



Education and Housing Equity Project Records.

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To address the lack of affordable housing

The Star Tribune editorial on Dec. 14 was right in stating that Minneapolis and St. Paul cannot solve the housing problem facing the region by themselves and in pointing out the need to address issues related to concentrated poverty. But we need to be clear that simply dispersing low-income people or removing them from their neighborhoods is not a policy to address either the housing needs of the region or the issues of concentrated poverty.

Under dispersal and removal policies, people are often reconcentrated in new, strange, vulnerable neighborhoods — once again isolated, but this time not just from economic and educational opportunities but also from friends and familiar surroundings.

There has been a growing understanding that focusing on concentrated poverty is an important factor in addressing the serious lack of affordable housing in the Twin Cities region. If one simply builds affordable low-income housing in the most receptive markets, this will likely increase the problems associated with concentrated poverty. Neighborhoods that are economically poor are often beset with many serious social needs and isolated from opportunity.

As communities are gripped in the trap of concentrated poverty, the population diminishes as many of the residents with options leave. Concentrated poverty is defined as when at least 40

Without a broad approach, efforts can worsen problem

percent of the people in a census tract are living below the poverty level. We imposed the consequence of high-poverty neighborhoods on low-income people and especially low-income people of color by limiting their housing choices to places away from things that most of us take for granted, such as good jobs, strong schools and safe neighborhoods.

If concentrated poverty is not addressed, it spreads initially at the urban core, then to the more vulnerable inner-ring suburbs. Even as our region has grown, Minneapolis and St. Paul, and now the older suburbs, have continued to lose population as middle-income people flee the central cities for the developing suburbs.

For example, as of the 1990 Census, 40 percent of middle-class African-Americans lived in the suburbs. Undoubtedly, this percentage has increased since then. Sprawl is one of the main engines of concentrated poverty at the urban core.

Our Institute has worked hard over the last six years to help make the negative effects of concentrated poverty part of the public dialogue. We believe that it is important and appropriate that the media, policymakers and

others have expressed concern about addressing our housing needs in a way that focuses on the problems associated with concentrated poverty.

Unfortunately, some have used the fear of concentrated poverty as an excuse to not take an aggressive stance for addressing our affordable housing needs and in some cases to make low-income citizens the issue and not concentrated poverty. There are others who would ignore the problems associated with concentrated poverty and continue to build affordable housing in the most vulnerable communities; there are others who would stop building, and even destroy, existing affordable housing without any serious effort to replace it.

All of these strategies are wrong. They hurt our fellow citizens, and they hurt our region. We must address the problem on a regional level. We need to make sure that we increase housing availability that also affords meaningful opportunity.

We should consider plans like that adopted by Montgomery County in Maryland, one of the richest counties in the nation, where affordable housing is built in every neighborhood throughout the county. We must also insist that as the region grows,

housing opportunities are considered integral to job and school opportunities. For our central cities and older suburbs, they must not simply push low-income people out, but strive to create mixed-income housing that supports stable neighborhoods and exercise leadership in expanding low-income housing opportunities.

We must be careful not to just focus on where low-income affordable housing exists but look at where there is and will be a need throughout the region. Success must be measured not simply by reducing concentrated poverty in one community while it is increasing in another, but by increasing housing opportunities and supporting stable neighborhoods, while addressing the need to reduce the concentration of poverty and increasing opportunity throughout the region.

We need informed leadership on this issue from our city council members and staff, state legislators, community advocates and our new governor. To do this right will require a change in the way we address the issue of affordable housing, and there will be some costs involved. But it will be a small price to pay compared with doing the wrong things or nothing at all.

— *John Powell, Minneapolis. Executive director of the Institute on Race & Poverty, and chair of the Minneapolis City Council Affordable Housing Task Force.*

TO THE POINT

Talk may be cheap, but it's valuable, too

When divergent people come together determined to learn from each other, profound change may occur. That's one goal of the Cities at Work partnership, which will hold its fall 1999 forums Thursday and next month.

For example, a woman who participated in a Cities at Work community circle in 1998 wrote that a handful of people, including two African-Americans, met for dinner and discussion on five Monday nights. She described their frank and animated dialogue about race in Minnesota, their disagreements and their epiphanies. They talked about the way the white members of the group had the option of being perceived as individuals, while the blacks were expected to speak as representatives for their entire race.

Ultimately, members of the mostly middle-age, middle-class, female group agreed on one thing: their common bond as parents who are deeply committed to raising good, strong, healthy kids.

And they agreed that discussion groups were pointless unless the talk led to action.

Just about every facet of urban life has received attention from the forums sponsored by Cities at Work, a partnership of organizations and initiatives that spark dialogue and work for change. The many sponsors and funders serve as a clearinghouse for information on improving urban life while lessening the isolation between groups. More than 6,380 people have participated in the 64 forums since they began in 1996.

It's hard to measure the impact of any forum, whether it's on the merit or demerit of a baseball stadium or on how to acknowledge and eliminate racism. Quite possibly minds change one by one, after receiving an influx of new information.

The women in the discussion group made a tiny inroad toward understanding. Maybe what the Cities at Work initiative knows is this: If you combine enough whispers, you eventually hear a roar.



