



**VOICES FOR
RACIAL JUSTICE**
ORGANIZING | ADVOCACY | POLICY

2015 Racial Equity Agenda

Clear Solutions for an Equitable Minnesota



Let's be clear.

The voices of people of color are growing strong and making clear that change is necessary. Events throughout the country have highlighted what communities of color and American Indian communities have long known: institutions and structures of racism are killing our communities—sometimes literally. As outrage and urgency intensify, as voices continue to strengthen, we must name a vision for a different reality.

Minnesotans saw some significant policy change in the last two years. From the Prosperity Act making higher education more available to immigrants, to Ban the Box opening the door to employment, to an increase in minimum wage, we have seen that policy change to advance racial equity is possible.

Change requires that we interrupt our usual way of doing things and ask different questions. Racial Equity Impact Assessments ask key questions about who is affected by current and proposed policies and how those policies could work better—and requires engaging communities of

color in the conversation and analysis. Collecting data, whether in school discipline or health disparities, that looks at the whole picture of what different communities of color and American Indian communities experience, will help tailor policy changes to close disparities. With clarity around our goals, we can avoid policy-making that perpetuates structural racism.

The disparities that are a shameful part of our state story—including among the highest racial disparities in the country in education achievement, employment, and health—requires us to come together around clear solutions that build a different narrative.



Make healthy communities a priority.

Create healthier work-life balance. Too many Minnesota workers of color are stretched thin balancing jobs and family life, working low-wage and even multiple jobs while also caring for children and other family members. Imbalance strikes when workers must choose between earning a paycheck and taking care of themselves or a sick family member. This is true for the 41 percent of the state workforce who do not have earned sick time. A bill calling for Earned Sick and Safe Time offers workers some relief and also allows time for recovery from domestic violence or sexual assault.

Expand health coverage to undocumented immigrants. Federal health care reform has failed to address health coverage for undocumented immigrant communities. Currently, undocumented Minnesotans access health care in the most expensive way—through emergency room visits and paying for expenses out-of-pocket. They cannot access public health care programs, subsidies, or private insurance through MNsure. Minnesota can offer some coverage in the absence of more comprehensive solutions, including a health care program for uninsured children not eligible for other state programs and a program that addresses the health needs of uninsured Minnesotans with chronic health conditions. Both would close some gaps for undocumented immigrants.

Increase funding for human trafficking victim services. Slavery and sexual exploitation is a terrible reality in Minnesota and young people of color and especially Native American girls are vulnerable to sex trafficking. Minnesota's safe harbor law is a national model by offering important protection by decriminalizing exploited youth. Now, our state should lead in offering more resources for shelter and services.

Count what matters. Collection of community-specific data that measure health disparities is key to developing solutions. Minnesota's reputation as one of the healthiest in the country is marred by also being a state with among the worst health disparities. System-wide collection of health-related data across race, ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status, and other factors will help tell a more complete story and inform performance measurement of providers who care for patients with health disparities risk factors. The result will lead to better access to good health for all Minnesotans.

Focus on our future.

Make child care affordable. One step toward making child care more affordable for families struggling to balance the costs of child care with working is expanding Child Care Assistance funding. With over 6,000 families on the waiting list, a proposed increase will help address a gap. An additional strategy is to expand the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit that is based on family child care expenses through eligibility requirements and increasing the size of the credit. Focusing solutions on strategies that have the greatest impact on those families struggling most to afford child care should be a priority.

Invest in early learning. Offering more early learning scholarships will allow the many families on the waiting list to access this important opportunity shown to help close education disparities. Another proposal is to offer universal preschool at no cost. Both of these proposals would reach students of color and low-income students experiencing the greatest equity gaps. But a racial equity impact assessment would help determine which strategies have the greatest impact on ending disparities.

Support the whole student. School counselors play an important role in connecting students to opportunities in school and beyond. But Minnesota’s counselor-to-student ratio is one of the worst in the country at 792 students for every one counselor. The national average is 450 students for one counselor, and the recommendation is 250 to one. This is a gap that especially affects students of color and low-income students who have less access to information about learning opportunities or may be the first in their families to apply for college. School counselors can be important change agents in closing equity gaps.

Pay attention to local education equity models. Community groups, individual schools, and districts across the state are working to build more equitable schools for students of color and American Indian students. These local innovations should inform statewide strategies for more equitable education. From St. Paul, where the Parent-Teacher Home Visit Project is developing greater trust and partnerships for the benefit of students, to the Deer River School District, which is working to connect more intentionally with American Indian families, models for authentic engagement with parents and students is informing equity solutions.

Make Minnesota work for everyone.

Invest in workforce development.

