how police-level interactions contribute to the racial disparity and disproportionality in the criminal justice system, the University of Virginia Equity Center’s Michele Claibourn and Sam Powers created a new website and map for the “Determined” series. With Charlottesville Police Department data from 2012-2014 and 2016-2017 gathered through Freedom of Information Act requests over the years from attorney Jeff Fogel, the site details the racial disproportionality that exists when police stop residents on the street.

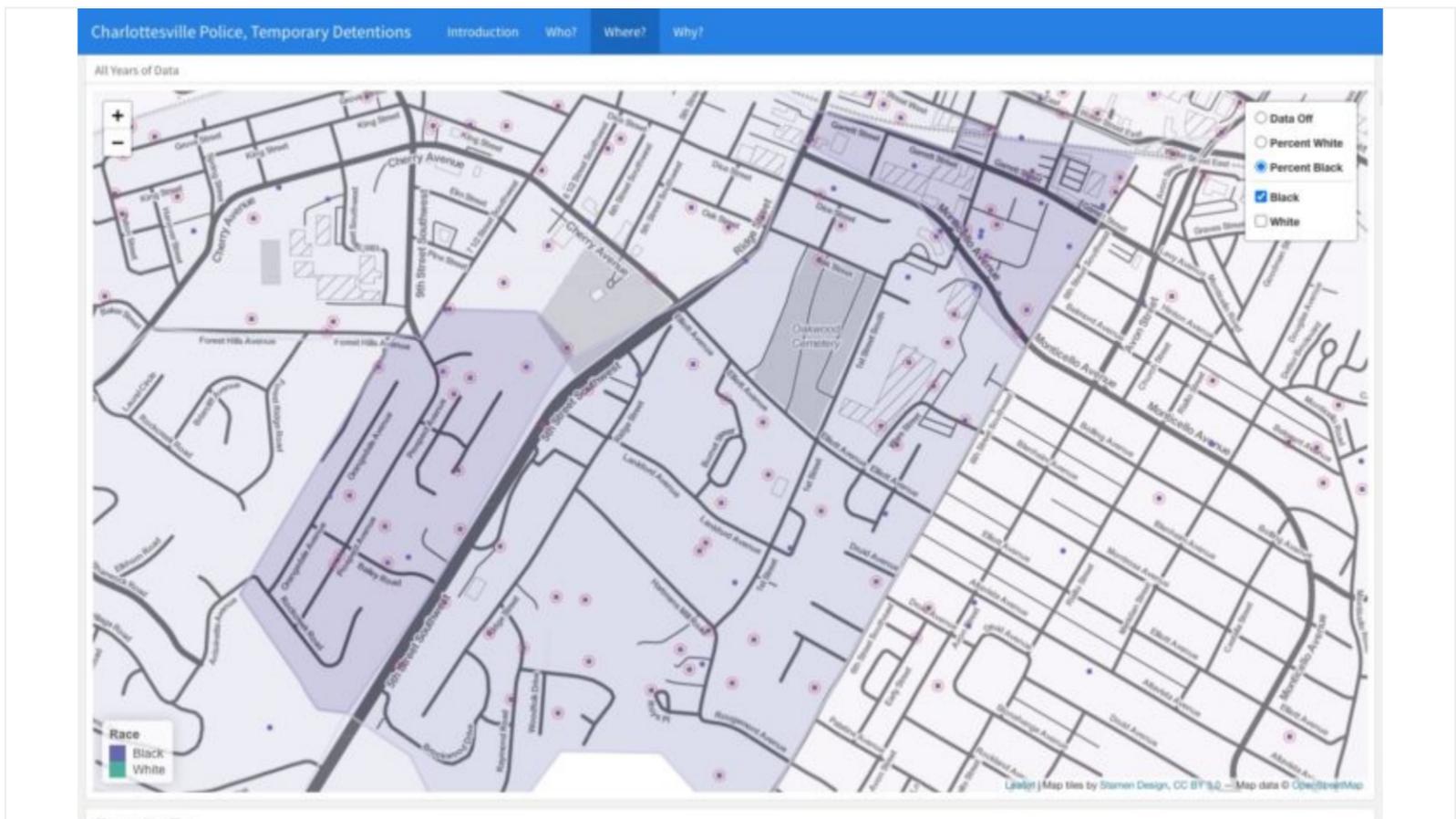
The Equity Center analysis found that police conduct an average of 11.9 stops per month, and that 65% of these stops result in a search or frisk. Racially, it found that for every two white residents police stopped, they stopped five Black residents.



