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Summer math academy aimed at preparing Black students, closing achievement gap

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A math academy for young Black boys this summer aims to not only help the young men prepare for advanced math classes but close the widening achievement gap between the races in local schools.

M-Cubed, which stands for “Math, Men and Mission,” is dedicated to help middle school students from Charlottesville and Albemarle County achieve higher math class placements once they reach high school, according the group organizing the program, 100 Black Men of Central Virginia.

The nonprofit group’s mission is to “advocate for the elimination of the achievement gap of African American males in grades K -12,” according to its website.

About 100 invitations were sent out this past year, Daniel Fairley, chapter president of 100 Black Men of Central Virginia, told The Daily Progress. Students are recommended by the school systems.

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“We sent out about 100 invitations this past year and we should have around 35 to 40 students that are participating in the program during the summer Academy,” Fairley said.



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The program is open to fifth through eighth grade students. It specifically seeks out students who are going to be enrolled in pre-algebra or algebra in the next year. The criteria is based on Standards of Learning test scores or ability to excel in math for students who cannot be enrolled in those courses.

“We work closely with the Charlottesville City Schools and Albemarle County schools to find students that fit that criteria,” Fairley said.

Located at Albemarle County’s Community Lab School, the program aims to fill the educational and social development gaps in students caused during the recent pandemic, according to the 100 Black Men chapter.

According to a Virginia Department of Education audit, Black and Hispanic students’ Standards of Learning test scores were 10% below the states average in their peer group as of March 2023.

The curriculum taught at the M-Cubed summer program includes a rigorous algebra intensive strategy and is tailored to the learning styles of Black boys. It is taught by veteran instructors from local schools.



M-Cubed was developed in 2009 by Bernard Hairston, a retired Albemarle County Public Schools assistant superintendent for school community empowerment. The program looks to “address systemic obstacles that often deter black students from enrolling in advanced mathematics courses,” according to a statement from 100 Black Men of Central Virginia.

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'Incubator of brotherhood': M-Cubed summer academy is about more than just mathematics

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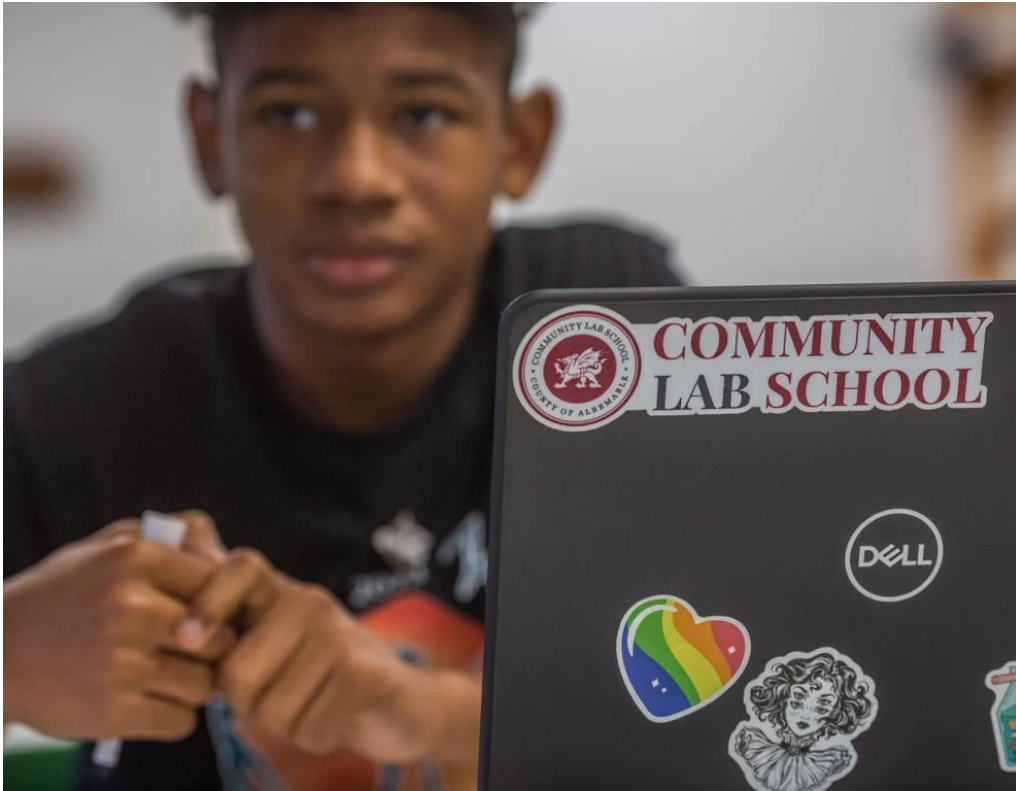
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R.J. Gatling was transitioning into the fifth grade at Baker-Butler Elementary School when his principal approached him about an opportunity in the M-Cubed program.

