

Legislation Text

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Urging Congress to pursue reconciliation and reparations regarding the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre and the lasting devastation it caused.

WHEREAS, 2021 marks the centennial of the Tulsa Race Massacre, one of the worst incidents of racial violence in U.S. history; and

WHEREAS, In 1921, the Greenwood area of Tulsa was a prosperous Black community, commonly known as "Black Wall Street." Most of the Black residents of Tulsa lived in the neighborhood, where they had created their own businesses and services in the enclave to escape the segregated and racially tense atmosphere that existed elsewhere in Tulsa. Black-owned grocers, newspapers, movie theatres, nightclubs, churches, and other institutions proliferated and thrived in Greenwood; and

WHEREAS, On May 30, 1921, a Black teenager named Dick Rowland entered an elevator at the Drexel Building, operated by a White elevator operator, Sarah Paige. Based upon reports of screams from inside the elevator, which were later proven false, police arrested Rowland the next day; and

WHEREAS, White-owned newspapers reported on the arrest and the false assault allegations, which was followed by the formation of a violent mob. The mob gathered outside the local courthouse at night and attempted to lynch Rowland. A group of Black residents also gathered at the courthouse to offer aid in protecting Rowland. As tension grew, members of the White mob attempted to break into a National Guard Armory. At the height of the standoff, shots were fired, and chaos broke out as many retreated to Greenwood; and

WHEREAS, Over the next 18 hours of June 1st, thousands of White Tulsa residents flooded into Greenwood, looting and burning homes and businesses over an area of 35 city blocks, committing numerous acts of violence against Black residents. This attack included groups of White Tulsans that were deputized and armed by city officials; and

WHEREAS, An estimate from the Red Cross found some 1,256 houses were burned, while 215 others were looted but not burned. Numerous institutions of the community were destroyed or damaged, including the two newspapers, a school, a library, a hospital, churches, hotels, stores and many other Black-owned businesses. By the time the Governor J.B.A Robertson had declared martial law and deployed the National Guard on June 2nd, the riot had already dissipated, and the damage was already done; and

WHEREAS, The true level of the devastation caused by the massacre has never been conclusively documented, but a 2001 report authored by the Oklahoma Race Massacre Commission concluded that between 100 and 300 people were killed and more than 8,000 people made homeless; and

WHEREAS, The devastation continues to be exposed, with mass unmarked graves of the Black victims being unearthed and victims exhumed as recently as June 7th of this year; and

WHEREAS, Although numerous committees and subcommittees have been formed to study the impact of the Tulsa Race Massacre, none of the survivors or their descendants have never received direct compensation; and

WHEREAS, On May 19, 2021, the surviving victims of the Massacre testified before the House Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties. Viola Fletcher, Hughes Vann Ellis, and Lessie Benningfield Randle spoke of their traumatic experiences and their continued fight for justice and reparations for their families; and

WHEREAS, As we recognize and condemn the devastating century-long legacy of the Tulsa Race Massacre, there must be redress for survivors and their descendants; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, BY THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, That it hereby urges Congress to pursue reconciliation and reparations regarding the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre and the lasting devastation it caused.