

2013 RACIAL EQUITY AGENDA

Minnesota Voices Building a Path to Justice



Our voices were loud and clear on Election Day. Minnesotans joined across race, ethnicity, class, and experience to break down road blocks to full participation in community life. We said no to voter ID. We said no to marriage inequality. Our voices, one by one, came together with a clear message: the path to justice demands inclusion and equity for all of our diverse communities in the opportunities along the way.

Minnesota's racial disparities in true access to good jobs, education, and health care challenge all of us. The disparate impact of the criminal justice system results in lifelong struggles to participate fully in community life. Structural barriers stand in the way of opportunity and are undermining the prosperity for our growing communities of color and for all Minnesotans.

But solutions exist, and we can build a better path. The 2013 Racial Equity Agenda sets out some of those solutions, bringing multiple voices together through organizing and policy priorities with a shared vision and strategy for racial justice. The path is long, but together we are building it, stone by stone.

BUILD A SOLID AND EQUITABLE FOUNDATION

Raise revenues and do it fairly. Rather than continue to pull back on funding important priorities, let's invest in what matters. Opportunity-building investments—in schools, health care, job training—open doors to racial equity and deserve sustainable funding. At the same time, raise the revenues in a way that is fair and recognizes our differences in ability to pay. Our state should ask its highest income earners to contribute more than they do, and close the gap so that the lowest earners are not paying the largest share of their income. We should rely less on regressive taxes and protect the credits, like the Renter's Credit and the Working Family Credit, that make the system more fair. Any tax reform package should reflect principles of equity and be uniformly progressive.

LEAD FOR HEALTH CARE REFORM

Create a Health Benefits Exchange that works for communities.

The Legislature again has the opportunity to adopt the Minnesota Health Benefits Exchange to make high-quality and accessible health insurance available to Minnesotans. Legislators should create an Exchange that reflects our state's diverse populations, by including community leaders in its governance system and providing culturally relevant information. Legislation should outline the state's role as an active purchaser, making sure that any health plan offered through the Exchange meets a standard of quality and affordability. Culture and language fluent community-based programs can be important partners with the role of navigating purchasers through the process of obtaining insurance. The Exchange and all health reform initiatives should also include the standardized collection of race, ethnicity, and language data to better enable the tracking and analysis of health disparities across populations in Minnesota.

Allow more Minnesotans to access health care. The Affordable Care Act allows states to expand Medicaid eligibility to persons living at 133 percent of the federal poverty level. Electing to do so would save the state money through increased federal funding and allow more low-income people access to health insurance. The Legislature should take action to allow this expansion.

Fill the gap in health coverage with the Basic Health Plan. The Legislature must take an important step to ensure that Minnesotans at 133-200 percent of the federal poverty level have access to health care. The Basic Health Plan would fill the gap for those who do not qualify for Medicaid but who also could not afford coverage through the Exchange. A disproportionate number of people of color are uninsured in Minnesota—by removing barriers to better health, the Basic Health Plan would help build the path to racial justice.

PAVE THE WAY FOR STUDENTS

Make adequate and stable school funding a priority. Minnesota's current system of funding schools relies heavily on local property taxes and has resulted in increased disparities between districts. The result has also contributed to gaps in education opportunity along lines of race and poverty. Special education, in which students of color are disproportionately placed, has long been underfunded and should receive stable funding. Integration funding remains uncertain as well, and recommitting to racial equity and integration can help the state close our gaps in education equity. We know the long-term value of investing in pre-school for all students—we should move toward making that investment real by expanding our system of education to include those early years. Any school funding changes should provide equitable support to districts and raise revenues fairly across the state, rather than through local levies.