Changing demographics are a fact in Minnesota and across the country—communities of color are the fastest growing segment of our population. But unless our state intentionally invests in closing racial disparities in education attainment and employment, Minnesota’s economy will lag behind. Programs that build racial equity through higher education access and degree attainment, as well as targeted training and pipelines to careers, should be a priority as our state experiences this demographic shift.



Make housing a priority. Housing is an enormous expense for many families, and people of color and American Indians experience housing instability and homelessness at a disproportionate rate. Homeownership is also disproportionately low for these communities, with only 23 percent of African Americans owning homes in 2012, compared to 77 percent of whites, according to Wilder Research. This session, an investment of \$39 million could help close some housing gaps by expanding housing and services for people experiencing homelessness and expanding housing options throughout the state.

Pave the road out of poverty. Last session, MFIP Education legislation opened up education opportunities for parents looking to build skills for better jobs. Now the legislature should pass The MFIP Workforce Bill. This legislation would add \$100 in monthly cash assistance to help striving parents and their children get stable, get skills, and get ahead. Cash assistance has not increased since 1986.

Find alternatives to payday lending. The predatory practices of payday lenders have trapped Minnesotans trying to make ends meet in a cycle of debt. Capping interest rates and limiting the number of loans would create some protection. But also crucial is developing alternative sources for short-term loans, as well as long-term wealth-building opportunities.

Make higher education affordable to close gaps. Focusing limited resources on making increasingly out of reach higher education available to students of color and low-income students should be a priority. Proposals for universal programs to limit tuition or even offer free access to two-year community colleges could improve access, but should be evaluated for their racial equity impact. If the goal is to close disparities in higher education enrollment and completion, programs should be targeted to achieve that goal.

Include our voices in the process.

Restore the vote. Minnesotans with criminal convictions face multiple barriers to full inclusion following incarceration. Seeking employment, housing, and education are all more challenging with a criminal record. The successful adoption of the Ban the Box legislation was one step toward opening employment opportunities. Now the Legislature should restore voting rights to people who have served their time and are living in the community. The current law disproportionately affects people of color and American Indians. Although African Americans make up about five percent of the state population, eight percent or 16,000 were unable to vote due to felony disenfranchisement in 2011. In the same year, American Indians were less than two percent of the population, but six percent of Minnesotans disenfranchised.

End prison gerrymandering. Minnesota follows U.S. Census practice and uses inmate populations in drawing legislative districts, which adds numbers to mostly white, rural communities, even though those inmates counted are nonvoting nonresidents. But according to the State Constitution, incarcerated people are legal residents of their home addresses. Minnesota law should change to end the practice of prison gerrymandering and allow for districts to be drawn more fairly following the next Census.

Encourage young voters. Voter pre-registration would allow young Minnesotans to register to vote early, and be ready to cast a ballot once they turn 18. Allowing people to register at age 16 or 17 would encourage young voters to be engaged in the issues their communities face. Minnesota should join five other states and the District of Columbia that have adopted this approach for 16-year-olds—and seen voter turnout 13 percent higher on average.

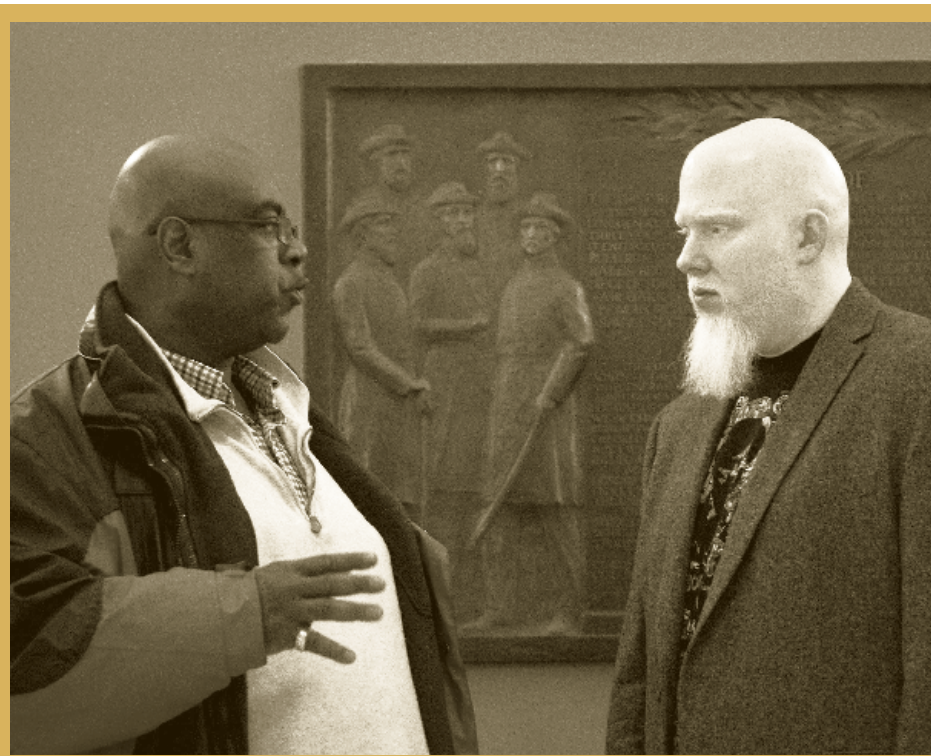
Make campaign financing more equitable. Running for public office is expensive and the high cost of campaigns locks out candidates of color with few resources and connections to large donors.

