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Time is of the Essence for American Indians

For the American Indian community in Minnesota, massive disparities undermine the ability of our people to thrive within the state economy. The preeminent problem is our extraordinarily high unemployment rate (13.1 percent) and the shocking number of our people who are no longer considered part of the Minnesota labor force (40 percent).

This problem is related to historical and systemic shortcomings that go beyond the mere availability of jobs. From strong public education to proper health care, affordable housing to adequate chemical dependency treatment, to the very treaty rights protecting indigenous sovereignty, the “problem” has persistently plagued our people for over 150 years in a multitude of manifestations. All of these issues contribute directly to the economic disparities that the American Indian community is forced to face every day. These disparities cannot be solved quickly, easily or cheaply.

How can over 150 years of systemic failures be eliminated quickly in order to hasten the improvement of our people’s fortunes now? The reality is that it cannot. This will take time. Properly addressing this problem will require a persistent application of effort and resources. Our community members need long-term care and ongoing development.

Unfortunately, what we have encountered at the American Indian OIC over the past two decades is a requirement by federal government entities to focus on narrow job placement based outcomes that align with short government funding cycles, rather than on the proper development of the communities that they have been elected to serve. Grants and contracts continue to be issued with a short amount of time for execution. The grantee must enroll, train, place and then follow up with retention data within the established timeline of the grant or contract.

While these opportunities have a powerful effect on those with few barriers, they are, alas, merely superficial in their impact on our overall community. A candidate must already possess a high degree of aptitude and base knowledge in order to successfully complete one of these fast-paced programs.

In order for these programs to meet performance standards, an unspoken “creaming process” has to occur. Only those people in the community who are the most ready and capable of achieving the prescribed program outcomes within the time limits can break free from poverty. In such a paradigm, those who are most in need are the first to be left behind.

In a community that is trying to overcome 150 years of chronic disparities that were authored by the very same government systems now trying to help them, the likelihood that huge numbers of our people will be transformed in a mere 12 months is pure fantasy.

What we have come to learn at the American Indian OIC is that meaningful change within our communities will require multi-dimensional investment over a period of years. We are not talking about decades, but rather something beyond the mandated adherence to the short timelines and narrowly focused outcome measures that we are forced to contend with. Additional time will help people develop in multiple areas (education, personal and emotional well-being, stabilized housing, etc.) and will enable more of our community members to participate in the economic rehabilitation process.

Additionally, the “work first” model of immediate job placement – a particular outcome that theoretically can be achieved in a short time – continues to fail many of our people. And so we disavow it as nothing more than economic triage. In the interests of expediency, this model has placed our adults in dead-end service jobs at minimum wage. Community members are forced to hold down three of four of these “positions” in order to achieve a meaningful income for their families – all while preventing them from seeing their families because of oppressive work schedules. The loss of family time creates new problems across generations, serving to exacerbate and perpetuate the chronic disparities.

What is needed is the proper development of skill sets and capabilities that will enable candidates to enter solid career pathways. Unfortunately, the structure of many grants require direct-service providers in our community to utilize these inadequate “work first” methods as a means of honoring contracts.

Finally, we know that many of our community’s adults need further remedial education, not only to obtain basic educational credentials (such as the GED), but to make up for the historic failures of a K-12 system that did not provide them with a quality education. Many of our 30- and 40-somethings are reading at a third-grade level and performing mathematics at the second-grade level. What meaningful career pathway can be secured and retained with such skills? Remediation, along with the development of career-oriented skills, cannot occur in 12 months. More time is needed to further develop our people in a meaningful way.

An adequate investment of resources for longer periods and broader, more flexible outcome measures, is the solution. Government officials need to consider the nature of the problem – how direct service providers like the American Indian OIC are desperately trying to undo 150 years of failure now, while simultaneously preventing more of our younger

people from slipping away. Only with more time and resources to develop our people can we penetrate deeper within the community to engage more people and transform more lives. This is how meaningful change will occur.

Until such reforms are implemented, until a more nuanced understanding of the nature of our community’s disparities is brought forward with the adequate means to address them, government agency programs will have only a surface-level impact, and the chronic economic disparities afflicting our people will continue. How long must we wait for wisdom to enlighten the powers-that-be to implement the broad changes needed to better serve our community?

The truth is the state of Minnesota cannot afford to wait any longer, because the acute needs of the American Indian people, the emerging needs of the state’s labor force and current events will surely overtake the discussion before long. Perhaps the state of Minnesota is uninterested in such investments. This would then foster different questions for a wholly different type of discussion. After more than 150 years of chronic disparities, change is needed now. **T**