M-Cubed, which stands for “Math, Men and Mission,” is dedicated to helping middle school students from Charlottesville and Albemarle County achieve higher math class placements when they reach high school, according to the nonprofit group behind the summer program: 100 Black Men of Central Virginia.



A seventh grade student in class in M-Cubed Academy at Community Lab School in Charlottesville on Wednesday, June 21, 2023.
CAL CARY, THE DAILY PROGRESS

“I always had an interest in math, but I always struggled in math, and then I was always the worst public speaker,” Gatling said. “I was too shy even to tell the teacher my name when I first came here.”

Through the program, Gatling learned the basics of what he’d later learn in his math classes the following year. His understanding of math and public speaking became better each year.

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“I’d always be shaking, I’d be trembling in my voice, but I even gave speeches during the closing ceremonies here,” Gatling said. “I’ve given speeches at my church and other school events before, and that’s all in part thanks to the wonderful program that they have here.”



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Gatling attended the program until he was no longer eligible. Though, he found a way to stay connected by becoming a teaching assistant.

“I really love the camp, and I was honestly sad I couldn’t do it again in ninth grade, so I wanted to come back and help in any way I really could,” Gatling said. “Just because they poured so much into me and I just wanted to give back in any way I could.”

It’s that sense of brotherhood that Daniel Fairley II, president of 100 Black Men of Central Virginia, said is just as critical to M-Cubed’s mission as the critical math skills it teaches students.

“We’re trying to prepare them as much as we can with creating an atmosphere like an incubator of brotherhood here,” Fairley said.

Gatling is now studying computer science at Hampton University, and said he met one of his best friends during his first year at the M-Cubed camp.

The start of the pathway to developing the summer program happened after a teacher workshop where two Black men were invited, an elementary school principal and a school board member, according to Bernard Hairston, founder of M-Cubed. The two men held conversations with students centered around their experiences of being a Black man in a classroom environment.