**DEBORAH
LOCKE**
EDITORIAL
WRITER

TO ATTEND

The two Cities at Work race forums — this month on business and next month on putting talk into action — are free and open to the public. Registration is required for the free meals before each; call (651) 642-4060.

■ **WHAT:** "Changing Faces of Business": topics include community-building; the impact of minority-owned businesses; and the recruitment of a new work force
 ■ **WHEN:** 8 a.m. to noon Thursday
 ■ **WHERE:** Metro State University, 700 E. Seventh St., St. Paul

■ **WHAT:** "Beyond Tolerance: A Call to Action," with keynote speaker John Powell, director of the U's Institute on Race and Poverty
 ■ **WHEN:** Starting at 5 p.m. Nov. 8
 ■ **WHERE:** Arlington High School, 1459 Rice St., St. Paul

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What is EHEP?

One of the best kept secrets in the Twin Cities' civil rights community these days goes by the acronym of EHEP (Education and Housing Equity Project). Its anonymity, while not necessary planned, creates no alarm or despair within the organization, for the success of the organization is not predicated on public notoriety or attention to itself. Its mission is designed to be accomplished through the coordination and support of other organizations and groups with compatible missions.

EHEP was born as a spin-off from the early days of the Minneapolis NAACP's school adequacy suit against the state of Minnesota. When it became evident that a mediation process was going to be the most viable instrument of solving the dispute, the chapter leadership at that time felt that securing the support, understanding, and cooperation of a large community cross-section would be necessary.

Another factor in the formation of EHEP was the realization that there was a direct correlation between housing and education, that would probably receive greater acceptability if they were combined as a single issue. Many of the advocacy groups had traditionally



approached the two as separate initiatives.

To further its agenda, in 1997 EHEP started what it called "Community Circles Collaborative, a multi-sector initiative to promote inter-community dialogue on the critical issues of education, housing, race and segregation in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. It solicited and obtained a host of established partnership with organizations such as the Minnesota Minority Partnership, the Metropolitan Interfaith Council on Affordable Housing, the Minnesota Churches Anti-Racism Initiative and the Urban Coalition, to name a few. The circles themselves consist of eight to fifteen participants, each who will meet at least five times for two hours each meeting. Each circle meets on specific dates at specific locations, use a prepared discussion guide, moderated by experienced facilitators. Currently, over 50 community dialogues are underway in Minneapolis, St. Paul and surrounding suburbs. In St. Paul, many of the circles are being convened as a part of its 1999 "Cities at Work," citywide initiative on race sponsored by the Wilder Foundation.

The rapid expansion of the

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LITTLE

Continued from 2A

community circles has forced EHEP to take on a life of its own, beyond being just an enabler to the NAACP's school adequacy lawsuit. The project recently received

national recognition by being selected by the President's Initiative on Race as a national model of a "promising practice for Racial Reconciliation." Last spring the program's executive director was invited to Washington to discuss innovative approaches to our national racial problems.

11. 4. 99

Circles drawing people together

By KATIE O'BRIEN

If you believe challenges for the metropolitan area affect us all, you have an opportunity to come together in conversation with others. Discussions will focus on critical issues like housing, employment and education. "Community Circles: Conversations at the Crossroads" offers a chance to listen deeply to others' beliefs and experiences; an opportunity to examine new information and how it squares with your own beliefs and attitudes; an occasion to meet new people and find common ground for action; and an opportunity to influence policies for the Twin Cities metropolitan area.

Each circle is composed of eight-15 people who are committed to meeting five times for two hours each. An experienced facilitator will moderate each circle. A discussion guide tailored to the Twin Cities area will be used to promote communication.

People from this area will have an opportunity to participate. The first meeting will be held in the Stillwater Public Library at 7 p.m. Monday, March 15. If you have any questions, contact Rev. Margy Matlin at Church of the Ascension. You may call the church at 430-2609, ext. 13, or 430-9222 to reserve a place. There is no cost, but participation is limited.

To: Margy

It was a simple request. Margy asked if I would send this information to the local papers. Margy and I had gotten acquainted as members of an advisory board for a welfare to work project. I wanted to say more than the announcement, but ...

Then serendipity happened again. I watched a fact-inspired television drama, "Behind the Mask." The young, mentally impaired man in the story came to the rescue of the doctor who operated the center the young man attended. This heroic act draws them together and changes both their lives. The most moving part was after the drama -- we were privileged to see a short video of the real young man and his father.

So much of what I write is from my own life experiences that taught me early what is behind our masks. I grew up in a "Lake Wobegone" neighborhood where we believed we were clearly "above average." The masks were of education, success, handsome homes and smart children. But I saw behind those masks to reality. Issues like alcoholic behavior, mental illness and abuse are in those homes, too.

My roommate at St. Kate's was my first experience with someone who grew up in a racially integrated, poor neighborhood in Minneapolis. The year my husband was in graduate school in New York, I went back to work as a nurse. There were many nights I was the only non-black person on duty. In my work with people with disabilities, I learned so much from folks we called "different." My work at Wilder Forest increased my enjoyment of diversity. And best of all my work with "labeled" kids still gives me peace and pleasure.

In my writing, I try to honor the richness of diversity. I believe our strongest, healthiest communities are diverse. And I believe that the issues facing the inner cities do affect the lives of all in the metropolitan area. Community circles are a chance to gather with others and work together.