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## California Is A Step Closer To Reparations. Not All Black Residents Will Qualify

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AILS CHANG, HOST:

The nine-member task force working on a proposal for reparations in California is undertaking a lot of work. They're not just figuring out how reparations would work in the state of California. They are also compiling their first report on how racism has affected the Black experience all across the country.

LISA HOLDER: I think it is probably one of the most expansive exposes of the African American experience.

CHANG: Lisa Holder is a civil rights attorney and sits on this task force.

HOLDER: So it's a report that looks at inequity in employment, in health care, in housing, in wealth accumulation...

CHANG: The list goes on.

HOLDER: ...Starting from the inception of the slave economy all the way up to the present.

CHANG: That first report comes out in June. And to get to even this phase, the task force gathered input for 10 months on exactly who should be eligible for reparations.

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UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #1: Let's not make the same mistake as the advocates of race-based reparations do and strip away the humanity of freemen by making their history and culture a prop for everyone, quote-unquote, "African" person in the world.

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UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #2: All Black people in California should receive reparations 'cause they were judged by the color of their skin rather than nationality.

CHANG: At times, the hearings on establishing this criteria got pretty heated.

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UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #3: How are we confused on who should receive this repair?

CHANG: It all ended in a narrow vote late last month. The task force voted 5-4 to exclude any Black resident who can't trace their lineage to enslaved or freed Black people who lived in the U.S. before the end of the 19th century. CONSIDER THIS - reparations for Black Californians is getting closer to becoming a reality. But not all Black people in this state will qualify, and some believe that's OK for now. From NPR, I'm Ailsa Chang. It's Thursday, April 21.

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CHANG: It's CONSIDER THIS from NPR. California's Reparations Task Force is hearing from a variety of experts. We're talking historians, psychologists and economists.

WILLIAM DARITY JR: So the California task force has, as one of its responsibilities, to determine what type of compensation would be given to individuals who they identified...

CHANG: Including William Darity, Jr. He and four other economists are guiding the task force on how much reparations could cost the state. Their estimate - more than \$870 billion to cover 2.6 million Black residents. Darity has also zoomed out on an estimate for reparations at the national level. That figure, he says...

DARITY: Fourteen trillion dollars.

CHANG: You heard that right - \$14 trillion. Darity says that number is based on looking at the racial wealth gap.

DARITY: The gap in wealth between Blacks and whites is the best economic indicator of the cumulative intergenerational effects of white supremacy in the United States.

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CHANG: Now, a larger debate about studying reparations nationally continues in Congress. A bill to do that, HR40, which is named for the phrase 40 acres and a mule, is pretty much stalled right now. But it could be influenced by what happens in California. And part of the ongoing debate in this state is this - how does a person even prove their ancestry in order to be eligible for reparations?

KELLIE FARRISH: I do it every day.

CHANG: That's Kellie Farrish. She's one of the genealogists who's spoken at California's task force hearings. Farrish says that while it might be difficult, it is possible to determine your ancestry.

FARRISH: You have your DNA and then you also have the publicly available data. So you have all of the census records, all of the World War I, World War II records.

CHANG: And Farrish says finding just one American ancestor during the era of slavery should be enough. But others say even making that distinction can be tricky.

MARCUS ANTHONY HUNTER: I can imagine a very complicated web around who determines who's eligible and how are people determining their descendancy.

CHANG: Marcus Anthony Hunter is a professor at the University of California, Los Angeles. He points to the very complex ways in which people identify as Black and the pain of possibly having that identity denied, whether or not documentation proves it.

HUNTER: You don't want to harm people in the process of eligibility either because we can imagine it takes a lot of courage and bravery to come forward and claim that relationship. And there's probably not going to be a one size fits all, but we definitely are in a better place when you try to find a more inclusive model around trying to think about all of the harms that systemic racism imbues to our society.

CHANG: It is worth noting that there is no timeline yet for when reparations would be distributed in California. The task force will continue meetings and then issue a final report with recommendations for the state legislature to consider in July 2023. And if they pass a reparations law, the governor would still have to sign it. But Black Californians are already thinking about the possibility of reparations in their state becoming a reality.

TAIWO KUJICHAGULIA-SEITU: My name is Taiwo Kujichagulia-Seitu. I'm from Oakland, Calif. And under the current plan, I would be eligible.

DERIKA DENELL GIBSON: My name is Drika Denell Gibson. I'm from the Bay Area, but I currently reside in Los Angeles. I am eligible under the current AB 3121 eligibility motion.

KAELYN SABAL-WILSON: My name is Kaelyn Sabal-Wilson. I'm from Riverside, Calif., but I live in Los Angeles. And under the current plan, I would be ineligible.

CHANG: I spoke with all three of these residents about California's reparations plan as it stands, starting with how the history of slavery impacts each of their lives today.

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KUJICHAGULIA-SEITU: I can get a DNA test and trace my ancestry back, you know, on these shores. But I can't necessarily say where in Nigeria or Benin or Mali my ancestors are from. Our families were literally torn apart. And I'm doing the piecemeal now of trying to put that puzzle back together. But were it not for enslavement and colonization, I wouldn't have to do all that footwork.

CHANG: Yeah. What about you, Derika? And I do realize I'm asking an enormous question, but how do you still feel, in your everyday life, the legacy of enslavement?

GIBSON: I know that I can draw a line, starting from today, all the way back to reconstruction and slavery, given the inhumane treatment that we've sustained, that's been allowed and, in some cases, amplified. We can look at the current homeownership, or the lack of Black homeownership, and businesses and so forth.

