

State of Maryland Commission on Civil Rights

“Our vision is to have a State that is free from any trace of unlawful discrimination.”



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A FEW THOUGHTS

I am incredibly grateful to wake up this morning to see a brand new day. My faith instructs me that it is a day filled with new mercies and great promise. I must admit that these times, like past times, have created an internal struggle as to whether long held promises that many of us hold will ever be fulfilled. I have spent the last forty years of my professional life working in the arenas of civil rights and human relations. I have witnessed great struggle, meaningful progress, disappointing retreats and too many repeat battles to remember. Yet through it all the belief and promise that fairness, equity, decency and opportunity for all people was a goal worth fighting for – not simply a dream, but an attainable vision. Now the reality of having fewer days left to work in these arenas than the days I’ve already worked leads me to wonder what the future holds, and how people of goodwill can make a positive difference.

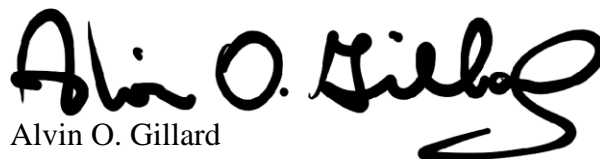
As the world continues to struggle through the COVID-19 pandemic, with our nation now having lost over 100,000 souls to this horrible disease, nationally there is a dueling sense of fear and impatience. We know the virus is real and deadly, but for many there is a refusal to accept that putting life as we know it on hold until a cure is found, or the virus is better controlled, is no longer a viable option. Our national leaders, some elected, some appointed and others who have been designated, have committed publicly to finding a vaccine to halt the death and destruction of the virus by the end of the year. To achieve such an accomplishment would be nothing short of a miracle. Yet, as many others have described it, there is another pandemic that continues to grip this nation, yet the sense of urgency and commitment to finding its cure simply is not present.

I heard a Rabbi on one of the morning shows opine, “If we can marshal the knowledge and resources again to send men into space, and to find a cure for COVID-19, then why can’t we have the same commitment to finding the cure for the pandemic of structural racism, poverty, hate, and brutality”. Within the past few days and weeks we have seen the troubling, unexplainable deaths of Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia and George Floyd in Minneapolis – both caught on video. In March we learned of the death of Breonna Taylor – an African-American emergency medical technician who was shot at least eight times when three officers entered her Kentucky apartment by force to serve a search warrant in a narcotics investigation. To be clear, these videos and the circumstances of Ms. Taylor’s death should shake us all to our cores regardless of our race, politics or faith. In the year 2020 in the United States of America, these types of acts should not be occurring, and certainly they should not be happening with apparent impunity. It should not take the uncovering of videos or acts of civil unrest and uprisings for

responsible offenders to be held accountable for their acts of hate, disregard, indifference and murder.

As we digest the realities of these two pandemics it cannot be lost on us that there is a story within the story as it relates to COVID-19 that truly reveals how deep and entrenched the disease of systemic racism, and its ongoing impact, continues to be. Almost without fail every state across the nation reports numbers that show while black and brown people make up a significantly smaller portion of the population, the rate of death due to COVID-19 is exponentially higher. The historical inequalities seen in this nation based on race and ethnicity continue to hold great sway over the quality of life for African-Americans and members of the Latino community nationwide. To watch in real time all the lives being lost to this disease is numbing, but to see the disproportionate number of black and brown people lose their lives is heartbreaking. So many black and brown people who in normal times are seen as “the least of us”, but in these scary times, are seen as “essential”. How do we as a nation process this – the deaths of Arbery, Floyd and Taylor, seemingly due to disregard at best, and the manifestations of racism at worst? Coupled with the staggering number of deaths of black and brown people due to a legacy of structural, institutional policies and practices which have marginalized and made expendable countless numbers of beautiful, productive Americans.

As the agency in State government with the responsibility of enforcing anti-discrimination statutes preventing unlawful discrimination in the areas of employment, housing, public accommodations, and State contracts, we are committed to combating unlawful discrimination throughout the State. This is not an easy task, and it continues to be more and more challenging. It is critical that in the midst of this challenge that we, a public agency which represents the last best chance for many people to be heard in an unbiased platform, stay focused and authentic in pursuing our statutory charge. The Maryland Commission on Civil Rights calls on all people of our state, and especially those who self-describe as people of “good-will”, to join us in combating unlawful discrimination in all its forms. There are opportunities for you to join with Human Relations Commissions in your counties, as well as advocacy and service organizations around the state that promote equity, inclusion and opportunity. We encourage all Marylanders to step-up and become a part of community efforts to promote sustainable change, through the dismantling of systems of oppression, neglect and inferiority.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Alvin O. Gillard". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Alvin O. Gillard
Executive Director
Maryland Commission on Civil Rights