

# Blue Ribbon Commission

Reducing Racial Employment Disparities

## April 18, 2011 Meeting Notes

### Meeting Attendees

Commission members: Beth Anderson, Atum Azzahir, Keith Baker, Tim Caskey, Andrea Ferstan, Louis Henry, Clarence Hightower, Butch Howard (Co-Chair), Doug Hubbard, Ramon Leon, Cyndi Leshner, Janet Ludden, Kevin Martineau, Repa Mekha, Paul Nelson, Tran Nhon, Carolyn Roby, Mary Russell, Carrie Jo Short, Dr. Sheila Wright (Co-Chair)

Guests: Ramsey County Commissioner Toni Carter, Saint Paul City Councilmember Lee Helgen, City of Saint Paul Deputy Mayor Paul Williams

Staff: Mary Jo Gardner, Patricia Brady, Jessica Tkach Paquin, Anne O'Connor, Ann Olson

Facilitators: Karen Gray, Nora Hall

### Welcome and Introductions

Co-Chairs Mr. Butch Howard and Dr. Sheila Wright opened the first Blue Ribbon Commission meeting with a few words of welcome for the members and guests. Mr. Howard thanked the Commission members for taking time out of their busy schedules to attend these meetings. He recounted the history of how the Blue Ribbon Commission came into being and thanked the leadership organizations (the City, County and WIB) and the staff for getting the meetings off the ground on a tight schedule. He thanked Patricia Brady, Director of Ramsey County Workforce Solutions, for bringing this crucial issue to people's attention and working diligently with the WIB, the City and the County to spur the action that resulted in the Blue Ribbon Commission. He also said that all of the stakeholders need to work together to create a healthy community that supports all of its residents. Dr. Wright echoed Mr. Howard's comments and added that the impacts of the current economic downturn have hit people of color the hardest. She also highlighted the need for the group to be action-oriented and for the members to ask the tough questions. She said that the group members should ask themselves what they wanted their legacy to be.

Ramsey County Commissioner Toni Carter welcomed the Commission members and thanked them for their participation. She stressed that Ramsey County would not be able to take on an issue such as this on its own and that regional cooperation was imperative. In addition, Commissioner Carter indicated that the severity of this problem was such that it was important that the Commission act quickly. As an example of a solution-oriented approach to a real issue, she gave the example of how the County recognized that it had significant racial disparities in juvenile detention holdings and commitments. In response, the County worked across various agencies and with law enforcement and judges to examine alternative approaches to dealing with young offenders. As a result, there has been a significant reduction in juvenile commitments (around 70%) as well as a corresponding reduction in the racial disparity of those committed. She also highlighted the overall need for education and employment opportunities for people of color.

City of Saint Paul Councilmember Lee Helgen noted that as a result of the enthusiastic responses he got when approaching people to participate on the Commission, he recognized this is a topic that is of great interest to those present. He thanked the participants for clearing their calendars to make time for the meetings and for dedicating themselves to making positive changes around this important issue. He also thanked facilitators for the work they will be doing throughout this process. He closed by saying that he was confident that the high caliber of representatives on the Commission will result in a work product that the City, County and business community will be proud of.

City of Saint Paul Deputy Mayor Paul Williams indicated that the goal for the policies of the City should be focused on providing opportunities that serve people from cradle to career. He also stressed that Mayor Coleman is keenly interested in this particular topic and that he is enthusiastic for the Commission's recommendations to be brought forward. Mr. Williams indicated that the question of taking action because it is the right thing to do is as important as the prospect of maintaining the region's economic competitiveness in order to maintain a high standard of living for all. He also stated that he was very influenced by the work of the state demographer, Tom Gillaspay, who has done a great deal of research on the changing face of the state. Because we will be facing a structural labor shortage in the coming decades, it is vitally important that all sectors of society are engaged and productive.



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### Committee Charge

The facilitators, Karen Gray and Dr. Nora Hall, introduced themselves and discussed the committee charge, which will be displayed during every Commission meeting. They pointed Commission members to their binders, which contain meeting materials, research on disparities and contact information for the Commission members and staff. The facilitators proceeded by asking the individual participants to describe their perspective on this issue and highlight what they bring to the table, in terms of familiarity with the issues surrounding racial employment disparities. The Commission members each described their interest in this topic and their individual racial experiences. Because of the diverse makeup of the Commission, which includes a broad range of participants representing community organizers, non-profits, business owners and state-level leaders, responses demonstrated that the members bring a great deal of personal and professional expertise upon which to draw. Numerous Commission members work for some of the region's major employers, and many expressed the need to explore both the external and internal factors related to hiring that contribute to racial employment disparities.

Following this brief exploration of Commission members' individual perspectives, the facilitators explained their working style and indicated that they had expectations that members would show up on time and that they would work to keep the group's discussions moving forward. They also touched upon the question of how the group would make decisions. It was generally agreed that majority would rule on decisions. Other decision-making tools would be used as needed throughout the course of the meetings. The question of whether there would be an opportunity for divergent opinions to be included in any reports or recommendations was briefly discussed. Deliverables will be vetted among all commission members and there will be the opportunity for feedback before the final recommendations are put forward. The goal will be for a set of final recommendations that will carry the support of the commission. Finally, the question of what "actionable" means was raised. This term, as well as some of the other details about how the final report will be created, will be explored by the group at subsequent meetings. The group also agreed that they did not want to use deficit language, such as the terms "minority" or "non-white," in meeting discussions or reports.

### Building a Framework

Ann Olson from the City of Saint Paul presented a brief overview of the BRC website and indicated where meeting materials could be found. She also highlighted some of the regional data showing that the Twin Cities region has a particularly high racial employment disparity. She presented a great deal of information from Dr. Algernon Austin's studies examining racial employment disparities and referred Commission members to the *Uneven Pain* report and other resources that are included in the participants' binders and available on the BRC website. She showed information on the student achievement gap, the increasing diversity of the region and economic data specific to communities of color, among others. Finally, she presented a draft discussion framework that could be used to approach this complex topic. The website address is <http://www.rcwib.org/Aboutus/BRC.htm>.

### Close of Meeting/Next Steps

The facilitators closed the meeting by thanking the participants for coming. They also indicated that they would like suggestions from the Commission members regarding additional data sources and/or experts that people would like to see providing information to the group. There was a question about what reading was recommended for the next meeting. The facilitators directed this to Mary Jo Gardner from the WIB, who serves as the central point of contact for the Commission. Ms. Gardner reminded people of the website and indicated that meeting materials, presentations and meeting notes from prior meetings would be available there. As the meeting time was coming to an end, the facilitators said that the framework and deliverables would be more fully discussed at the next meeting. The next meeting on May 2 also will include presentations from the Itasca Group and the Minnesota Compass project, led by Wilder Research.

