Planning to Overcome Racism
A Look Into Kansas City’s Human Investment Plan

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Racism is still a pervasive problem in today’s cities, and successful urban planning requires addressing this problem in both its blatant and subtle manifestations. An adaptation of an article submitted to the 1998 National Planning Conference, this paper describes the course of action taken by Camiros, Inc. in combating racism through the FOCUS Kansas City Human Investment Plan; the suggestions and findings discussed in the plan can be used by other cities looking for a game plan for addressing racism in a comprehensive manner.

Building the New American City: Making Connections for the 21st Century

In the mid-1990s, Kansas City, Missouri found itself facing a number of challenges common to major American cities: transportation shortcomings, concentration of poverty, and inner-city blight. Recognizing the need to find politically and economically viable long-term solutions to the city’s problems in these areas, Kansas City mayor, Emanuel Cleaver, and his City Council created a Civic Steering Committee to oversee the creation of a community-driven, 25-year plan for action. The plan was intended to be a unifying strategy that would emphasize connections—connecting people to places, people to each other, and the past to the future. The plan would be broken into three separate components: a governance plan, a physical environment plan, and a human investment plan. The Kansas City Council hired our firm, Camiros, Inc., to assist in the creation of the human investment component of the FOCUS plan.

During one of my initial information-gathering visits to Kansas City, I approached the late Dr. Larry Ramsey, who was then the Superintendent of the Kansas City School District. Dr. Ramsey knew that I had come to tell him about our intentions to create the Human Investment Plan for his city, and almost as soon as I had introduced myself, Dr. Ramsey made the statement that would shape the rest of our work on FOCUS. “Kansas City,” Dr. Ramsey said, “is a racist city”—clearly implying that the city’s racism would pose significant problems for the comprehensive plan in general, and the human investment plan in particular. In response to these concerns, we began to investigate what Dr. Ramsey meant by “racist.”

Most agree that racial prejudice—especially institutionalized prejudice—acts to deny groups of people equal access to and full participation in key roles in society. Based on the notion of superiority of one group over another, racism confers special—and arbitrary—privileges on the dominant group. All too frequently, the victimized group responds with anger and frustration, leading to a community polarization that dehumanizes both oppressor and oppressed.

The social and individual costs of racial prejudice and other forms of unfair discrimination are high. First and foremost, racially-motivated fear and hatred isolate communities and individuals from the city’s jobs and opportunities, turning some citizens into prisoners in their own neighborhoods. Racism leads to the lack
of investment in people in a variety of areas—from health to education—and to an attitude that accepts lower standards in the delivery of these basic investments to people of color. Direct victims of racism are not the only ones who lose; prejudice erodes everyone’s quality of life by effectively excluding a viable and productive segment of the workforce from economic participation.

In light of these costs, are we forced to accept the persistence of racism, or can we do better? Dr. Ramsey based his comment on the assumption that racism is axiomatic, that it must be accepted as a factor in any exchange between citizens. On the other hand, Rabbi Michael Zedek, another Kansas City community leader, saw things differently, arguing that reducing racism is both feasible and necessary. He proposed the idea that, “You don’t have to change the hearts and minds of all 460,000 citizens of this city—only the hearts and minds of about 10,000 opinion-makers.”

In developing our human investment plan for Kansas City, we accepted Rabbi Zedek’s proposition and set about using his suggested approach.

We started with the fundamental idea that actions speak louder than words. Instead of an easily abandoned rhetorical commitment to vague notions of “tolerance” and “respect,” city leaders must move beyond rhetoric to adopt actual policies that translate these resolutions into reality. In our human investment plan for Kansas City, we proposed the following policy approaches for combating racism in Kansas City, and we believe these general principles are equally helpful for other cities interested in reducing racism and increasing equality.

Reducing Racism through Human Investment

1. Influence opinion-makers. Cities can address racism primarily through harnessing the community credibility of local elected officials, community leaders, and people whose opinions are respected throughout the community. These are the 10,000 opinion-makers who must be convinced in order to successfully influence the 460,000 citizens referenced by Rabbi Zedek. In Kansas City, we trained community leaders, paying special attention to the senior police officials who lead and train officers who are frequently confronted with difficult situations that involve racial misunderstandings.

2. Eliminate institutional forms of discrimination, such as lending and insurance redlining, and hiring biases, etc. In 1996, the Kansas City Mayor’s Task Force found that housing discrimination remained dispiritingly prevalent, and that redlining remained an issue in minority communities. Cities can change this by providing a model and an assistance package for institutions to undertake self-directed racism audits, looking particularly at lending practices, insurance company performance, fair housing practices, and equal employment opportunities. Once cities understand the forms of racism deeply embedded within these local practices, they can work to change them for the better. Consultants and facilitators who understand organizational development and human behavior should be made available to help local governments and city organizations locate and eliminate the racist institutions they may unwittingly be supporting. Employment and career advancement practices in critical city services, like the police department, the local justice system, and social services must reflect the racial composition of their cities in order to foster community trust and support for these institutions.

