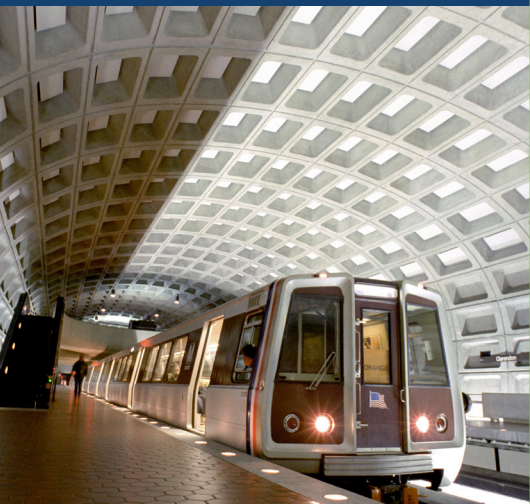




**VoicesDMV**  
COMMUNITY INSIGHTS

# Voices of the Community: Charting a New Path Forward

By Tonia Wellons







**The protests and anger that have recently filled our streets aren't solely the result of the senseless and brutal death of George Floyd at the hands of police.**

**They are also the product of long-simmering frustration — frustration that is rooted in the fact that the DMV's black community faces a much different reality than their white neighbors.**

When we first began reviewing the results of this latest iteration of the VoicesDMV survey in February 2020, the disparity in the responses offered by our black and white neighbors jumped off the page. While it's not news that the black and white experiences are much different in our community — and, really, in all U.S. communities — these findings nonetheless were startling.

We live in a region that prides itself on being inclusive, yet these results make clear that our community has a long way to go before that pride can be fully justified and realized.

Just how far we still need to travel is apparent in the responses to the VoicesDMV survey, which captured sentiments in our region right before the COVID-19 crisis disrupted daily life in our community. Consider:

Nearly one in 10 black residents (9%) felt discriminated against in interactions with the police in the past year compared with less than one in 100 white residents (0.7%).

During the past 12 months, six times the percentage of blacks relative to whites in the DMV said they experienced discrimination when trying to obtain housing and nearly four times the percentage of black residents compared to white residents reported facing discrimination when banking or applying for a loan.

Even before COVID-19 plunged our region into the worst recession of most of our lifetimes, more than one in three black residents reported that the overall economic conditions in the Greater Washington region were getting worse. By comparison, more than four in five white residents said the local economy was getting better or staying the same.

Keep in mind, the survey responses came during a time of economic prosperity and relative calm in our region. It was before COVID-19 began threatening the lives of black people at a disproportionate rate. It was before our economy plunged into free fall. It was before anti-lockdown protests, the tragic and preventable death of George Floyd, and unrest across the country.

In the short period since then, all of these events have combined to make conditions much worse for many families, particularly black residents in the DMV. In fact, the VoicesDMV data also provide clues about just how severely COVID-19 is impacting the black community.

Before the pandemic, 17% of the DMV's black households said they were already "very worried" about being able to pay their rent or mortgage. By comparison, fewer than 3% of white households indicated they had that same fear.

Even more troubling, 35% of black households reported that if they lost all sources of household income they could "continue to live as they live today" for less than a month — a figure that is 2.5 times the percentage reported by their white neighbors.

These findings highlight the preexisting inequities facing our region's black community — inequities that have only widened in the face of a public health and economic crisis, and then further amplified during the 8 minutes and 46 seconds captured on video on a Minneapolis street.



# So how do we move forward?

It begins with using these latest data to shine a bright spotlight on how systemic racism permeates our community, and to take real actions to ensure that these gaps get closed.

At the Greater Washington Community Foundation, it means the continuation of our effort to center our work in racial equity. It means prioritizing our community investments in a way that yields real change — by being population focused and more intentional about supporting leaders of color. It means listening to the Voices of the Community and allowing lived experience to drive our agenda. And finally, there is an opportunity to share our platform so that our donors, partners, grant recipients, and others in our sphere of influence can learn and act together.

## **It also means our region must begin by addressing racism in law enforcement.**

“Racism in law enforcement obstructs our country’s pursuit of true equality,” says Dr. Rashawn Ray, David M. Rubenstein Fellow at The Brookings Institution. “Insights from the VoicesDMV data offer a pathway for our region to be a leader in police reform by establishing accountability and restoring trust.”



# But we won't stop there.

We must also address it in our local economy, in our neighborhoods, in our arts and cultural institutions, in our healthcare system, and in our schools. In each of these areas, the VoicesDMV survey shows a significant gap between our white and black communities.

VoicesDMV was designed as a way to gather Community Insights that will inform community conversations and lead to community action. We will use the data to elevate community voice and explore solutions to address these deep-rooted issues in our region through the lens of people impacted by inequity and at the front lines of addressing it. Through *On the Table* conversations, we will bring the entire community together to discuss how these issues impact their families and communities. We will then fund *Community Action Awards* to help transform ideas sparked during these conversations into community change projects, committing at least \$100,000 in microgrants for organizing, community action, and social justice projects that can be implemented individually or collectively.

Some of the important work toward closing these gaps is already underway. In 2018, following our first iteration of VoicesDMV, we updated our community investment strategy with our Building Thriving Communities framework — an approach that connects the dots between the amazing work of our donors, nonprofit partners, and our own work to make the Greater Washington region a better place for all residents to live, work, and thrive.

Building Thriving Communities focuses our investments on supporting neighbors to find pathways out of poverty, creating diverse and inclusive spaces to build stronger connections between neighbors, and preparing workers to succeed in our region's changing economy.

But achieving meaningful long-term change will require an even bigger and more sustained effort; one that will evolve from what we've learned during the early days of our Building Thriving Communities work, what we're seeing in this new survey, and what we hear from our community during our virtual conversations.

All of this will play a key role in shaping The Community Foundation's next strategic plan as we chart a new path forward for our region. We will be innovative in our pursuit to close the racial gaps highlighted by the VoicesDMV data.

You can expect this new strategy to be big and bold — and to outline an agenda for how The Community Foundation can play a more prominent role in confronting systemic racism in our community and ensuring that all of our neighbors have the same ability to thrive.



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