CHANG: What about you, Kaelyn? Because, you know, your family has roots in Trinidad and Belize, but you were born here in the U.S. And I'm curious - and this may be the key question in this debate about who is entitled to reparations in the state of California. Do you think that you - as an individual, that you are impacted differently by the legacy of racism and slavery in this country compared to someone whose ancestors were enslaved or freed in the U.S.?

SABAL-WILSON: Yes. I think that I have a very different reference point and experience. Much like Taiwo was mentioning, being able to sort of trace your lineage - I can trace my family in Trinidad. I can trace my family in Belize. I can sort of get back to some of those connections that have been severed and lost by bondage and by slavery.

CHANG: Apart from that, though, do you feel that moving through the world in your day-to-day life, that your origins are seen any different?

SABAL-WILSON: I feel like when I step outside, I am a Black woman. I am still racialized. I am still profiled. I am still marginalized. And my identity is still sort of dictated by these social structures that have been created as a legacy of slavery.

CHANG: This whole dialogue about reparations, it started back in 1865 - like, the so-called 40 acres and a mule promise, right? And as we know, that promise never came to fruition, and the conversation about reparations has continued since. So today, I want to ask, what exactly do you believe is owed to Black people in this country now? Why don't we start with you, Taiwo?

KUJICHAGULIA-SEITU: I represent the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America. And when we discuss reparations at N'COBRA, we discuss full repair. It can't just be a check. So one of the biggest things in terms of full repair is we have to eliminate that myth of white supremacy because even if every Black person in California - let's pretend every Black person in this country was given land and that we were able to, you know, start catching up economically. That would not eliminate that myth of white supremacy, which means, the minute we're off our land, we could still be profiled by the police. The minute we're off that land, we would still have certain harms done to us. So when we talk about full repair, we have to look at solutions that target every single issue. And financial payments or money is not enough to fully repair what has gone wrong as a result of enslavement and colonization and now this belief in racism.

CHANG: You believe that full repair is possible.

KUJICHAGULIA-SEITU: I believe it's possible. And I believe that without full repair, we'll be having this same conversation 50 years from now.

CHANG: I want to talk specifically about the criteria that the task force in California laid out. They decided that only Black Californians who are descendants of enslaved Black people, or descendants of freed Black people living in the U.S. prior to the end of the 19th century, that only those Black Californians will be eligible for reparations. How does that set of criteria sit with each of you? Derika?

GIBSON: I believe that reparations is only owed to African Americans who descend from persons enslaved in the United States. And in that designation, that specificity is very important because of the historical context and data that makes that very clear.

CHANG: So what do you say to the argument that all Black people in this country are suffering at some level from the layers of impacts that flowed out of slavery, regardless of whether their descendants were enslaved or freed during the 19th century? Are those Black people not owed any reparations stemming from the impact of slavery? What's your view on that?

GIBSON: I do believe that all people who are considered Black peoples in the United States have been subjugated to some type of inhumane treatment. However, in terms of reparations, reparations as defined is a very distinctive repair for a specific group that has a unique and specific history here in this country.

CHANG: Well, let me turn to Kaelyn. I mean, listening to Derika lay out her argument, do you believe that when it comes to specifically reparations from the state of California, that there should be a distinction among Black Californians?

SABAL-WILSON: I agree with Derika; I think that makes sense in looking at the specific parameters of reparations as a whole, like, considering this experience, absolutely. I agree.

CHANG: So you feel fine as a Black Californian not being entitled to reparations from the state of California at this moment. You're OK with that.

SABAL-WILSON: I feel that I am not owed anything in this particular context. Dealing with a specific history and a specific experience, I am OK with some of us getting something in what we are owed than for none of us to get anything.

CHANG: Yeah. What about you, Taiwo? Do you think that this distinction the task force is drawing is a fair one, at least within this context?

KUJICHAGULIA-SEITU: I'm going to say that within this context, it is an understandable one. If it's about trying to pinpoint who is owed what and make it a process that is formulaic, I think the primary concern with some people is that this decision should not be prohibitive for people who cannot trace their family history due to lack of resources or due to lack of information.

CHANG: I want to ask each of you, what would it ultimately mean to you and to your families if you were to receive reparations? What does that symbolize to each of you?

KUJICHAGULIA-SEITU: This is Taiwo. For me, it would mean an opportunity to build wealth, to leave a positive net worth for my children. My oldest daughter is a senior in high school this year - to be able to actually pay for her to go to college so she doesn't have to, you know, have student loan debt like I do because my parents couldn't afford for me to go to college, right? So it would mean a lot in terms of setting us up economically, financially - some financial stability.

CHANG: Kaelyn?

SABAL-WILSON: I think for me, personally, it would be about the ability and the sustainability to thrive rather than to just survive. I think that, ultimately, because of the ways in which Black people have been left out of the wealth ladder and have been left out of the economic sector and even have been left out of the health care system, to just be able to exist freely would be what it would mean for me.

CHANG: What about you, Derika?

GIBSON: Reparations would be - it means everything to me. Reparations means living a full American life and in living the life that my ancestors were not able to live - and not just freely but purely and to also be able to have an inheritance and have something to pass down to my children thereafter.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

CHANG: Our thanks to California residents Derika Denell Gibson, Kaelyn Sabal-Wilson and Taiwo Kujichagulia-Seitu for sharing their stories. You heard additional reporting in this episode from producer Brianna Scott. It's CONSIDER THIS from NPR. I'm Ailsa Chang.

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