

Robin Rue Simmons grew up in Evanston's Fifth Ward. At an early age, she became aware of the racial divide in her city when in third grade, she visited the home of an affluent white school friend in a neighborhood just a few miles from her own. She noted the difference in the size of the lots, the well-manicured lawns, and the spacious homes. She went home that day not jealous because she loved the Fifth Ward which was comfortable, happy and familiar but unsettled about why such discrepancies in living situations existed in her own community. That feeling stayed with her for many years...through high school through college and through the early years of her professional life. Then, in 2017 she was sworn in as the alderman from the same ward where she had grown up and was now raising a family of her own, alongside her neighbors who were mostly Black. The realization dawned on her that she now might be able to do something to address that unsettled feeling that had haunted her for so many years. She could tap into it and use it to make something happen...maybe something big...and she has done just that.

When **Robin Rue Simmons** was elected 5th Ward alderman for the City of Evanston in 2017, she made it her top priority to expand opportunities for Black residents and improve their living experience in the Chicago suburb. For years, she had watched Evanston "working hard" to resolve its racial disparities but with very little to show for its efforts. She is quoted as saying that "the gaps were widening and the Black population of the city was declining." Believing that new approaches needed to be taken, Robin began developing a new, stronger approach to addressing racial inequality in Evanston and that was a local reparations program for African Americans similar to that which was being discussed on the federal scale.

The program was developed in concert with Evanston's Equity and Empowerment Commission, and it was overwhelmingly approved by the city council in November 2019. The measure's central provision clearly states "The Chief Financial Officer is hereby authorized to divert all adult use of cannabis to a separate fund in a City account for local reparations." The initial investment was set at \$10 million, its specific uses left unstated beyond a reference to "housing assistance and relief initiatives for African American residents of Evanston" and "various Economic Development programs and opportunities for African American residents and entrepreneurs in Evanston."

Since Evanston has only one cannabis dispensary, the amount of tax revenues collected will be limited. It is anticipated that the restorative housing program will begin sometime in 2021.

The restorative housing program now includes three initiatives: The homeownership program, home improvement program and a mortgage assistance program. For each one, recipients could receive up to \$25,000 to help with a down payment; fund efforts to improve, repair or modernize homes or pay down mortgage principal, interest and/or late penalties. The efforts are important because they will help Black residents increase home ownership, build wealth, create intergenerational equity, and revitalize, preserve, and stabilize Black owner-occupied homes.

Those who apply for the program must be direct descendants of those who lived in Evanston sometime between 1919 and 1969....a requirement that has raised some controversy in the community. However, overall the support for the program has been strong and leaders of other communities have expressed interest and enthusiasm for the city's work.