Credit: UVA's Equity Center

The data are reliably broken down between only Black and white residents — no other races or ethnicities. When Charlottesville’s total population is similarly broken down, removing all others, Black residents make up 21.2% and white residents 78.8%, according to the U.S. Census. But, according to the Equity Center analysis, Black people made up 68.3% of the people police stopped without frisking or searching them, and 72.4% of those they stopped and frisked — nearly four times what is racially proportionate. The site details the reasons that police cited for the stops as well, careful to stipulate that the nature of a stop does not mean a crime has been committed, nor an arrest made.

The data speak to a reality Black residents have long relayed, that their communities are over-policed. In the Orangedale and Prospect neighborhood, where 57% of the population is Black and life expectancy is 6.2 years less than that of white residents a mile away — Black residents make up 77.2% of the people police stopped.

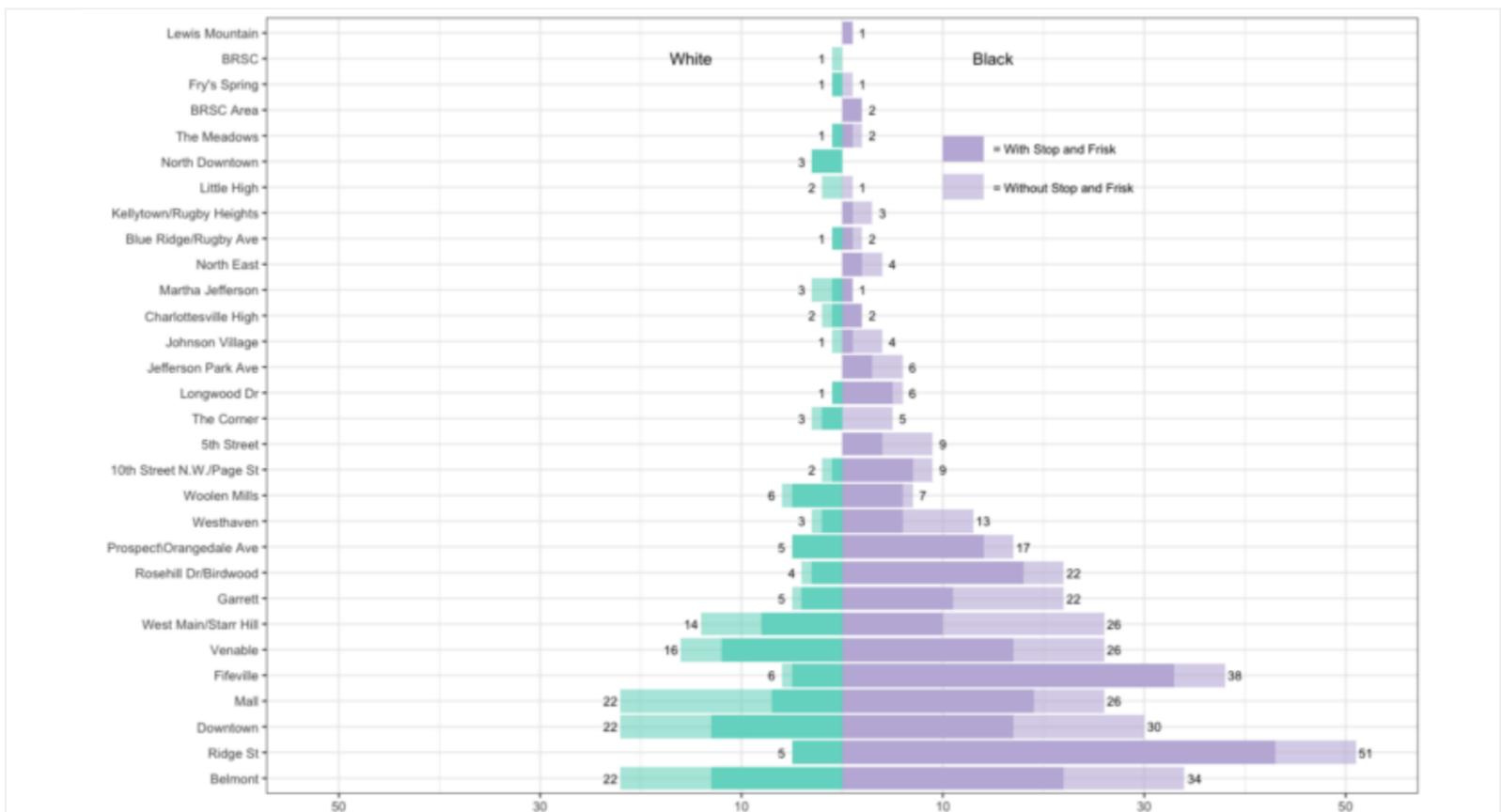


Credit: UVA's Equity Center

In the Ridge Street area, which includes the Sixth Street and South First Street public housing neighborhoods along with Friendship Court, 40% of the population is Black and life expectancy 8.9 years less than nearby white neighborhoods. There, Black people made up 91% of the people police stopped — 51 of the 56 stops. In the Locust Grove and Martha Jefferson neighborhoods, where 90% of the current population is white, police stopped people just three times over the same time period: two white, one Black. This means that police stopped people in these white neighborhoods, which historically contained racist covenants preventing Black people from living there, more than 19 times less than in the Ridge Street neighborhood a half-mile away. This pattern holds true for other historically racially restricted neighborhoods as well: Fry's Spring, North Downtown, Little High, Rugby, Jefferson Park Avenue, and more.

To explore the Equity Center's stop and frisk data analysis and map, click below.

Charlottesville Police, Temporary Detentions
 Credit: University of Virginia Equity Center



Credit: UVA's Equity Center

The MGT Consulting Group study strongly recommended the formation of a “fully functioning, independent” Civilian Review Board (CRB). Earlier this year, City Council approved an initial CRB, [which has gone through many trials to get this far](#) but stopped short of granting it investigative reach or the disciplinary power advocates wanted. Folley said he’s holding out hope because the council funded it with \$150,000 in the recently passed fiscal year 2021 budget, and incoming CRB members can redraft the groups bylaws, potentially opening the door for more authority later this year.

But beyond a CRB, the racial disparity report’s first recommendation was to fund re-entry programs, like Home to Hope, to assist people coming home “with housing, education and job training so those labeled as ‘criminals’ can realistically obtain higher-paying jobs and viable, rewarding career paths.”

And while any future data from the police department, magistrates and courts will surely be the ultimate lens of how personal racial bias exists in each areas, the report highlights what sociologist Joe Feagin called, “indirect institutional discrimination” — the laws, public policies and procedures enforced by law enforcement that appear to be race-neutral in their language, but which are racist in practice.

