

Blue Ribbon Commission

Reducing Racial Employment Disparities

August 8, 2011 Meeting Notes

Meeting Attendees

Commission members: Atum Azzahir, Keith Baker, Clarence Hightower, Butch Howard (Co-Chair), Doug Hubbard, Janet Ludden, Kevin Martineau, Carolyn Roby, Mary Russell, Carrie Jo Short, Dr. Sheila Wright (Co-Chair)

Guests: Deputy Mayor Paul Williams, Jim Westcott, Cameron Counters

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

Facilitators: Karen Gray, Nora Hall

Welcome and Review of Previous Meeting

Dr. Hall welcomed the participants to the final commission meeting and reviewed the commission's original charge, which is as follows:

Identify and recommend strategies to reduce racial employment disparities in Ramsey County. The recommended strategies shall:

- Support and align with regional economic development efforts;
- Be measurable;
- Be identified from best practice research and regional data; and
- Result in actionable steps that can be implemented in 5 years.

Dr. Hall asked the group if they thought they had achieved the charge. Some group members indicated that they didn't think the group had done enough in terms of identifying measurable goals. In addition, there was some discussion about whether there was enough connection with regional economic development activities. Various commission members stressed the importance for outreach and connection with the region's Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs) as well as with the regional economic development activities, such as those being supported by the Itasca project and its partners. A member pointed out that there is a group comprised of WIBs in the metro region (the Greater Metropolitan Workforce Council) that meets a few times a year. The commission's findings could be put before that group in the coming months.

Results of Humphrey Institute Students' Research Project

Karen presented the findings of a research report prepared by Humphrey Institute students. The students focused on four U. S. cities that had similar characteristics to St. Paul/Ramsey County (Seattle, Dallas, Saint Louis and Dallas), as well as an international example (New Delhi, India). The report focused on identifying best practices, many of which are already being pursued in some form in the region, including the following:

- Reframe a city's identity to develop/support equity;
- Create private/public partnerships for workforce development;
- Collaborate with Faith-Based Community Organizations to rebuild the community from the inside out;
- Develop a certification program for corporate and social responsibility;
- Promote non-profit strategies to develop the disadvantaged; and
- Pursue a two-pronged approach similar to what is being applied in New Delhi of (1) promoting the 4-E model (Education, Employment, Employability and Entrepreneurship) and (2) promoting Positive Discrimination (actively giving preference to underrepresented groups).



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The report also recommended that leadership strategies should take a bottom-up approach in which there is cross-sector collaboration between government, businesses and community leaders. Commission members welcomed the suggestions and noted that the group had not spent much time discussing the role of the faith-based organizations and their role in addressing this large, complex issue. Because the students who compiled the report were not able to attend the August 8 meeting, Professor Jim Westcott, the group's advisor, was present to answer questions. He reiterated that the Humphrey Institute would be happy to find students who are willing to perform further research needed to support the implementation of the commission's work.

Commission Member Feedback Regarding the Humphrey Student Report

A commission member noted that although this report was well done and contained useful information, it focused too much on the perspective of governmental and policy changes and did not reflect the role of private employers. She indicated that the participation of the private sector was vital to this cause and that any effort must include government, non-profits and private industry at the table. Another commission member also reiterated a concern voiced in previous meetings that most members of the commission did not have a solid overview of all the regional activities currently underway and all of the stakeholders currently working on this issue, either directly or indirectly. Any activities or programs that stem from the Commission's recommendations should directly connect with (or build upon) efforts that are currently underway in the region and should not be duplicative or redundant. Finally, with regard to the Humphrey students' recommendation regarding a certification program or some other formal recognition of companies that have policies to promote racial employment equality, what body would recognize or verify this?

Discussion of Final Report Language, Review Schedule, Contents and Organization

Dr. Hall distributed handouts with the strategies that had been voted upon at the July 25 meeting. This revised grouping included three overarching areas: (1) Policy, Outreach and Collaboration, (2) Education and Workforce Preparedness, and (3) Businesses of Color. For each area, the handout showed four columns: Issues, Strategies, Actions and Stakeholders. A question was raised about how specifically the report would focus on the African-American community or whether it would try to be a set of recommendations that would support all racial groups. It was pointed out that the majority of studies, in particular the Uneven Pain report and the data presented by the Wilder Foundation, highlighted the fact that African-Americans in the Twin Cities region have the highest racial employment gap in the nation. Native Americans in the region also had a significantly high employment disparity. In addition, the Blue Ribbon Commission was charged with looking specifically at the issue as it related to African-Americans and Native Americans. While efforts resulting from the Commission's work may be applicable to all communities of color, the immediate goal was to identify strategies address the employment gap between Whites and African-Americans and between Native Americans and Whites.