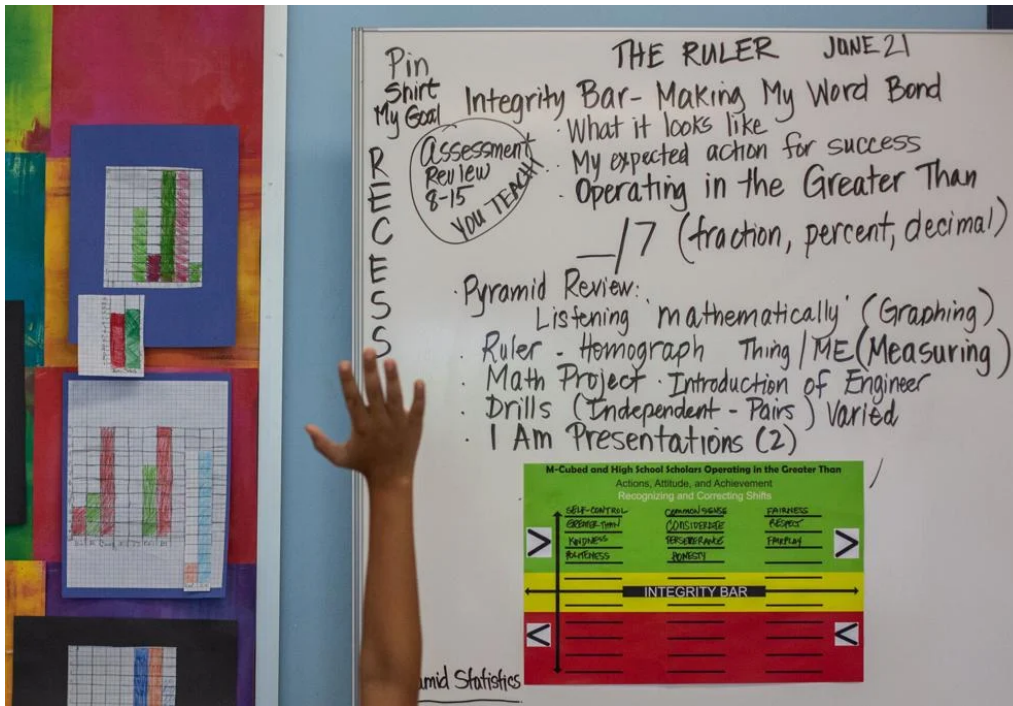
Fourth grade teacher Lateefah Muhammad works with a student in the M-Cubed Academy at the Community Lab School in Charlottesville on Wednesday, June 21, 2023.

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A fourth grade student raises his hand in the M-Cubed Academy at the Community Lab School in Charlottesville on Wednesday, June 21, 2023.
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“I saw that as an opportunity, a crack in the door, and I said there’s a whole lot we can do,” Hairston said.

Hairston and others worked together to develop a Central Virginia chapter of the nonprofit, 100 Black Men of America, to begin work on the summer program.

After being approved and putting structures in place to start their local chapter, the chapter initiated two programs that year.



Daniel Fairley II, president of 100 Black Men of Central Virginia, works with seventh-grade students in the M-Cubed Academy in Charlottesville on Wednesday, June 21, 2023.

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The first program was a high school scholars program. That program recognized Black students with a 3.0 grade point average from the nine Central Virginia high schools in grades nine through 12, according to Hairston. A celebration was held as

part of the program, and in attendance was Rick Turner, former president of the NAACP Albemarle-Charlottesville chapter.



LOCAL EDUCATION

Summer math academy aimed at preparing Black students, closing achievement gap

Faith Redd

“He walked up to me and said, ‘Bernard, this is the best thing that I’ve experienced in Charlottesville, Virginia, in all my life, seeing this many Black young boys come together and present themselves in such a professional way,’” Hairston said. “He had tears coming into his eyes.”