“I just hope we can make more change”

As uprisings, marches and protests have erupted through the country in the wake of George Floyd’s murder in Minneapolis, Whitmore Merrick has watched closely, looking for ways that greater systemic shifts might occur. “I feel there’s so much overwhelming pain,” he said. “I just hope we can make more change.”

As someone with a felony conviction, Merrick said he’s felt disregarded by many decision-makers over the years. So he finds hope when, like earlier this week, he gets to talk with someone like Democratic Del. Sally Hudson. He told her he’d like to see three significant changes from the state.

Merrick wants an easy way for people who have served their sentenced time to have the chance to expunge their records. He also wants a way to ensure that drug-related convictions don’t prevent people from accessing government funded benefits, such as housing or financial aid for school. And his last big push is to ease child support requirements for fathers while they’re incarcerated. All three of these have a bevy of ripple effects, he said, that cost the greater society, all in an attempt to continue punishing individuals already being punished.

Hudson too relishes opportunities like these to talk to people like Merrick who are on the ground doing the hard work. “You don’t have the governor’s staff in your cell phone, but I do,” said Hudson. “My job is to be a funnel for those voices in the community.”

Merrick’s also had positive conversations with the city and county commonwealth’s attorneys and the local sheriff’s offices about making significant changes and incorporating Home to Hope into their network of solutions for those facing charges.

“I speak to the people,” said Merrick. “So to be able to pass that on and to have those conversations with the people able to make change, that gives me hope.”

In early April, Hudson and 16 other delegates [penned a four-page letter](#) to Gov. Ralph Northam, calling his attention to the more than 57,000 incarcerated Virginians — 58% of whom are Black. The lawmakers asked Northam to release children held by the Department of Juvenile Justice, as well as adult prisoners through geriatric parole, clemency and the power of the pulpit. He should call on commonwealth’s attorneys to reconsider bond and release all eligible pre-trial prisoners, nearly half of the state’s jail population. To date, the state has [released only about 200 people](#) in response to the pandemic.

Instead, prisoner release has fallen to local leaders. Since March 17, Folley and a team of activists and local

instead, prisoner release has fallen to local leaders. Since March 17, Folley and a team of activists and local law enforcement officials have worked to figure out how to reduce the number of people police arrest and the number of people being evicted from housing while increasing the number of people being released from jail.

“It’s a deathtrap for people who are incarcerated,” said Folley. “Folks in jail don’t come out and get COVID, people who work in jail bring it in with them.”

He’s still working to get the last eligible people, about a dozen inmates, out of the ACRJ, he said. He asked UVA to temporarily house them in some of its empty dormitories, but they said no, adding that they needed to be renovated instead, he said.

