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Race to Equity: The Project to Reduce Racial Disparities in Dane County

Introduction

Profound and persistent racial disparities in health, education, child welfare, criminal justice, employment, and income are common across the United States and in Wisconsin. These racial disparities compromise the life chances of many children and families and thwart our common interest that every child grows up healthy, safe and successful.

The Wisconsin Council on Children and Families (WCCF) aspires to make a greater contribution to narrowing and ultimately eliminating racial disparities in Wisconsin. We are beginning with a multi-year “*Project to Reduce Racial Disparities in Dane County*” and hope subsequently to move into a broader effort to reduce racial disparities across Wisconsin.

Recognizing that many people have identified, studied, and worked on the problem of racial disparities for many years, WCCF aspires to learn from and build on prior efforts, and will rely heavily on the advice and guidance of leaders and residents of Dane County’s communities of color. These past efforts will inform our collection and analysis of information on the key contributors to disparate racial outcomes in order to identify and advance comprehensive and effective solutions. We hope that the contribution of our core organizational strengths in data and policy analysis, advocacy of effective solutions, and engagement of stakeholders, can foster the necessary political and public will to enact solutions.

The Problem of Racial Disparities

Dane County is often at the top of lists of the best places in America to live and raise a family. That makes it all the more troubling that we are repeatedly ranked near the bottom in national studies on the extent of racial disparities in our health, education, justice and child welfare systems. Nearly, 75% of all African American children in Dane County are in poverty, a rate 50% higher than African American children in the state and almost twice as high as African American children nation-wide. Furthermore, a preliminary review of the systems data suggests that compared to their white counterparts, African American males in Dane County are more than 20 times more likely to be convicted and incarcerated; and that African American children are more than 13 times as likely to be in foster care, and only half as likely to graduate from high school on time. In addition, the fact that African Americans constitute just over 5% of the county’s total population means that their poor outcomes are obscured by the generally positive outcomes experienced by the far larger white population. The county’s aggregate “success” has actually made it harder to build and sustain a broad sense of urgency about the much more negative experience of our minority population. It is

important to note that disproportionately negative outcomes are also common among the county's growing Hispanic population, but due to limited resources and the even wider disparities experienced by the African American community, that is where this project will initially focus.

Addressing racial disparities is critical, not only as a matter of simple fairness, but also for our county's collective well-being. Narrowing such disparities will help to level the playing field for all citizens and, in turn, will make Madison and surrounding areas a more supportive environment for high achievement by all our children and families, including those of color. This is not only the right thing to do morally, it is the smart thing to do economically. Unless our entire community is thriving, the long term social, cultural and economic fate of our county will be far less promising. In the increasingly globalized world of the 21st Century, only a Madison that is able to attract and support success for individuals and families of diverse backgrounds will be able to retain its long cherished status as one of the nation's great places to live, study and work.

Project Plan

The Project is designed to help overcome these challenges and barriers by undertaking four related activities:

1. Gathering information about and learning from what has been done in the past;
2. Identifying and disseminating the relevant data in health, education, child welfare and criminal justice to all stakeholders;
3. Providing tools for the analysis, evaluation and prioritization of both problems and solutions; and
4. Creating mechanisms for engagement, resulting in more coordinated and comprehensive actions and investments aimed at reducing racial disparities.

Past Efforts: Of course, we are not the first to point to these problems and urge solutions. For decades, many individuals and organizations in the county and state have worked to combat these alarming inequities, and some very promising approaches and initiatives have been undertaken. We applaud these efforts and hope to learn from them and build on them. This work is vital for focusing our next steps and building partnerships for success.

Data: We want to focus in on those measures that are most predictive of good or bad life outcomes. Examples of the indicators we will investigate include: low birth weight, infant mortality, school readiness, family disruption and out of home placement, third grade reading, middle school proficiencies, adolescent pregnancy, high school graduation, post secondary education and training, and involvement with the justice system. Our intent is to present these data in ways that are accessible to the public and policymakers, that can be monitored and tracked over

time, and that encourage reflection and thoughtful action across diverse audiences.

Solution-oriented analysis: This step will include identifying and disseminating the research on causes and contributors behind key disparities; highlighting the most promising evidence-based disparity reduction strategies; facilitating comment and analysis by subject-matter experts, both local and national; and thoroughly exploring the roles that poverty, family structure, institutional and system behavior, bias, and community context may play in explaining disparity patterns. Our early inquiries have led us to a special interest in determining how the characteristics, social capital, and institutional make-up of particular neighborhoods may contribute to specific disparities.

Engagement: The project will work to create space for dialogue, debate and consensus around actions, programs, policies and investments capable of narrowing the identified racial disparities. We hope this engagement will build a shared information base among advocates, researchers, policymakers, community leaders, media and the general public. We also hope to enhance collective problem solving by inviting comment and guidance from organizations and leaders who have effectively tackled disparity challenges both here in Wisconsin and around the country. In addition, our aim is to help convert community consensus around priority goals into a sustainable advocacy network committed to a set of accountable, measureable action plans that can serve as the blueprint for reducing the county's racial disparities within the next decade. Finally, we hope that what we learn here will be relevant to other communities in Wisconsin and elsewhere around the country. We do not underestimate the work involved to bring about the necessary actions, but we believe that coalescing around community priorities and implementing approaches the community has agreed upon can boost the odds of success and lead to achievements that to date have been elusive.

The Project will be carried out under the auspices of the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, headed by Ken Taylor. The Project itself will be directed by Erica Nelson, a Madison-based child welfare attorney and social policy consultant.