According to Common Cause, people of color who run for office raise, on average, 47 percent of what white candidates raise. This barrier is becoming more important as demographics change in the Twin Cities area and in Greater Minnesota. Worthington's population is over 50 percent people of color, but its city council and school board are all white. Opportunities are available in local communities to open the door to public office by adopting public financing systems that match funds from small donors. New York City's six-to-one matching program has increased participation among low-income communities and communities of color.

Reform criminal justice.

Reduce the severity of drug sentences. Minnesota has one of the largest disparities in marijuana possession arrest rates in the country, with African Americans 6.4 times more likely to than whites to be arrested for marijuana possession. These disparities that begin at the policing level affect subsequent action in our criminal justice system. Mandatory minimum sentences for non-violent drug offenses have exacerbated this disparate impact of the system. Reducing the length and severity of sentences for these types of drug offenses can help close these disparities. At the local level, cities can adopt policies to apply lower levels of enforcement of marijuana possession, focusing police resources instead on more serious crimes.

Listen to voices who know. Voices for Racial Justice has the privilege of working with inmates at Lino Lakes Correctional Facility who have developed an agenda for programmatic and systemic change. They speak with a wisdom that comes from knowing how a system interacts with their every day lives. Among their priorities: adopt a proposal for better transition of long-term offenders, end unwarranted transfers from state prisons to county jails, lower rates for intrastate phone calls, offer a more robust mentoring program for youth offenders, commit to an ombudsperson for the corrections system, and formalize ongoing conversations about racial justice by committing time and space to an organized group. The Department of Corrections has taken these requests seriously enough to allow for ongoing partnerships with community organizations about moving them forward.



Move to opportunity.

Invest in an equitable ride. A comprehensive transportation system must include improved access to public transit through expanded bus service that includes more high frequency bus routes, longer hours, and bus shelters in high-use areas. Aggressive equitable hiring goals offer the chance for increased racial equity in the transit workforce. Transportation spending is an opportunity to apply a racial equity impact assessment. Will communities struggling to access transportation, whether through driving, public transit, biking, or walking have better opportunities as a result? Are the funding structures as equitable as possible? Are communities most impacted engaged in developing solutions? Taking the time to answer questions like this can lead to more racially equitable transportation policy.

Remove barriers to drivers licenses. Allowing Minnesotans to obtain drivers licenses regardless of immigration status is an opportunity to make safe, lawful driving an option for all residents. Communities across the state require car transportation to access jobs, schools, training, and other opportunities. The opportunity to access drivers licenses should not be burdened by a “status check” designation for immigrants, which will require doing away with that existing policy.

Support our councils of color.

Engage communities of color. Minnesota’s four councils of color have been under attack since the release of a 2014 legislative auditor’s report calling into question their effectiveness. Like other state institutions, the councils of color surely have room for improvement, but they remain an important voice and connection for communities of color and American Indian communities in the state policymaking process. Each of the councils—the Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans, the Council on Black Minnesotans, the Chicano Latino Affairs Council, and the Minnesota Indian Affairs Council—should continue to exist as separate entities and should have the necessary funding and partnerships to build bridges between their communities and state policymaking.

Stay true to racial equity.

Commit time and resources to implementation. Multiple policy changes in the last biennium require ongoing commitment and thoughtful implementation. The LEAPS Act that was adopted in 2014 calls for improved cultural competency and development of education plans focused on English Learners. This is a nation-leading measure and deserves full development. State leaders should follow through on implementation of the World’s Best Workforce legislation which requires districts to develop plans with communities to meet goals of closing disparities in education from kindergarten through high school graduation. Ban the Box must be enforced with employers to truly provide the opportunities it promises to job applicants with criminal records. These and other steps toward racial equity build a more just Minnesota—if we stay true to their promise.



VOICES FOR RACIAL JUSTICE

ORGANIZING | ADVOCACY | POLICY