“Voters get lost in the crossfire”

At the core of much of the structural and systemic racism occurring throughout the state, said Hudson, is a very strong governance tension between where the state should step in — by setting the tone or providing resources or guidance — and where it should step back and grant more authority to local governments.

Localities like Charlottesville are clamoring for change — whether it’s taking down Jim Crow-era statues, or tasking a CRB with subpoena power, or revamping its affordable housing strategy — but the [Dillon Rule](#) says localities can only do what the state expressly says it can. Hudson said this is “maddening” for those who want things to change. “But people who want to preserve the status quo love those binds because it lets them off the hook,” she said. “They say, ‘I would if I could, but I can’t, so I won’t.’”

For instance, localities want law enforcement to stop criminalizing poverty and over-policing Black people, but a significant part of over-policing, and the resulting racial disparity, stems from counties and cities raising money through the fines and fees that result from those policies, said Hudson, adding that this comes, in-part, from a lack of state incentives and funding.

Or, take sheriffs and commonwealth’s attorneys — two of the major decision-points within the criminal justice system. Both positions are required, under the state constitution, to be elected to office. This strongly encourages these officials to act as extensions of the political parties, said Hudson. “It concedes from the outset that justice is a political tool,” she said.

This structure finds its roots in the 1902 constitution. The same constitution, written by white men, which codified a poll tax to vote, and implemented literacy and property requirements, reducing the more than 146,000 eligible Black voters to less than 15,000 the next year.

In 1971, the state constitution was rewritten and re-ratified, supposing to be the first colorblind constitution. But in it, these locally elected law enforcement positions were more firmly cemented as, again, local governments depended on them for revenue to operate. “We really do have justice by geography, and it all sits in the hands of a handful of local elected officials who have enormous discretion to do what they want,” said Hudson.

Because the General Assembly is normally only in session for two months each year, it makes it difficult to keep pace with the amount of authority and discretion localities are increasingly wanting, though they make efforts. Earlier this year, Northam signed a bill that Hudson supported. It gives school principals the discretion to not report students for misdemeanor offenses.

“Everybody else in the justice system has discretion, teachers are just asking for the discretion to decide what’s best based on what they’ve seen,” said Hudson.

Many Republicans opposed the measure, saying that some forms of sexual violence against girls could be considered misdemeanors and should be required to be reported. Hudson pushed back, saying this was weaponizing people’s biased fear. She pointed to the thousands of times white people have attempted to justify lynching Black men by citing unproven, and often false, accusations of sexual assault. With this new discretion, she said, there are more opportunities to intervene at a local school level, to avoid letting people’s racism and bias determine Black children’s outcomes, sending them into the criminal justice

people's racism and bias determine Black children's outcomes, sending them into the criminal justice system.

All of this back and forth over who exactly has the authority and power to change these hidden and seemingly small, but practically huge, decision points, can be confusing, Hudson said, which further perpetuates existing racist systems.

"Voters get lost in the crossfire," she said. "They have a hard time keeping track of who has power over what so they can hold the right people accountable. That confusion favors inaction which again preserves the status quo."

"It's going to be beyond powerful"

What Hudson is proposing, giving localities more autonomy with state backing and funding, is in some ways a scaled-up version of what the pandemic has brought for Charlottesville's most determined communities — whether its access to jobs, mutual aid, food equity, affordable housing, anti-displacement strategies or philanthropic models based in solidarity not charity — people are prioritizing taking instruction from those on the ground, people who are going through the struggle themselves, and then supporting them, through resources or advocacy, to craft solutions.

Recently Hudson said she's seen an increasing willingness in the government to focus on the economic inequality involved in criminalizing poverty, but not the racist part. She points to recently passed measures that decriminalize marijuana possession, or the increased threshold for grand larceny, or the waiving of home electronic ankle monitors fees.

But these measures are half-hearted, she said. If, instead of jail time, people possessing marijuana are fined, "it means it's legal, but only for rich people for whom that penalty is not burdensome," said Hudson. If a charge doesn't have jail time attached to it, people aren't required to be given a public defender, she said. "It lets us deal with the financial component of it, but not with the racist part, which is that Black kids are still getting stopped because they're over-policed," said Hudson.

Folley said the pandemic has opened the window for defining what a new "normal" can be. "Now we know that all this stuff we've been fighting for is possible, the only way we go back is if we get amnesia," said Folley. "We can't let this momentum die out. What happens after the marching?"

