

# Blue Ribbon Commission

Reducing Racial Employment Disparities

## May 2, 2011 Meeting Notes

### Meeting Attendees

Commission members: Liz Anderson, Atum Azzahir, Tim Caskey, Andrea Ferstan, Louis Henry, Clarence Hightower, Butch Howard (Co-Chair), Doug Hubbard, Ramon Leon, Cyndi Leshner, Janet Ludden, Kevin Martineau, Paul Nelson, Tran Nhon, Carolyn Roby, Mary Russell, Carrie Jo Short, Dr. Sheila Wright (Co-Chair)  
Guests: Allison Barmann, Craig Helmstetter, Toni Carter, Lee Helgen, Paul Williams, Cam Counters  
Staff: Mary Jo Gardner, Patricia Brady, Jessica Tkach Paquin, Anne O'Connor, Ann Olson  
Facilitators: Karen Gray, Nora Hall

### Introduction and Main Themes

Karen Gray opened the meeting and reminded members that meeting notes from the previous meeting were available on the website ([www.rcwib.org/aboutus/BRC](http://www.rcwib.org/aboutus/BRC)). Co-Chairs Butch Howard and Dr. Sheila Wright welcomed the BRC members and guests. Dr. Wright asked the members to keep the goals of the Commission in mind, and also reminded them that because this is a process, it will take time to make transformations that will have a lasting, positive impact on solving this problem.

Some of the main themes to emerge from the May 2 meeting included the following:

- Best practices: What are they and what can we glean from them?
- Outcomes/Measures: How should the BRC define success? How do we make sure recommendations are implemented?
- Future employment trends: Where is the data? Who will be hiring and in what areas? What can we learn about industry clusters?
- Current landscape: What is currently being done in terms of training and programs aimed at solving this problem in the metro area? How much (public and private) is being spent on the various efforts currently underway?
- Job preparation: Where does it take place? Middle/high school, technical/vocational college, etc.? Can more certificate programs be used at postsecondary institutions to help prepare people for careers? Who is responsible for teaching job preparedness skills (particularly among younger people)? What are effective collaborations that succeed for young people?
- Race in hiring: How do we increase employer awareness? How do we work with professionals so that hiring decisions are not based on race?

### Data Presentation and Question/Answer Session

Allison Barmann, Itasca Project Director, presented information about Itasca and various economic disparity data points in the Twin Cities metro region. She highlighted that it is a CEO-led, cross-sector alliance that was launched in 2004 in order to support and improve the region's economic competitiveness. Her presentation outlined numerous data points that show the disparities in the region are growing and that they threaten our economic health. She mentioned a documentary, *Close the Gap*, produced by Twin Cities Public Television in partnership with the Itasca Project. Her presentation outlined some data points that highlight the disparities in the Twin Cities region, including gaps in readiness for kindergarten and some health outcomes. The Brookings Institution did some research for the Itasca Project and recommended three strategies to reduce disparities. These included updating the basics, meaning to make sure that education and healthcare meet our needs; increasing income and wealth; and acting regionally. Ms. Barmann also talked about place disparities, in which there are concentrations of poverty. She mentioned the Itasca Project's task forces centered on various topic areas and mentioned that a discussion guide had been put together for organizations to work on their internal approach to reducing disparities through hiring and other practices. Finally, she



# Blue Ribbon Commission

## Reducing Racial Employment Disparities

distributed the Close the Gap DVD to meeting attendees and outlined some other informational materials she brought to the meeting.

Craig Helmstetter, Senior Research Manager, Wilder Research, presented information from the Minnesota Compass project on employment and disparities in the Twin Cities. He pointed out that when there is no common base of information, good intentions often lead to inefficient decisions. He stressed that sound, credible information and common sense of purpose lead to productive decisions for a strong state and community. Minnesota Compass analyses echoed some of the findings in Dr. Algernon Austin's "Uneven Pain" report. Dr. Helmstetter showed charts highlighting that the black/white employment gap as one of the highest among the 25 largest metropolitan areas. He went on to show numbers regarding workforce participation and unemployment rates among various racial and ethnic groups.

Following both presentations, Commission members asked questions of Ms. Barmann and Dr. Helmstetter, who answered or offered to provide follow-up information, where available. A question was asked regarding what efforts were underway as a result of the Itasca task forces. Various efforts focused on early childhood development were mentioned, including a partnership with the Minneapolis Public Schools, as well as transit, environmental planning and financial literacy partnerships.

