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King and Brown: To end racial disparity, take the first step

Let's bring money, time and influence to bear on this Twin Cities problem.

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A recent national study showing that blacks in our area are three times more likely to be unemployed than whites has resulted in a spike of attention to the issue. We must now fan this spark to bring about the flames of change. Talk alone will not do it.

The study, released by the Economic Policy Institute, named our metropolitan area as the worst in the nation when it comes to unemployment disparities. Rather than simply revisiting the problem, let's instead view this as the next chapter in the quest for equity in this country, just as we did with slavery, segregation and voting rights. In these cases, blacks stood up and took the initiative to pursue the promises of America. Whites joined them, supported them and ultimately triumphed with them. We firmly believe that the people of the Twin Cities are up to a comparable task. We simply have to

be willing to become bridge-builders.

The job of the bridge-builder is to close the gap that separates people of color from whites in the economic mainstream. There are three primary elements. Education provides the footings; marketable skills are the supports, and deliberate, active social networks are the spans that bring people together.

Creating these bridges is in everyone's best interest. Quite simply, with the imminent exit of the baby boomers from the workforce, there will be fewer white workers and more people of color. If we seek prosperity, we must ensure that they are educated, skilled and wired into the social fabric of the community -- or we will all suffer.

In addition to having a rich legacy of caring about the common good, Minnesotans also have innovative leaders who get the job done when presented with the opportunity to do the right thing. This has been our experience with HIRE Minnesota, a coalition of more than 70 organizations from all types of communities that has united to ensure that public investments in infrastructure and green jobs benefit low-income people and people of color. Together we have begun to secure investments in training and outreach

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as well as commitments to transparent reporting of hiring patterns.

Because, make no mistake, it takes investment to change the patterns that are before us. As we begin the slow and arduous process of rebuilding our economy, we need to ensure that public investments are made strategically and deliberately -- so that they will provide fair economic opportunities for all, not perpetuate the structural inequities of the past.

Our collective investments of money, time and influence should leverage proven bridge-building strategies that exist today. The Cristo Rey internship program is an excellent model for giving kids skills and including them in a social network. The "Power of YOU" program provides access to college for kids, bridging the gap between skilled- and unskilled-worker opportunities. The Heavy Equipment Operators Union, Summit Academy OIC and the Minnesota Department of Transportation have developed an operators program for women and minorities that will provide access to a network that has previously excluded them.

We also challenge employers to provide one person of color a job in a professional environment and nurture their professional

development. A partnership between Achieve Minneapolis, the Chamber of Commerce and the Minnesota Business Partnership could establish the framework. If each bridge-builder took on one person, the gap would close. And, it will cost peanuts compared with what we pay now.

Finally, these individual actions and targeted investments must be reinforced with structural changes. Government, developers, organized labor and construction companies must view land development as an opportunity for human capital development. Hiring goals and minority-hiring projections must become an integrated part of the business approach, like OSHA safety standards, rather than an afterthought.

HIRE Minnesota has already shown that building bridges across racial, cultural and geographic boundaries to take deliberate action can yield results in a short period of time.

So, this is not about blame, nor is it a request for another program. It is an invitation to be a bridge-builder and spark the elimination of unemployment disparity.

We have work to do.

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Are you with us?

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