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Race and Economy

# Why the nation's first reparations program for Black residents is tied to homeownership

Amy Scott and Maria Hollenhorst | Apr 7, 2021

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A Black Lives Matter sign sits in front of a home on March 23 in Evanston, Illinois. The City Council voted to approve a plan, believed to be the first of its kind in the nation, to make reparations available to Black residents due to past discrimination. Scott Olson/Getty Images



## Why the nation's first reparations program for Black residents is tied to homeownership Marketplace

Earlier this year, the city of Evanston, Illinois, approved a groundbreaking program aimed at shrinking the racial wealth gap created by decades of housing discrimination.

It's the first initiative of what is believed to be the first [government reparations program](#) for African Americans in the county and offers eligible Evanstonians up to \$25,000 in grants to help them buy property or put toward home repairs and improvements.

Robin Rue Simmons, alderman for Evanston's 5th Ward and the driving force behind this plan, spoke with "Marketplace's" Amy Scott about what it means for her city and national reparations movement. The following is an edited transcript of their conversation.

**Amy Scott:** One of the questions that comes up when we talk about reparations is, you know, how do you determine who has suffered and who is, quote, deserving of reparations? How did you decide that question when it came to Evanston's program?

**Robin Rue Simmons:** So in our case, residents that lived here between 1919 and 1969, and are Black, have received an injury on behalf of the city of Evanston because they were limited to live in one particular part of the community. And their direct descendants, of course, are injured because there was no opportunity to transfer down wealth that their elders were not able to access. And then obviously, those that have experienced direct discrimination, housing discrimination, because they're Black, will qualify. We're starting with a tiered system, and those that were directly injured and qualify, if they want to pass along their benefit to a direct descendant, that's an option that they have. I thought that was important so that if that elder is in a place in life where they are not owning or have no intentions of owning a home at this stage in their life, they can at least pass that opportunity of wealth down to their child or their grandchild.

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**Scott:** And why did you choose housing specifically as a way to address some of the wrongs that Black Evanstonians have dealt with?

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moving forward with housing. We all know that it's the most likely path to building wealth, but in our case, the injury was specific and targeted to the Black community. It included housing and zoning policies from 1919 to 1969 that restricted the Black community to living in one corridor of our city, and that same corridor was intentionally disinvested in and disenfranchised, and so it stripped away opportunities for wealth in limiting the area in which we could live in.

**Scott:** And that's your ward, the 5th Ward, right?

**Simmons:** That is my ward. I was born and raised in the west end of the 5th Ward, I've raised my children here. The Black community has \$46,000 less of a household income on average than our white friends and neighbors here in Evanston. We have 13 years less life expectancy, we have an achievement gap and opportunity divide, and it was important that we do something tangible that we could measure that was working in the direction of bridging our racial divide.

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**Scott:** The [one alderman](#) who voted against the program thought it was too restrictive and that people should be given perhaps cash and decide how they want to spend it. What's your response to that?

**Simmons:** My immediate response is we have more work to do. This isn't a settlement. We have only allocated the first 4% of our program, but really what we should be doing is looking at how we can grow the fund. It's initially \$10 million. We should be looking at how do we grow that fund to \$100 million in Evanston so that we can really dig in deep and make sure that we are delivering a reparative initiative to the Black residents of Evanston.

**Scott:** The larger conversation about reparations has been in and out of the headlines for decades. A version of a bill that's now in the U.S. House of Representatives — [HR 40](#) — was [first proposed in](#)

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the information is right in your face. And at this moment in history, we are very near a day that we will see federal reparations, I believe. And then the work is very difficult. I'm speaking from experience. In Evanston, it's taken us from 2019 until just a week ago to advance our first initiative. So my encouragement to our federal leaders is that we begin the work now. There's two lifetimes of work ahead of us, and we [should] begin the work now understanding that it's going to be incremental, but acknowledging that it is necessary. It is justice, it's overdue, and my hope is that the work will continue.

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