Hudson said the proof of a community moving towards anti-racist policies and practices will be in the budget. During the Great Migration, when more than 6 million African Americans moved north from southern states, recent research by Princeton University's [Ellora Derenoncourt](#) shows that the only increase in spending on public services for the major destination cities was in police. To undo that legacy, Hudson said, Virginia needs to be intentional.

"We now understand collectively that when you have enormous historic debts to be paid you can't make things fair without proactively righting racist wrongs," said Hudson. "Taxes are an investment in each other, and in the society we all want to live in together."

This week, in a government-wide move to reassess the Charlottesville City Schools' partnership with the Charlottesville Police Department (CPD), officials announced a community-oriented process to reassess what safe schools look like, specifically without law enforcement. To back that process, and the resulting safe schools model, officials pledged the \$300,000 in funding it was using to pay CPD.

Similarly, in the recently approved fiscal year 2021 budget, councilors voted to fund Home to Hope with \$350,000, though this was \$55,000 less than Walker wanted. And Hollie Lee, the city's chief of workforce development strategies, who has helped build the Home to Hope program, said that the city is exploring moving some of housing-related funds into the program's budget, to help participants find better homes.

Former Councilor Wes Bellamy, towards the end of his four years on City Council, reflected on the promise

former councilor Yves Bellamy, towards the end of his four years on city council, reflected on the promise that Home to Hope and similarly structured programs will have on Charlottesville. “I think we don’t all quite get it right now,” said Bellamy. “We don’t understand the power. And I mean, we as a community. It’s going to be beyond powerful. It swings the pendulum in another direction and one towards true equity.” Washington sees the vision. In the future, she pictures the group of peer navigators speaking across the country, at a convention perhaps, on a stage, behind podiums. People from all over will come hear how Home to Hope works, she said. “Because they want to incorporate this type of program into their re-entry, into their system,” she said.

And Merrick too, he sees it. “We want to make a movement,” he said. “We want people to see us when we’re not together.”

Together, they’ve built a home for hope.

[***Back to Determined.***](#)

[***Previous story: Determined to Thrive***](#)

[***Next story: Epilogue***](#)



WRITTEN BY:
Jordy Yager

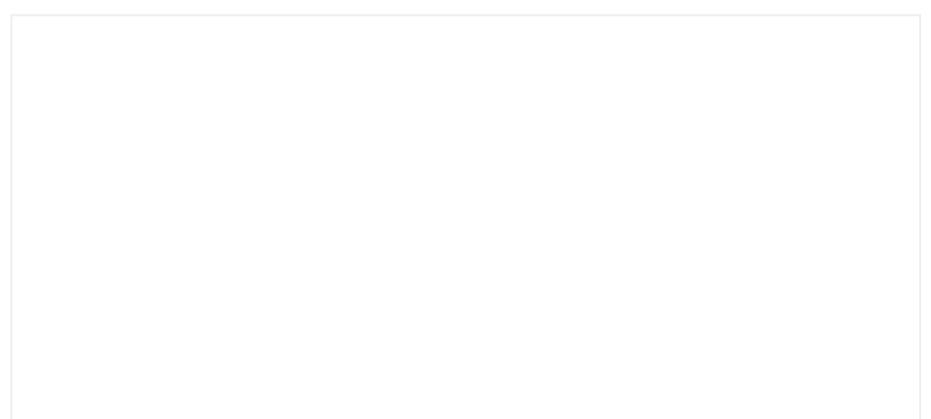
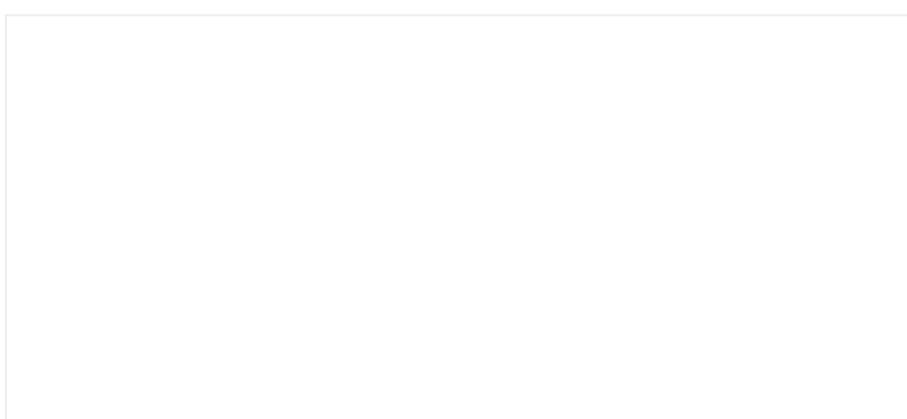
Jordy Yager is a freelance journalist raised in Charlottesville, who earned his M.A. in journalism from Boston University. For six years, he covered Congress and the federal government in Washington, D.C.. Since 2013, Jordy has focused on issues of equity and racial disparities in his hometown.