One Commission member noted that there seems to be a lack of clear instruction (or responsibility for instruction) in how young people should dress and how they communicate in the workplace and what needs to be done to prepare them for the working world. He mentioned that during his youth, teachers took on this role, but that it seemed to be missing from today's classrooms. He was worried that schools are too focused on basic skills and that they are not helping young people develop the skills they actually need to survive in the workplace and are thus setting them up for failure. There is a lack of adequate support to steer kids who are on the cusp of failure back in the right direction. This is also frustrating for employers, who are having trouble finding quality applicants, as well as for young people who are probably being overlooked for employment because they are missing these key essential skills.

In response, Ms. Barmann mentioned the Genesys Works program, which supports low-income high school students in developing IT-related skills and securing employment pathways with local firms. Other meeting participants mentioned other non-profit and similar organizations doing similar work and asked how effective these programs are. At the same time, it was noted that many of these programs are expensive on a per-person basis.

A question was asked about whether data was being tracked over time and what methodology existed behind the Mind the Gap study. He was concerned that refugee populations, for example, who may be tested for reading proficiency in third grade, may not be tracked to show how well they are doing and may appear to be doing worse than their peers because they are still learning the language. Dr. Helmstetter mentioned that they at Wilder Research are trying to track student performance from year to year, but there are many laws that limit the ability for researchers to obtain this information.

One person asked whether anyone had looked at the top three cities (those where the racial employment disparities were lowest) to see whether any lessons could be gleaned from their experiences? Were there any best practices that could be applied here? Dr. Helmstetter said that this has not yet been done, but that it would be useful.

A Commission member mentioned that a good deal of the data on the BRC website points to a persistent gap across education levels and the workforce. She was also interested in pursuing the notion of gaps by gender and pointed out the importance of having disaggregated data among employment and in education (K-12 as well as postsecondary). She mentioned how important it was that we start to see noticeable gains among people of color who were born in the



# Blue Ribbon Commission

## Reducing Racial Employment Disparities

U.S. Dr. Helmstetter said that they are looking at educational attainment by race and ethnicity in the Twin Cities and that there was some data among immigrant groups by gender, but that there had not been as much focus on this area.

A Commission member pointed out that there are clearly issues when people with the same education levels are still facing disparities. She wondered what conditions create this and asked what best practices were being used to attract and retain people of color in the workplace. Ms. Barmann answered that the Itasca Project has not addressed this directly, but some of the individual companies involved in Itasca have done this on their own. Also, the toolkit for HR personnel is a resource for addressing this issue. Another question was asked about whether someone is tracking differences by occupation. Dr. Helmstetter replied that it is very difficult to get a hold of that data.

One reaction to the presentation from the Itasca Group was that in some ways, it served as a cautionary tale. As much energy as there is behind the overall effort and the specific task forces, the gap that was initially identified remains and has widened. Ms. Barmann responded that the group's aim was to make recommendations and then to push these out to the various companies and entities in the area. The question was raised about how to keep the momentum going and how to ensure that recommendations are implemented. Another regional factor that was raised was the lack of personal networks that can aid people in job hunting. How do we help people build their personal and professional networks in order to improve their opportunities in the workplace? This issue needs further exploration by the group. It was also mentioned that the discussion around practical workforce preparedness and essential skills (how to dress in the workplace, how to address colleagues and supervisors, etc.) should remain important threads in this process. In order to address some of these, we should look at schools, families and ethnic groups to provide support.

### BRC Outcomes and How to Measure Success

Karen Gray asked the group to think about what the goal might look like and what kind of numbers we were actually talking about. For example, how many jobs would we need to improve the employment participation rate up to a particular level? How many people are unemployed in the region? What would we have to do to make progress on this and how long should that take? One question from the group was whether we would support trying to get all racial groups to a certain minimum employment participation level, such as 80 or 85%. A suggestion was also made about looking at the Georgetown University study (included on the BRC website) to get an idea of how many people would be needed to fulfill certain professions in the coming years. One person mentioned the Campaign to End Homelessness, which has very specific, numeric goals associated with ending homelessness.

A Commission member asked if we have data regarding future vacancies in various fields. What kind of employment will be available, and what will the economic situation look like? Examples were given of how Tampa and Atlanta involved trade unions and technical colleges to reduce the racial employment disparity. While current economic factors make this challenging right now, the involvement of the unions in employing more women and people of color was encouraged. A member reiterated that the Georgetown Report had some of this information and stressed that we should use this data to guide our action steps. It is important to make sure that any recommendations include data that can be used to measure success and also that we are targeting recommendations in the right areas. A question was asked about where there are gaps in various skill areas. The "All Hands on Deck" report was mentioned and it was indicated that this report is posted on the BRC website.