Eliminate disparities in school disciplinary procedures. Students of color are disproportionately suspended, expelled, transferred, and arrested at school, nationally and here in Minnesota. The result is



increased out of school time and repeated negative interactions with teachers, administrators, and police, leading to lower graduation rates and unnecessary juvenile ticketing and incarceration among students of color. Alternative approaches exist and should become a priority in education policy and practice. The Safe Schools for All bill introduced last session would protect students from harassment and bullying, but also provide for remedial measures that support all students. The Minnesota Minority Education Partnership's Solutions Not Suspensions Minnesota campaign is working with other community-based organizations and the Minneapolis Public Schools to create a new disciplinary policy that may include peer mediation, alternatives to out-of-school suspension, restorative justice, a new data collection process, and accountability measures. Statewide policies should include collection and reporting of data, disaggregated by race and gender, on who is suspended, how often, and why.

Place equity at the center of excellence. OAP and the Education Equity Organizing Collaborative continue their work with the Minnesota Department of Education to develop a framework for building and measuring progress toward equity in schools and districts across the state. Supporting the launch of a pilot program to test these tools in the fall of 2013 is an important first step toward achieving equity for all students in Minnesota. The path toward closing gaps in opportunity and equity will transform how schools interact with students, from making opportunities to learn truly available, to fair disciplinary procedures, to equitable funding. Committing to walking that path of transformation is the next—and crucial—step.

TAKE DOWN ROADBLOCKS TO ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

Create a solid base for working families. Minnesota’s minimum wage, among the lowest in the country, should rise and move closer to providing a living wage. Other strategies to build economic opportunity include a state Child Tax Credit, increased child care assistance, and an increase in the Working Family Tax Credit. Guaranteeing a minimum number of paid sick days also supports working Minnesotans—41 percent of workers in the state do not have access to paid sick leave, placing their health and job security at risk. These strategies, and protecting all workers’ rights, provide the building blocks for Minnesotans to establish greater economic stability and the chance for our state to begin closing the gaps in income, employment, and wealth between people of color and whites.

Support strategic workforce development. Our job skills gap starts with a gap in education opportunities. So paying attention to building equity and opportunity in our school system, from early childhood education on through high school and beyond, is a key priority to closing the disparities in access to good, stable jobs for people of color. But at the same time, we must commit to strategic workforce development that works with communities to provide skills and placement in growing industries. Several recommendations are being put forward by the Workforce Funders Policy Task Force including expanding career pathways that support adult participants as they continually build skills toward greater employment opportunities. Other proposals include efforts to bridge education to employment, clear pathways for career advancement, and pipelines between neighborhoods with high unemployment and opportunities for learning competitive skills. Innovative strategies like this and true public-private partnerships will be necessary for Minnesota to break down its racial disparities in employment.

Make MFIP a real anti-poverty program. Parents and children in the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP)—the state’s welfare-to-work program—have received the same amount of assistance since 1986. On top of that, a “family cap” in place since 2003 freezes payment levels for families and denies additional assistance to newborns. With over 70 percent of MFIP recipients children, and half of those under five years old, it is clear who suffers the most with these limitations on the program. African American and American Indian families face a persistent gap in successfully leaving the MFIP program with paid employment. Increasing the cash benefit and repealing the family cap are two ways that the program can meet the real goal of building a ladder out of extreme poverty.

END THE HOUSING CRISIS

Keep families in their homes. The foreclosure crisis hit communities of color especially hard, having already experienced generations of financial discrimination in redlining, mortgage lending, and access to insurance. Financial institutions must change their practices and exercise fair and transparent lending. Policymakers can limit the impact

of the foreclosure crisis by protecting homeowner and renter rights and calling for a moratorium on foreclosures.

End homelessness. We should continue innovative public-private strategies like Heading Home Hennepin, which saw progress toward ending homelessness over the last five years, including a 33 percent reduction in homelessness among veterans. But the impact of the foreclosure crisis, the return of troops, the rising cost of tuition, all impact housing stability. Ending homelessness will require work across sectors—improving job training and placement, child care support, access to affordable housing, and the social services to guide and support people toward a brighter future.

