Employment Equity in Minneapolis

By Policy Link

On August 8, 2012, Minneapolis became the first city in the nation to adopt a resolution promoting racial equity in employment. Coauthored by Councilmembers Cam Gordon and Don Samuels and passed unanimously, it declares institutional racism “a primary reason for unemployment disparities” and requires the city to take action to ensure that people of color have a fair shot at government jobs, promotions, and contracts.

“We heard from the community that the city better have its own house in order,” said Gordon. “If we can develop tools that make a difference within the city, that’s going to be more powerful than [trying] to tell others what they should be doing.”

The council has set itself a target of reducing racial disparities in employment and poverty rates for residents of color by 25 percent by 2016; and increasing the people of color hired on city-funded projects to 32 percent (from 11 percent).

Without Inclusion—Goodbye Growth

The Twin Cities region has the worst racial employment gap in the nation, according to Algernon Austin of the Economic Policy Institute. African Americans are more than three times as likely as whites to be out of work, and Native Americans are four times more likely to be jobless.

Forty percent of Minneapolis residents are people of color but they only hold 17 percent of the jobs and make up 23 percent of the city’s workforce. Such inequities are potentially disastrous for the region’s future, officials and advocates agree.

“If you want a region to be viable and growing, you need to draw from all sectors of society, especially those that will be dominant in decades to come,” says Shawn Lewis, an urban planner who played a major role in promoting the ordinance. “This is not only a moral argument, it’s economic.”

The city took the first steps toward adopting the resolution in 2008, when it established an Equity in Employment Task Force and in 2012, hired a full-time Director of Employment Equity. But it resulted from years of advocacy and grassroots organizing from the people.

When Communities Lead, Cities Must Follow

HIRE Minnesota, a coalition of 70 diverse organizations and 2,000 residents, began a campaign to bring the state “from worst to first” in 2008. HIRE actively participated in the Minneapolis City Council process—sitting on the task force and filling council chambers with members who spoke in support of the resolution.

Metro Talking Circle, a volunteer group which works to advance economic equity for African American and Native American communities, developed recommendations for the task force and laid out these goals for the city: (1) lead by example; (2) strengthen workforce development; and (3) support efforts by business to hire, retain, and promote more people of color.

In response, the Minnesota Department of Transportation has increased its hiring of people of color on projects by 138 percent since 2009.

Towards Action and Accountability

As a first step toward implementation, the city is developing an equity and assessment toolkit to guide its budget, policy, and program decisions.

Also acknowledging the need for action at the regional level, the city has joined with the Ramsey County Blue Ribbon Commission’s “Everybody In” effort to reduce employment disparities throughout the Twin Cities metro area.

“We will be in the room, reading the reports, raising questions,” says HIRE Organizer Avi Viswanathan. He is hopeful that the city’s commitment to leading by example will have a ripple effect that reaches private employers as well.

Endnotes


Reimagine Planning Jobs Women & Economic Justice Transit

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