



Education and Housing Equity Project Records.

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1999 Cities At Work Forum Series Ideas for Community Change

Background

During the spring and fall of 1999, over 900 people in Saint Paul came together at a series of public forums, gatherings, training sessions and community circle dialogues to understand and address the impact of racism in our rapidly changing community. Saint Paul is a strong city, proud of its past and traditions. Today, people from many different cultural and ethnic backgrounds migrate here to live and find work, put down roots and raise their families. The 1999 *Cities At Work* forum series focused on how we can strengthen our community by recognizing the richness of our multicultural identity and by tapping all of the assets found in our community.

This forum series aimed to increase understanding of racism and its impact in our community on three levels:

- ➔ The **individual level** focuses on personal commitment and responsibility for interacting with people from different cultural and racial backgrounds.
- ➔ The **organizational level** includes working with others in neighborhoods, schools, churches, and places of employment to bridge differences, build understanding and address the impact of racism in our community.
- ➔ The **institutional level** includes challenges embedded in our social institutions and public policy.

The following pages summarize ideas shared by 245 of the 480 participants in the first three community forums of 1999. Because some people attended more than one forum, this count may overstate the total number of respondents. Feedback from 174 participants in spring 1999 community circle dialogues are also included.

The number of people involved in these discussions is small, considering the population of our city. But if these 900 people each talk in depth with 10 other people, and those people each talk to 10 people, we will have reached 90,000 people or one-third the population of Saint Paul. So these ideas are a starting point, a whisper, that can build to a roar and change the culture of our community.

Ideas for Community Change

The responses have been grouped into seven major themes with the most frequently mentioned ideas listed first. The ideas cut across all levels, including opportunities for action at the individual, organizational and institutional levels. The seven themes are:

1. Make individual commitments to respect and tolerance in daily life
2. Continue public dialogue on race and racism
3. Enrich communities through diversity
4. Create equitable educational opportunities
5. Insure affordable and equitable housing for all
6. Connect with youth and involve them in community change
7. Engage the business community to welcome diversity

The following pages detail some of the more frequently mentioned comments regarding each of the seven themes. This information will be used to stimulate more focused dialogue and action planning at the **Beyond Tolerance - A Call to Action** forum on November 8, 1999.

Theme 1: Make individual commitments to respect and tolerance in daily life

- Reflect on biases and prejudices, and practice becoming not prejudiced. Don't judge or label others.
- Reach out to people different from self, expanding social group to include greater diversity. Stretch beyond comfort zones. Don't avoid conversation with people you don't know. Get involved in community projects to meet a diverse group of people, and keep in contact.
- Make a conscious effort to listen to people of different generations and cultures. Keep an open mind and try to understand other perspectives.
- Use skills gained at the forums when interacting with friends and colleagues on a daily basis. Be positive, sensitive, and respectful of others, and do not take others for granted.
- European Americans need to be aware of their white privilege and consciously decide to not use it. They need to speak out when other European Americans show disrespect to people of color.

Theme 2: Continue public dialogue on race and racism

- Continue organizing and attending community forums and community circle dialogues, and join others to more effectively address racism.
- Share learnings with friends, relatives, colleagues and neighbors. Share knowledge of different cultures. Discuss issues and problems with people who are not yet aware of them. Embrace people experiencing prejudice and help them to get "unstuck". Initiate a gathering of work colleagues or neighbors for a discussion of these issues.
- Hold public leaders accountable to address institutional racism.
- Invite public officials to participate in community forums and community circle dialogues.
- Share strategies for addressing racism with organizations. This could include a youth group, a meeting with school officials, or a church's Social Justice Committee.
- Provide more opportunity for intergenerational and cross-cultural dialogue. Continue telling stories as a way of learning about other cultures.
- Encourage the media to report on diversity issues.

Theme 3: Enrich communities through diversity

- Focus on activities that build a sense of community for individuals.
- Families should make special efforts to get to know your neighbors.
- Communities should provide opportunities for people to meet others different from themselves. They should bring people together in ways which do not feel threatening to community members.
- Initiate community celebrations. Bring community members together to learn about diverse cultures and experiences by participating in celebrations.

Theme 4: Create equity in educational opportunities

- Initiate equitable funding of schools on regional level. Allocate extra funding to schools with large numbers of "at-risk" students, to meet these students' greater needs.
- Desegregate neighborhoods. This is the only way to truly desegregate schools.
- Recruit more men and people of color to be teachers. This will enable students to better identify with them as role models.
- Consider the possibility of neighborhood schools to promote more parent involvement.
- Teachers need to teach a multi-cultural curriculum. All students need to learn about their own and other cultures. All students gain from learning about diverse cultures.
- Businesses and schools need to form stronger partnerships. Business could invest more significant resources to help at-risk students.
- Teachers need to understand more about the cultures of the children they teach. Language barriers and cultural ignorance lead to discrimination by teachers.

Theme 5: Insure affordable and equitable housing for all

- Affordable housing should be subsidized.
- Anti-discrimination laws must be enforced.
- Attend demonstrations and meetings on affordable housing.
- Reconsider the current definition of affordable housing.

Theme 6: Connect with youth and involve them in community change

- More adults should develop mentoring relationships with youth.
- Increase opportunities available to youth. Provide opportunities for young people and adults to tell their stories and discuss issues together. Adults and youth can learn from each other.
- Youth can be capable partners in community change. Their intelligence, energy, and open-mindedness give them the power to be successful partners in improving their communities.

Theme 7: Engage the business community to welcome diversity

- Opportunities for people of color and women to own businesses benefits everyone in the community.
- Adapt the workplace to the needs of a diverse workforce. Greater cultural awareness and cultural competency is needed in the business community.
- The business community needs to connect with the diversity found in our city and neighborhoods. Community connections can improve the success of business.
- Businesses must attract customers from diverse cultural groups. This is an important customer base, and requires that companies get to know the customers they are targeting.
- Recruit the "hard-to-employ". Intentional welfare-to-work programs are needed to utilize every person's talents.