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Ramsey County / Panel to study racial gap in employment

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When it comes to hiring racial minorities, Twin Cities businesses could be doing a lot better. In fact, some studies show the gulf between black unemployment and white unemployment in the metro to be among the highest in the nation.

Over the past week, three public bodies have effectively said that needs to change. The Ramsey County Board of Commissioners, the St. Paul City Council and the Ramsey County Workforce Investment Board all passed resolutions to form a blue-ribbon commission of businesses, public officials and advocacy groups to study the trend.

The commission will convene over the next nine months and issue a report on its findings by Oct. 15. It will be staffed by Workforce Investment Board Chief Executive Mary Jo Gardner.

In June 2010, a study of the nation's 50 largest metropolitan areas highlighted the Twin Cities as a prime example of employment disparity and said differences in educational attainment alone don't account for the gulf.

"The data is really startling for folks," said city council member Lee Helgen, who submitted the council resolution Wednesday. It passed unanimously. "We're up there with Detroit. If you're

black, unemployment is about 20 percent. If you're white, it's about 6 1/2 percent. Why we want Ramsey County to take the lead on this is we're the most diverse county in the state, so our disparities are even more visible."

An amendment added to Helgen's resolution Wednesday clarified that the city would donate staff

time to the commission, but nothing in the resolution promises additional funding.

The Ramsey County resolution was sponsored by commissioner Toni Carter. Commissioner Janice Rettman cast the sole dissenting vote.

Rettman said she was concerned because no price tag was associated with the commission and that she believes the Workforce Investment Board is already lightly staffed and needs to do more fundraising. "I'm saying, why aren't you involving the business community in paying for this, and not having the staffing paid for by either the county or the city?" she said.

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