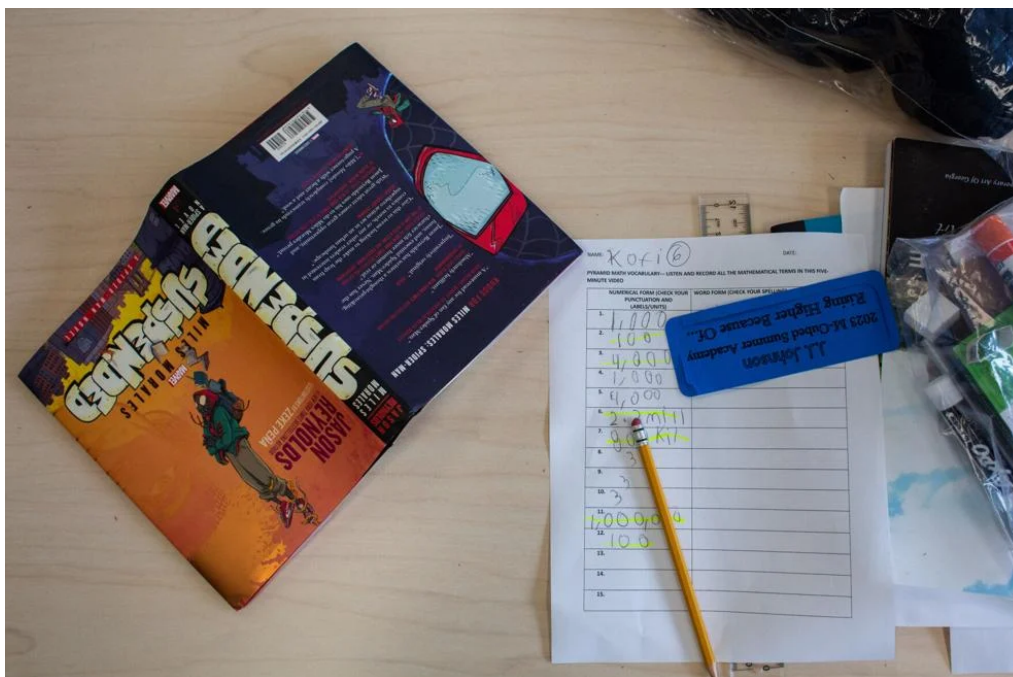


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The local chapter of 100 Black Men of America advocates for eliminating achievement gaps in Black students in grade school.

“We looked at the data, and the data was just horrible,” Hairston said.



The book "Suspended" sits on a desk in Lateefah Muhammad's class in the M-Cubed Academy in Charlottesville on Wednesday, June 21, 2023. CAL CARY, THE DAILY PROGRESS

The Virginia Department of Education released a statement in March 2023 saying Black and Hispanic students' Standards of Learning test scores were 10% below the state average in their peer group, according to a divisionwide audit.

“A lot of the things that were noted in that audit report are things that we’re doing here, like teacher training for example, teaching to and through the background experiences of the students, and having strong relationships with families,” Hairston said. “Those are the things that our program has been founded on and grounded in.”

Following that celebration recognizing Black students, the second program was initiated: M-Cubed.

Students participating in M-Cubed are taught a rigorous algebra course that is intensive and tailored to the learning styles of Black boys, according to 100 Black Men of Central Virginia.



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The day-to-day of the program includes courses in reading, writing and math, and of course breakfast and lunch.



Daniel Fairley II, president of 100 Black Men of Central Virginia, and Dr. Pamela Venable, a fifth grade teacher, work with students in the M-Cubed Academy at the Community Lab School in Charlottesville on Wednesday, June 21, 2023.

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M-Cubed also offers a mentoring program.

Hairston also created a program and certification model for teachers to tackle the battle of getting instructors to “teach to the culture and background of the students,” he said.

“In my role at the executive level of the Albemarle County Public School system, I created a culturally responsive teaching program and created a certification model where they had to be certified to understand how to teach across cultures, especially with Black children, and it works, but you still have people who struggle to make a shift from teaching the way they were taught,” Hairston said. “It’s hard.”

In the early stages of planning and assembling the Central Virginia chapter of the nonprofit group and the M-Cubed program, Hairston and others gathered 12 men from the community and asked what contributed to them being successful Black men, he said.



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The common answer: a mentor.

“The follow-up with developing these young men is having committed men who are willing to work with them to reinforce the work that we do here over this two week time,” Hairston said.



Daniel Fairley II, president of 100 Black Men of Central Virginia, poses for a photo outside of the Community Lab School in Charlottesville on Wednesday, June 21, 2023.

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Gatling met his mentor in the ninth grade, he said. Through his mentor he was able to build stronger bonds with students and develop leadership and public speaking skills.

“He would take me out to do things with other students that we had just to grow more bonds, because there were students in the group that I didn’t really have a connection with, he helped introduce me to them and he also signed me up for things to get me outside of my comfort zone, like more public speaking roles,” Gatling said.

The 100 Black Men of Central Virginia chapter was awarded the National Chapter of the Year for Mentoring in 2016 and the National Chapter of the Year for Leadership and Mentoring in 2014 by the international chapter.