TRANSIT THAT LEADS TO JUSTICE

Commit to transit equity in funding and access. The Central Corridor light rail transit line is nearing completion, and work to make the system accessible and equitable for the communities impacted by the development continues. These efforts are essential for maintaining community cohesion, as well as protecting and creating economic opportunity. As transit development grows, we must ensure that projects offer affordable, accessible transportation options—including continued funding of high frequency bus service—for those communities that most need public transit. The voices of low-income communities and communities of color should be included as part of the transit planning process. Make sure transit development both builds economic opportunities in place and takes people to opportunities throughout the region.



COMMIT TO TRUE JUSTICE

Offer a real chance. People with criminal records face a substantial hurdle to fully re-entering their communities. Job applications that ask applicants about a criminal record up front deny them the fair chance to show their potential. We have already removed these questions on government job applications. Legislators should commit to doing the same on private employer applications, and open the doors for those with criminal records, disproportionately people of color, to obtain a true second chance.

Limit access to juvenile records. Most states have a presumption of privacy for juvenile felony records. This allows the majority of juvenile felony charges for nonviolent crimes to be kept private, keeping open the chance for young people to engage in education and employment, and move forward from previous mistakes. Minnesota should join these states and create opportunities rather than close doors.

STOP GUN VIOLENCE

Commit to saving lives. Gun violence affects us all and continues to rip loved ones away from communities. Ending that violence will require the will of policymakers who recognize both the tragedy of mass killings like that in Newtown, Connecticut, closer to home at Accent Signage in Minneapolis, or the 2005 shooting at Red Lake High School—and the fact that gun violence destroys lives every day in communities across our state and country. Advocacy groups like Protect Minnesota are working with community leaders to craft sensible policies that limit access to firearms. These include demanding universal background checks before gun purchases and keeping weapons of war off our streets. Communities and policymakers must come together to create these proactive strategies that protect our right to live in safe communities.

EXPAND PARTICIPATION IN OUR DEMOCRACY

Allow people on parole or probation to vote. Thirteen states, including our neighbor North Dakota, allow probationers and parolees to vote. The disparate impact of our criminal justice system on people of color means that one domino effect is losing the voices of more people of color at the polls. Nearly one in five African American males are disenfranchised in Minnesota. Opening the doors to participation in democracy would allow people seeking to re-enter their communities the chance to participate, and simplify voting law that currently criminalizes ineligible people who mistakenly vote.

Early voting is accessible voting. The 2012 election saw long lines at the polls and much frustration among voters. Early voting would alleviate some of the pressure at polling places on Election Day and make it easier for people—including those in Greater Minnesota, working long shifts, or facing child care or transportation challenges—to participate in the election process.



VALUE OUR IMMIGRANTS

Give DREAMers a chance to grow. The federal Deferred Action program will give young undocumented immigrants temporary relief from deportation and the chance to work and go to school. Policies to open more doors to in-state tuition, scholarships, and state financial aid would allow young immigrants the chance to expand their opportunities and the long-term possibility of adding their gifts to Minnesota communities.

HONOR AMERICAN INDIAN COMMUNITIES

Respect tribal sovereignty—ban or modify the wolf hunt. The wolf hunt allowed under Minnesota law in 2012 disregarded members of American Indian communities who had long expressed opposition to the wolf hunt. Over ten years, tribal members had worked to create alternative proposals that respected tribal sovereignty, allowing for a ban on reservations. Legislators ignored those proposals last year, but can change that course and offer a more respectful vision in 2013.

BUILD INCLUSION IN MARRIAGE

Change Minnesota law to create marriage equality. The successful defeat of the proposed amendment to limit marriage to heterosexual couples opened the door to expanding the rights and opportunities that make a community whole. People of color share the history of exclusion from marrying the person they love when that love crossed racial lines. Only since 1967, when the Supreme Court called anti-miscegenation unconstitutional, have interracial couples been free to marry in the United States. Structures of exclusion weaken the fabric of community and should be broken down in favor of inclusion.