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Determined Epilogue: A Conversation with Charlottesville Mayor Nikuyah Walker

Friday, June 19, 2020, at 7:30 AM 16 MIN READ



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In closing the *Determined* series, we wanted readers to hear from Mayor Nikuyah Walker. Born and raised in Charlottesville, and having devoted much of her life to serving others, Walker is in a unique position that affords her daily conversations with the region's most determined residents, and those who are often not prioritized by our systems and structures. She is also the only Black official on either the City Council or the Board of Supervisors.

In this conversation, we discuss many of the Social Determinants of Health that the series investigated — from the role of employers and the role of the University of Virginia, to that of affordable housing, and why she votes 'No' on some development projects. Walker also shares her thoughts behind the recently raised topic of removing school resources officers from Charlottesville City Schools, speaking about the broader role of education, and where it can better serve Black students.

And finally, she speaks about the City's responsibility to continue shifting towards greater racial and economic equity, and the personal cost that comes with moving systems that have been entrenched and engrained in our communities for generations.

DETERMINED

This series uses the Social Determinants of Health as a foundational framework and guideposts to bring you stories of how the COVID-19 crisis has impacted some of our African American communities.

JY: When thinking about racial and economic equity in employment, what can be done to desegregate and improve the job force?

NW: I don't know if that conversation starts with employment. I think it's hard to get [racial and economic equity] if you're an employee, especially if you work for people who meet their needs first. And I know that doesn't do anything about larger employers like the City of Charlottesville or the University of Virginia, and the fact we need to pay a just wage, which is not \$15 an hour either.

This is about valuing what people do on a daily basis. You also have to talk about what our school system is preparing people for. I think we see that the factory worker assembly-line type of output is not working. It's not the economy we have today. It has failed kids for so long.

So then you get to a world that's built on technology. We know people can figure out any technology placed in their hands, so I think we have to reverse how we think about that — if we can place a phone or a gaming system in someone's hands and they figure it out with no problem, then what if we put the pieces of the technology in their hands, coupled with apprentice-style programs, could they also then build and create the game?

I think until we switch to that way of thinking, we're going to have this level of inequality that we have in the job market. I mean we're just failing everyone at every level. I think it starts with being a business owner and education.

JY: For business owners who have to hire employees, how can they better show that they value their employees?

NW: Everything from time-off to benefits, what are we offering you to work here? They need life insurance, health insurance, paid time-off, and vacation time. These are all things I have worked on since I've been at the City, to make sure people know we value them.

I think until we switch to that way of thinking, we're going to have this level of inequality that we have in the job market.

Nikuyah Walker

Charlottesville Mayor

Last month I proposed we allow department directors to outline the details, but that once a month, we would allow 25% of the workforce to get a week off. That didn't go well. But I was able to get employees two days off. So we did that on May 11 and May 22. One of those ended up being a 4-day weekend and the other was a 3-day weekend.

Part of the feedback I received, when I was advocating for that, was people saying, "But people are already home." So there was a lack of understanding that even if people are home, they're still working. And they're not home with their feet up. They're home trying to educate their kids, keep their job, and help people who are in crisis. And they haven't even been afforded the opportunity to provide for their own families. And we have the resources at the City-level to be able to implement additional benefits to help people, to provide mental health assistance during a crisis, but other businesses probably don't have that.

At the beginning of this pandemic there were businesses that, without the Payroll Protection Program, their first immediate thought was to lay people off. I'm not sure if they had reserves or not, but from what I saw there are major issues with them not having three to six months of business expenses.

This was a major crisis, so it's not surprising, but it's something people often say about low-income people: 'Why do they overspend?' But what we saw with the requests coming into the City from businesses, is that most people seem to be having this problem. And so I wonder if there is even a real understanding of the fiscal sustainability and management that's needed to be able to give your employees those types of benefits that will help them.

JY: Do you think of the City government as a model for how private sector businesses and nonprofits should treat their employees?

NW: I don't think we're a model yet. But I think anyone can treat people really well, and then become a model for someone else who's watching them. I would like for the City to be a model, but we're not there at this time.

JY: Where does that inability to treat employees considerately and responsibly come from?

NW: It's probably not intentional. I think when you're talking about small businesses they probably don't have the revenue coming in, but I don't know.

When I'm talking about education and how we transform that system, I think what we value is important. If you can start training someone to be an electrician, they will always be able to take care of themselves. If you can train someone to be a plumber, they can always take care of themselves.

