

**July 15, 2020**

**Formal Recommendation from the Community Advisory Committee of the MacArthur Safety and Justice Challenge to the Implementation Team: Virtual Hearing Planning Inclusion and Deadline for Response**

**Recommendation**

The Community Advisory Committee (CAC) recommends that *community voices be immediately included in planning conversations related to reopening courts following COVID-19 closures.*

**Specifically, that the dates, times, locations, and agendas of planning meetings related to virtual hearing and continuance of court operations be provided to the CAC Virtual Hearing Subcommittee** and that members of the committee be permitted to attend and participate in the planning conversations.

**Response Deadline**

In accordance with “MacArthur Foundation Safety and Justice Challenge Philadelphia Community Advisory Committee- Policies and Procedures” item #8 Recommendations, formal written responses are requested by Thursday, July 23rd at 3 PM.

**Clarifications**

We beg indulgence in not knowing formal names for teams or how best to name the group in which we request inclusion. We hope that, in the interest of collaboration and service to our city, agency liaisons will do their best to understand our request. From the limited communication we have received, we are aware that these decisions are being made by a group that largely resembles the Case Processing Working group (with which the CAC has not yet been able to meet) but is a temporary, ad hoc group addressing the specific urgency of providing guidance for virtual hearings and other court operations in light of COVID-19.

**Goals**

Inclusion in these planning deliberations is advantageous for the City and the Courts as successful implementation of equitable solutions is valuable to our entire city. Successfully modeling just practices that serve all Philadelphians will create unprecedented opportunities. We have an opportunity to recruit outside investment, build pride, improve our social environment, and secure our position as a forward-thinking big city. By enacting policies and plans which serve all Philadelphians and that meet the goals of reduced prison population, racial equity, and community safety we can transform our city. We do not have to be known as “Killadelphia”, the “poorest big city in America”, or the city of “pay to play.” We have a unique opportunity in this shattering pandemic to instead be lauded for our inclusiveness, our imaginative and innovative solutions.

## **Background**

The MacArthur Safety and Justice Challenge work over the last several years has highlighted the limitations of privileged city and judicial employees to effect equitable and meaningful change. Despite serious and, we trust, good faith efforts for nearly 5 years, the racial disparities present in the Philadelphia Prison System are more pronounced now than ever. Representatives from the city and courts have acknowledged their lack of awareness related to issues of race and poverty in recent interviews.

To address these issues, the CAC was constituted to provide specific knowledge and experience directly related to the experiences of underrepresented Philadelphians. Drawing from our own experiences and our connections with neighborhoods and communities across the city, we are uniquely positioned to help the city successfully navigate these complex issues. We are eager to support the Implementation Team and associate agency liaisons in collegial partnership.

We have repeatedly requested inclusion in these decision-making processes. Since we became aware of this task force and made an initial request for involvement on June 17, 2020, we have made repeated requests for involvement. Some agency liaisons have expressed their interest in having CAC involvement in the process while others have, through email, expressed they have no opposition to it. Nevertheless, no invitations have been extended. It seems unlikely that no additional work is being done on solving these problems, so we are concerned that planning continues without our valuable contributions.

Despite public acknowledgement of ignorance of and distance from the lived realities of many Philadelphians, there seems little urgency to close that gap, to gain knowledge, or to invite experts in those realities to be part of planning. We trust that responses to this request will reassure the CAC, MacArthur Foundation, and Philadelphia at large that the city is genuinely committed to equity and justice. We are eager to advance the goals of the Safety and Justice Challenge together.

Thank you for your careful consideration of this recommendation. Thank you for your timely reply as requested by July 20 by 3 PM. If specific questions arise related to this recommendation, please direct questions prior to the response deadline to the CAC Virtual Hearing Committee by e-mail:

- Rev. Dr. Michelle Simmons <[whynotprosper@aol.com](mailto:whynotprosper@aol.com)>
- Ms. Margaret Robertson <[m\\_erobertson@aol.com](mailto:m_erobertson@aol.com)>
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- Rev. Samuel Lufi <[sam.lufi@gmail.com](mailto:sam.lufi@gmail.com)>

**Attachment - Letter from Rev. Michelle Simmons to the CAC Members summarizing communication regarding Virtual Hearings.**