Hairston said he has high hopes for the future of the summer program developed in partnership between Albemarle County Public Schools, Charlottesville and the 100 Black Men of Central Virginia in 2009, he said. It was “designed to provide African American males with a solid pathway for future success through increased opportunity for rigorous coursework and consistent opportunities for mentoring.”



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“It has unlimited potential,” Hairston said “I mean because we have survived for 15 years.”

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By Faith Redd

Education Reporter



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A Stepping Stones report was recently released highlighting areas in the community that are in need of resources, and others that are doing well.

The report's data focuses on issues that include education and civic engagement, economic security and housing, and health and family stability in Albemarle and Charlottesville's youth and families. The recent report was also released with a supplemental report that breaks down some of the metrics by race.



The goal of the Stepping Stones report is to improve living conditions for Albemarle and Charlottesville's youth and families.
(Getty Images)

The goal of the Stepping Stones report is to stimulate dialogue and promote action, according to its organizers. It also aims to improve living conditions for those within the community.

"It is unfortunate, if not surprising, that we see pretty substantial racial gaps in all of the measures," Michele Claibourn, director of equitable analysis at the Equity Center, told The Daily Progress. "We're really hoping that's another way of looking at these outcomes and the well-being of our community that might promote more urgent action. Providing this racially disaggregated data is a first for this report and one that we hope to be expanding on to build it out further."

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The first Stepping Stones report was produced in 2000 by the Charlottesville/Albemarle Commission on Children and Families, according to Claibourn.

“It’s been a resource in the community for a while and it’s been updated periodically over the last couple decades, but most recently has been sustained by the City of Charlottesville Department of Human Services, with the last update in 2019, and so they wanted to generate a new one,” Claibourn said.

This year’s Stepping Stones report was created in partnership between the Equity Center at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville Department of Human Services and the University of Virginia Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy, according to a statement released by the Equity Center.

Charlottesville’s Department of Human Services provides resources and programs “that improve and support the resilience, health, and well-being of youth, families, and community organizations.”

This is the first time the UVa Equity Center has contributed to the report. The organization, which was founded in 2019, aims to serve as a model to other universities “seeking to promote equity and justice.”



One positive outcome in the report’s findings is the increase in the on-time graduation rates in Charlottesville City Schools.
(Getty Images)

The report was a way to help achieve the Equity Center’s goal, according to Claibourn. Work completed by the community and university has been “a great demonstration of the power in real partnership.”

“We’re excited to be able to bring something that is good for the community and was a learning opportunity for students, and also just an opportunity for us to build on this report because we added a new component that was trying to show some of the data broken down by race to center equity,” Claibourn said. “The city was interested in this, but we were pleased we were to add that as a novel component.”

Conversations began last fall, when Claibourn introduced the idea of allowing her public interest data ethics and practice students to help with the report, she said.

“They really did a lot of the initial work of understanding all the sources, finding new sources for metrics, writing code to gather sources so we can make it reproducible and update it more easily so other people could see exactly how it was generated, and then also doing research around the metrics to provide more context and understanding of what these were really meant to be representing,” Claibourn said.



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The material curated by the students was brought to the Equity Center to be validated and put in a coherent form, according to Claibourn. A draft of the report was brought to roughly 20 “local knowledge experts” to gather feedback and ensure the data was transparent and had undergone multiple reviews.

“It was a really great opportunity to bring it to people who are working on front lines largely with children and families since this report centers a lot of indicators around youth well-being, and who could give us more background or tell us that if we were representing something that was not quite right. It really made the report even more powerful,” Claibourn said.

The data came from a variety of sources, including many state agencies such as the Department of Education, Department of Health, Department of Justice and Department of Social Services, according to Claibourn. Other sources include the National Census and the American Community Survey. The goal was to utilize public sources available to all, but not easily accessible to all.