The transformation also requires asking people what they are interested in, and you don't do anything differently if they say, "I want to be a mechanic," or if they say, "I want to be an attorney." You prepare them so that even if they're becoming the plumber or mechanic they said they wanted to be, that they are able to be an attorney if they choose to.



Charlottesville Mayor Nikuyah Walker

Credit: Ézé Amos/Charlottesville Tomorrow

And right now, because of the education gaps that have been created, we don't have those types of services in place for our kids. Just because you go to a 4-year institution shouldn't mean it's more valued. There was a time when trades were paying more than some 4-year degrees earned hourly, but people were told that they shouldn't or couldn't go into that line of work, because it wasn't valued by society. And that creates a situation where people say, "Well if I can't do this, I definitely can't see myself there." And then nothing happens in their life, and the system is to blame for that.

JY: How does that system start to change?

NW: You have to have the resources — which we do, so that's not a problem — but I think you have to be intentional about undoing the systems.

I'm not so sure our Black and Brown kids can learn in a system that wasn't created for them. And people want them in these systems because they bring in revenue, but I don't know if they're really valued or offered the opportunities to really learn and unlock the things that are hidden in their minds.

JY: What are your thoughts on pulling School Resource Officers (SROs) out of schools?

NW: There are so many layers to pulling SROs out of schools. Until we truly fix the issues of poverty, there will be disruptions in schools that are caused by children who are in pain. We already have every social worker in town going into the schools or serving the same kids that SROs would be in the schools for. SROs aren't in there just to keep people out who would do mass shootings — that's an afterthought.

So now we have all of these people making demands, and they're not really thinking through the demands. In my perfect world, there are no police in schools, there are no police anywhere. But that's not the world we live in. So how do we make sure our kids get what they need?

That part is missing from the conversations that I've been a part of, and it's been missing for years. And that means we just failed our kids on a bigger level.

JY: What are other things that would help the issues that SROs were put there to

solve?

NW: I think what would be better are schools built on a foundation of cultural integrity, which public schools are not. Black kids who go to African-centric schools, where they learn about their history, they are not learning to love white culture or how to participate in white supremacy or how to be underemployed and provide services in rich communities like Charlottesville. Those students do better.

There is a public and a private experience in our public schools now, and so long as some people are comfortable with that, things will continue along those lines. If you walk into a school and you have the majority of advanced placement, dual-enrollment, and honors courses full of white kids, you have a private school system within the public school system. You're failing a large percentage of the population. So even if they can walk past each other in the hallways while changing classes or going to lunch, they are not in this same school system.

People need significant amounts of resources so that we don't end up with a lottery where 50 kids out of the 4,000 that we're failing can come to this other school. Rather, you provide those resources and opportunities so anyone can go to these schools. But we don't have these structures in Charlottesville, and we probably don't have the people who could create them.

One of the thoughts we had when City of Promise started was to start a school for the kids. We would compare the data from our school to the data from the public schools, and because of the success we were sure we'd have, it would force the public schools to do something different. We would have the same kids from the same neighborhoods and we would be able to educate them and give them what they need. And so we'd be destroying the whole notion that, "People only do as well as they can do." I hope that's still possible, I'm very interested in it. It really comes down to state and federal funding.

JY: How are you feeling about the state of affordable housing here?

NW: Nothing has been resolved at this moment. We have some plans in place, but we haven't fixed anything yet. We're hoping to fix it, and I believe we would have started construction by now on Crescent Halls and South First Street if it hadn't been for COVID-19.

What I'm hoping that COVID might do — since we need it to do something good because it's been so destructive — is to make landlords possibly see for the first time that they don't have this guaranteed source of income with UVA students, and that it may be beneficial for them to rent to local families. Those types of changes are necessary so people can live within the city limits and right now I think COVID-19 gives us an opportunity to have landlords who have forever thought that, "I have this guaranteed source of income," to maybe reconsider that. It's probably the only shot we will ever get to reverse that tide.

JY: Is that a conversation that's happening?

NW: I'm having it. I've had it with our housing specialist and with Home to Hope staff so they can add it to their pitch when they're talking to landlords. I have not picked up the phone and called the landlords to say 'Hey' but I've been having this conversation with the City's housing program coordinator too. I know

So now we have all of these people making demands, and

they're not really thinking through the demands.

Nikuyah Walker

Charlottesville Mayor

Black kids who go to African-centric schools, where they learn about their history, they are not learning to love white culture or how to participate in white supremacy or how to be underemployed and provide services in rich communities like Charlottesville. Those students do better.