Regarding data and projections in various skill areas, a Commission member noted that it is dizzying to look at all of these numbers and not be overwhelmed or distracted. She indicated that we need to focus on the big-picture facts and agree on what we are looking at. Dr. Hall asked whether there were suggestions from the group for whether we should be looking at any data, in particular. There followed a discussion regarding the numerous organizations working on these issues in the metro area and whether it would be productive to convene a meeting of all of these people at one time in order to understand what all of them are doing and whether there is some redundancy in their efforts. At the same time, there is a sense of fragmentation among the various efforts and questions about how strategies could



# Blue Ribbon Commission

## Reducing Racial Employment Disparities

better be aligned. The Harvard Graduate School of Education report "Pathways to Prosperity" was also mentioned as a resource that highlighted better use of technical and junior colleges by looking at international models and applying different principals to the U.S. education system to better fit with projected labor market vacancies. A comment was also made regarding whether the Canadian approach to adult education might not be helpful.

A question was raised regarding whether there is a listing of what is being done in key areas around the metro and how effective various efforts have been. Commission members discussed this and indicated that it was difficult to do such an inventory and that the results were often subjective, mainly due to the fact that numerous organizations have anecdotal, but not data-rich, information about their programs' successes. The question was raised regarding the flow of funds into programs that support this issue. For example, how much goes to job creation, how much to the creation of new businesses, how much to sustainable pathways to prosperity? One member mentioned that an inventory of funding streams supporting workforce development was underway, but it was not known how far along that inventory was or how long it would be before it was completed. One response was that it would be a mistake to focus only on public workforce dollars. The problem is a good deal greater than what can be addressed through workforce development dollars and we need to look at the systemic issues and figure out how to improve the entire equation.

A member raised the issue of middle school students who are on the verge of failure and indicated that in the past, school districts and police have worked together to support these students and have been successful. The question was asked of whether we are setting kids up for success and whether there are ideas about what works that can be pushed into the schools. Another member talked about the fact that the typical approach to this issue has been to look at the input side of the equation and that we haven't managed to solve the problem yet. What is the bigger shift that needs to happen to look at the output end of things. For example, what are examples and systemic interventions using the major players to focus more on local and national examples of efforts that produce results. The idea of breaking down the existing structures and rebuilding the entire system was mentioned.

The overarching issue of race and its role in the disparities was discussed. Many of the people who hold hiring positions are white and if they are making hiring decisions based on race and on their own cultural experiences, this contributes to the problem. How can we bring information on the practice of racism in employment and counter how this has devastated the confidence of job-seekers of color. A further comment was that we need to examine what institutional policies serve as real or perceived barriers to success and try to figure out how to remove those. The data we have seen point out the obvious and show that this problem exists.

The question of why recent arrivals to the U.S. have higher employment participation was raised. How strong are the social networks and community fabric of disadvantaged populations? It was thought that because many recent immigrants have groups of people to support them and because they are surrounded with positive role models as well as social and cultural capital, they had better support structures than many U.S.-born African-Americans. If people are surrounded by a network of people who are unemployed or uneducated, they often lack the support structure and connections that result in opportunities. In addition, when people are struggling with basic issues, such as the availability of food or stable housing, job preparation is probably not a top concern. Also, some people coming from other countries have skills and formal training, but they lack American experience and their foreign-based experience is not always recognized. These people often end up having to go back to school and work to gain U.S. experience before being able to find gainful employment.

### Discussion and Questions about Best Practices

In discussing how the success of the BRC will be defined, the question of best practices was raised. What cities and states are doing this well? How do we start people young, prepare them, coach them and mentor them to entry-level work? It was also mentioned that even when people are employed, they often lack opportunities for advancement. A



# Blue Ribbon Commission

## Reducing Racial Employment Disparities

member mentioned that we need to provide greater capacity and be intentional about how we approach job creation. We need to increase the capacity of individuals and also increase the capacity of employers.

Examples of best practices that were mentioned included the FastTRAC program in the healthcare industry as well as Portland's Economic Opportunity Initiative. What are successful interventions that allow people to move out of poverty? How can non-profits and businesses work together toward this goal? Also, what are the community connections and mentorship programs currently in existence and who is going to teach the skills people need through the variety of workforce education systems? A member indicated that they had a model for mentorships that might be useful to examine. A fellow member mentioned that it is important to keep in mind that mentorship program models may not be transferable to different racial/ethnic groups, but that she would like to see models of programs that are working.

How do we shift the paradigm and rethink what adult education means and what higher education means? Are there opportunities to look at various certificate programs as a means to teaching specific skills that lead to employment? The concept of industry clusters and looking at what can be done across a particular industry was discussed. Just as the FastTRAC program helped train for vacancies in the health care industry, are there other industry-specific training programs that should be explored?

Dr. Hall closed the meeting and reminded participants that the next meeting would be held on Monday, May 16, 2011.