3. Strengthen relationships between minority groups and government representatives, particularly police officers and departments. Senior police officials should receive concentrated training, as they lead the group most often confronted with intensely difficult situations involving racial misunderstandings. Cities should conduct annual workshops between police officers and members of minority communities—taking
Planning to Overcome Racism

care to include young people—that explore the perceptions and realities of their relationships and ways in which these can be improved. As part of this process, community policing must be expanded citywide. The philosophy behind community policing is that the police, residents, and business community are all partners in solving crime, preventing crime, apprehending offenders, and setting good examples for young people. Community policing is making a significant difference in the livability of the target neighborhoods in Kansas City where it is now in operation.

4. Promote cultural awareness and appreciation between different ethnic, racial, and cultural groups. Using public relations, marketing techniques, facilitated anti-racism workshops, and forums for cross-group dialogue, cities can actively work to eliminate historical and often deeply held misperceptions about persons of “other” racial and ethnic backgrounds. In Kansas City, we found that people just needed assistance, encouragement, and a comfortable setting in which to move into new behaviors. To create these settings, we used the organizing abilities and community credibility of local religious and cultural organizations to create gatherings that provided opportunities for cross-cultural and cross-racial exchange. Churches in particular rose to this challenge on a grand scale by forming interracial congregational partnerships, instituting pulpit exchanges, initiating joint community work-projects, and coordinating informal gatherings, like potluck dinners. One key lesson from the Kansas City experience is that all elements of society must strive to bring people together, including neighborhood associations, charitable organizations, political parties, and businesses.

Specific strategies for cities might include: (1) establishing an anti-racism resource center, funded through foundations, individuals, and the city, to offer anti-racism seminars, provide written and video resources, and train workshop facilitators; (2) hosting and marketing cross-cultural and anti-racism events; (3) utilizing a multi-layered public relations strategy to present positive stories of racial harmony, progress in reducing racism, and the successes of city anti-racism efforts.

5. Promote anti-racism education. Children are the best hope for a non-racist community. When they are grown, 20% of the population of the United States will have a background that is something other than European. The success of their world will depend, in part, on the dependability of society in providing them with sound anti-racism training in grammar school and high school. In Kansas City, we worked with the City’s school board to assist school districts with upgrading their anti-racism curriculum and proposed significant reforms, including combining the metropolitan suburban school systems and the City’s school districts. We also proposed that special efforts be made to provide African-American male administrators and teachers in the school systems at every grade level. Good role models are important for African-American boys and young male adults, since they are the country’s and the city’s most at-risk group.

6. Expand youth development activities. Strengthening existing mentoring programs and establishing additional mentoring programs for minority youths is important, especially for young men. Mentoring and tutoring programs for this group are crucial to achieving a community free from racism. In Kansas City, the Mayor’s Task Force galvanized volunteers from across the metropolitan area to address this need, and worked to create opportunities to bring youth together with mentors through sports, social events, and church activities.

Implementation
Coupled with the long-term nature of the challenge, these action items require buy-in from a multitude of different stakeholders, suggesting that a coordinating council is critical to providing continuity and leader-
ship. In Kansas City, the Mayor’s Task Force recommended two such groups: one within the city’s political arena, and one centered on the spiritual side of the issue, convened by faith congregations throughout the metropolitan area. Both have important and complimentary work.

**Diversity Council**

The Mayor’s permanent Diversity Council coordinates Kansas City’s anti-racism efforts in the political arena. The composition of this council reflects the community, both racially and economically, and includes the Mayor of Kansas City, the mayors of surrounding cities and suburbs, and other community leaders. Participation of area businesses and corporate leaders is essential to the success of the initiative. Based on the example of Kansas City, similar councils in other cities should do the following: concentrate on the issues of racial justice; work with the wide range of institutions within the city to help them root out practices that perpetuate racism; and proactively establish programs that provide equal opportunity. For example, in Kansas City, the Task Force recommended that a venture capital fund be established for African-American entrepreneurs.

**Council of Congregations**

In Kansas City, the faith community formed a Council of Congregations to complement the work of the Diversity Council. This council concentrated its efforts on the spiritual side of ending racism through changing the hearts and minds of individuals and building community between congregations from diverse racial backgrounds.

**Conclusion**

In reality, we know that it will take generations to eliminate racism—even with considerable resources and total commitment. That means 20 to 25 years of continuous effort by committed community leaders. Eliminating racism must become, like its hateful adversary, institutionalized. The effort will not survive this long period of time as an individual or a special-interest-group project; it has to be made permanent as a community institution. Based on our experience in Kansas City, we have proposed a system by which the work is carried out by many committed groups working together and separately over time.

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