Dr. Hall also presented an aggressive review schedule for the draft report. Because there would be no more physical meetings, the group would have to communicate electronically to help prepare the final report that would be presented to the Workforce Investment Board, the Ramsey County Board and the Saint Paul City Council in early October. The commission members also again discussed the language that would be used to present the issue and the factors contributing to it. Dr. Hall reiterated that the report would use the most neutral language possible so that its findings would be most widely received. At the same time, it was important to many commission members that language emphasized the need to specifically target actions and strategies to help African-Americans, since they are the part of the community hardest hit by disparities in



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employment. A further consideration with language was a desire to refrain from using phrases such as “require business to...” and instead focus on what the desired outcome would be. Specifically, in Action 3.c. in the handout, it was suggested to add “...to increase the hiring of people of color and those with criminal backgrounds” to the rest of the language. In addition, one instance of wording said “help employers,” and some suggested changing this to “support employers.” Finally, it was also suggested that specific language from the commission’s charge should be tied directly to the proposed strategies and actions wherever possible. Dr. Hall reiterated that any other wording changes should be emailed to her and she would work them into the report.

A commission member observed that many of the actions seemed to be suggestions for larger firms and reminded the group that while larger employers may have more internal capacity to implement changes in hiring practices, smaller employers are more pressed for resources. Because small-and medium-sized businesses account for a substantial amount of local hiring, it is important to keep them in mind when making any recommendations. Another commission member also pointed out that it might be useful to perform outreach to organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce and others to promote practices that remove barriers to employment and also to encourage some high-profile employers to champion this cause as an example to other employers. Various commission members indicated that a successful outreach effort should include resources to help employers be more proactive about eliminating bias in their hiring decisions. Some people refer to this internal personal bias as a “cognitive error,” and others refer to it as discrimination or racism. Regardless of the exact term used, this bias is important to address when it results in a person not being hired, despite having the same qualifications as another candidate, due to their racial or ethnic background.

A question was raised about whether this bias in hiring was more prevalent in private industry (as opposed to in the government or non-profit sectors). Commission members discussed that it was important that all employers – public, private and non-profit – bore a responsibility when it came to this issue. Some members also felt that the recommendations were too softly worded and needed to be stronger. This issue did not appear overnight and it will take aggressive action to help eliminate it. It was also suggested that the stakeholder categories should include those impacted by racial employment disparities. On a similar note, there was reiteration of the fact that the language should explicitly highlight the need to address solutions that are geared toward African-Americans. At the same time, it was expressed by a commission member that often, an activity or effort that helps one racial group usually helps other racial groups as well. The universality of the problems and the solutions was highlighted by another commission member who said that the ultimate goal was the removal of real or perceived barriers to employment across the board.

Education and Work Preparedness

In the “Education and Work Preparedness” section of the Issues/Strategies/Actions/Stakeholders document, although seven of the nine Issue points refer to things that take place in schools, there are no strategies listed that are related to schools. A member asked if there should be a 5th Strategy added in this area to more specifically address the education piece of the issue. The suggestion was also made to add information about the disparity in the graduation rate between White students and students of color, as this is a particularly troublesome trend that has not improved in recent years. Any substantial change to the success of the workforce has to include strategies that improve success in school. Another commission member also



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suggested including graduation and employment rates by race, by work level and income as well as by gender, because there are numerous trends that are obscured if we only focus on race.

Public Reporting of Hiring Data

Regarding the first strategy under the Policy, Outreach and Collaboration area (Build regional capacity to create racial employment equity), it was suggested to focus on how hiring data are reported and call upon all employers to publicly display this information (in a user-friendly, transparent format). Once organizations start reporting out on specific results for various racial groups, they would likely pay more attention to it. A further step would be the ability of the public to compare how successful firms are at hiring across various racial groups, and at what levels people are hired; it did no good if there were increases in hiring people of color but they were all hired a low-level jobs. At the same time, some commission members emphasized that pointing out the problem is only part of the solution and that any efforts won't succeed unless they are also paired with funding.

Conclusion

Mr. Howard and Dr. Wright, the commission's co-chairs, thanked the members for their participation and reiterated how important it was for the group's recommendations to be implemented. Dr. Wright spoke about the importance of all working together toward this goal and even though we all play a small role, we have the opportunity to make a substantial impact. Mr. Howard also pointed out that the more he learned about this problem, the more it bothered him. He reinforced the need for actionable and measurable recommendations, because concrete steps and goals were absolutely essential for the commission's long-term success. Deputy Mayor Williams praised the commission members for their dedication and also thanked the foundations for their support of this process and reiterated how important partnership is to addressing issues that are this large and potentially overwhelming.

In going around the room, the commission members reflected on their thoughts about the process and what still needs to be done to address this issue and reduce disparities. Some people pointed out that finding out our region was the worst in the nation with regard to racial employment disparities presents an opportunity to set a positive national example. If we hadn't been ranked as the worst among major cities, there may not be the same sense of urgency for change and improvement. A fellow commission member commented on the fact that Minnesota does not think of itself as being the worst in this area; we like to think we're better than this.