Nikuyah Walker

Charlottesville Mayor

say, they, but I've been having this conversation with the city's housing program coordinator too. I know that one of the potential areas we're thinking of funding is to provide rental assistance directly to the landlords on behalf of people. I'm still debating how I feel about that.

JY: Why do you sometimes vote "no" on developments that do not promise to build units priced below 60% AMI, or those that pledge to price only 10-15% of their units below market-rate?

NW: If you truly understand that there used to be more Black people here than white people, and now there are more white people here, and you start having that conversation about "Why?" and then you say, "I'm going to build 100 units here, 400 units there, 30 units here," — and every time you say, "I'll give 1-3, or 1-5 affordable units," I don't think the math adds up.

You will always have a greater percentage of the white and higher-income people in the area because they are attracted to the area, so if you're even pretending that you're committed to affordable housing, then I'm going to stretch you a little bit there and I'm going to ask you to prove your commitment to affordable housing is authentic.

If you can only build 20 units by-right, and you come and say, "Oh, I want to build 100 units on this," based on the same laws that you want me to follow, the laws that you're now trying to figure out a way to circumvent, I can, in my world, ask you for something else. You want something to now apply to you that doesn't apply to you by-right, so I'm going to ask you to include more affordable housing.

I don't think it really works though, because people don't want people to live in these buildings or in these homes or in these neighborhoods, so we still have that issue. You're basically pleading for someone to believe in affordable housing where you're going to set them up potentially for failure because they're going to be living amongst people who don't find any value in them. So that's another thing that I'm often thinking about: even if we get someone who makes 50% AMI into 600 West Main, are they going to be happy in that building? The answer is: probably not.

So those are the types of things that I'm thinking about when people are offering crumbs. I know they are benefiting from building more units, or they wouldn't be asking us for an SUP. If it worked out for them, in their board rooms and around their round tables, they wouldn't come before us and ask, especially since they have to deal with the headache of me.

JY: Where does UVA fit into this conversation, in terms of being a better neighbor?

NW: One thing I hope that doesn't get lost in this pandemic is UVA's commitment to workforce and hopefully low-income housing — the 1,000-1,500 units they promised to build over the next 10 years. I hope we get more than that, because they owe more than that, but I could see them feeling the need to come out of the economic crisis we're in, and will be in for a while, and say that it will take them 10 years to rebuild.

As long as the resources remain with the people who currently have them, or the people who make decisions about the resources but who don't really get it, or only think they get it, we have a problem.

Nikuyah Walker

Charlottesville Mayor

If people are putting equity issues on hold until they feel they've arrived back at whatever status they were previously at, then that means we'll have another decade and another generation of people who won't have access to resources they need to transform their lives. That's one thing I'm most concerned about, because those conversations are happening in the city and there's a complete disregard for people's lives. The common themes throughout the conversations are, "How can we stay afloat?"

Even at the City, we have pots of money we haven't touched. While no one wants to use every dollar that they have, and we understand it's important to have reserves, it's also important to understand that if people are in a worse situation than they are in right now, which is already pretty bad — it's a horrible situation, the poverty levels, the miseducation, the current health outcomes — if we allow them to become worse in an attempt to survive the pandemic, which we're going to survive anyway, then I think we will have failed people. And I think that's what UVA might do. They might say, "We have to get back whatever

we feel we lost,” and they’ll lose sight of all the things they said they would do to become not just great but good — nobody told them they were great in the first place.

JY: A big takeaway for me in reporting the *Determined* series was seeing how well programs and efforts work when the people who are most impacted and most affected are put in positions of power, and in decision-making roles. And yet, a lot of people are wedded to the status quo, which does not always prize those skills and expertise as much. How do you deal with that?

NW: That’s something that I’m struggling with now. I really think I’m wasting my time, because even people who think they get it, really don’t get it. They don’t know how to really create the solutions to the problems we’re facing. They bring in what they think they know to be true, but they don’t know how to unpack that and question themselves about why they feel the way they do. And those individuals are usually the people with the power, and are either the resources themselves, or are the access points for the resources, so they won’t destroy the foundation they created, and they won’t get out of your way so you can create new foundations. And if you don’t change that part of the equation, of who has access to resources, then you are dependent upon people who have this savior-type mentality. So I don’t know, I really don’t know.

I appreciate being in this world, but I don’t know if I’m supposed to be here at this time. I’m way ahead of something, and being in this position on Council has shown me that in a way that nothing else ever has. As long as the resources remain with the people who currently have them, or the people who make decisions about the resources but who don’t really get it, or only think they get it, we have a problem. I don’t know how to redirect that because I’m only one person, and I’m exhausted.

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