“Also, we really wanted to center sources that could be verified, that we would get the same answers as other people would get because part of our goal here is to have a shared understanding of how we’re doing and we feel like that’s facilitated by using transparent processes and open data so other people can check and verify,” Claibourn said.



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One positive outcome Claibourn notes in the report’s findings is the increase in the on-time graduation rates in Charlottesville City Schools.

Albemarle County Public Schools and Charlottesville City Schools on-time graduation rates sat between 93% and 94% in 2022, according to the report. This is higher than the state rate of 92%.

“One of the things that I was happy to see was the increase in on-time graduation rates over the last 20 years because again, every indicator is represented for about 20 years so we can see both where we are now and where we’re coming from,” Claibourn said.

Another success in the report Claibourn notes is a drop in the use of exclusionary suspensions in both city and county school districts.

Suspension rates in Charlottesville and Albemarle schools were above 200 per 1,000 and 100 per 1,000 students, respectively, prior to the 2009-2010 school year. Since then, suspension rates have dropped, hovering around zero in the 2020-2021 school year. When referencing this data, the report notes the hybrid learning schedules due to the COVID-19 pandemic.



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Claibourn hopes the report is used to make data-informed decisions and prioritize spaces where more urgent action is needed.

“But we also want it to be a resource for others at multiple levels like community organizations and leaders as a way of helping them target their own work,” Claibourn said. “We have a lot of nonprofits in this community doing great work and it’s a resource to support the argument for gaining more resources for their efforts.”

In previous years, Claibourn’s wishes have come true.

The Commission on Children and Families created a group focused on teen pregnancy and STD prevention after the release of a Stepping Stones report, according to Daniel Fairley II, youth opportunity coordinator for the City of Charlottesville. The initiative helped reduce rates of teen pregnancy in the mid-2000s.

“You would see the numbers start plummeting for teen pregnancy in our area that wouldn’t have happened had there not been a coalition that was built to work towards ending and minimizing teen pregnancy, and that was created because of the Stepping Stones report,” Fairley said. “People were able to see the data that teen pregnancy was rising and put a coalition together to work towards the minimization of it.”



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The teen pregnancy rate per 1,000 in Charlottesville was 9, 5 in Albemarle and 7 in the state, according to the 2018 to 2021 data in the Stepping Stones report. Rates have seen an overall declining trend since the data was first reported in 2000.

The recent report also indicates areas within the community that are still falling behind.

“Despite a lot of efforts made by both governments and nonprofits, there is this very stubborn persistence in the rate of children living in poverty,” Claibourn said. “It just truly hasn’t budged in 20 years. The fact that we haven’t been able to move that needle for decades I think should trouble us and is concerning.”

The rate of childhood poverty in 2021 in Charlottesville sits between 15% and 24%, according to the Stepping Stones Report. In Albemarle County, that same rate ranges between 7% and 12%. The city’s youth poverty rate has been consistently higher than

the states, while the county has consistently reported lower rates than the states over the years.

The supplemental report finds that the highest percentage of youth living below the poverty line throughout the state are Black.

Though the city and county are still experiencing these community issues, the report creates a space and opportunity for government agencies and nonprofit organizations to collaborate and “move the needle” on issues that need to be addressed, according to Fairley.

Harnessing the Stepping Stones data allows the community to have a benchmark. It enables organizations and state agencies to revisit areas that were thought to be doing well, or not doing well, to take further action and allocate resources.

“It’s focused on our students and kids in our community and making sure that we are looking at some of the most vulnerable portions of our population and seeing whether or not we’re serving them the way that we think that we’re serving them,” Fairley said. “It allows for benchmarking in the city, the county and the state.”

The report is still in its discovery phase, according to Fairley. Organizations and state agencies are “combing through data” and figuring out what to do with it.

“It’s been presented and shared at meetings, shared through the city’s reports that go out to everyone in the community, and it’s been presented to the city manager,” Fairley said. “It’s still in the discovery phase of what’s inside of the data, but it’s being shared throughout committees and commissions to figure out what we are going to do about the things that we are seeing right now.”

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