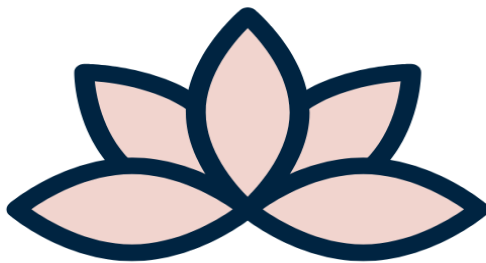


2022



BUILDING EQUITY THROUGH DIALOGUE

Community Convening Summary



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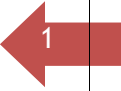


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Building Equity Through Dialogue



Introduction

For many in our region, the St. Cloud area is a great place to live, learn, work and play. Yet, some of the community members invited to attend community conversations said that they faced profound and persistent inequities - which will threaten our collective prosperity.

This report summarizes the key findings collected from the first four conversations sponsored by the Central Minnesota Community Foundation (CMCF) with support from Filsan Talent Partners. The convenings took part between January 22 and April 20 of 2022. The primary purpose of the convenings was to invite diverse residents from across the St. Cloud area to discuss the challenges they encounter in experiencing racial inequities in the fields of education, healthcare, housing, economy, employment practices, and community engagement; and to offer recommendations for potential innovative, and/or pragmatic change. The convenings also provided key business leaders, local employers, community-based associations, and profit/non-profit organization directors an opportunity to build cross-racial, cross-sector relationships that aim to address racial disparities and other social hurdles.

To capture the meaningful lived experiences of the individuals, our trained facilitators and their note-takers divided the participants into small groups. This type of small group dialogue spurred intimate conversations. With the cooperation of CMCF, the Filsan team

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managed to ensure that each group—ranging from 8 to 11 participants—reflected cross-sector leaders and diverse residents in the St. Cloud area. The invited participants consisted of local public health officials, community organizers, business leaders, charitable organizations, researchers, professors, and doctors, both NGOs and Non-NGOs. Those members demonstrated their willingness to discuss the feasibility of creating and sustaining genuine equity initiatives in different community settings. One of our priorities was to listen to/heed underserved voices in group conversations.

This report is presented in four parts:

Convening 1: Building Relationships - Bonding and Learning

Convening 2: Listening to people's experiences and challenges around racial disparities

Convening 3: Addressing Challenges in Employment and Education

Convening 4: Addressing Challenges in Health Care and Housing

Summary of Key Discussion Points

The four racial equity convenings that were held via Zoom covered a range of great topics. Filsan facilitators and notetakers captured the community's main input and experiences regarding disparities in education, healthcare, housing, economy, employment practices, and community engagement.

Key Definitions

Definitions of equity vary across sectors and within organizations—and terms like “disparities,” “inequities” and “inequalities” have significant nuanced meanings. For the purpose of this convening, equity is defined as treatment of different views or opinions equally and fairly.

- **BIPOC:** The acronym stands for Black, Indigenous, People of Color.
- **POC:** An acronym used for ‘People of Color’.
- **Non-POC:** The term is used to describe any person who is considered “white”.
- **Community of Color:** The term “person of color” is primarily used to describe any person who is not considered “white”.
- **Latinx:** this term is used to refer to people of Latin American cultural or ethnic identity in the United States.
- **African American:** African Americans are an ethnic group who are from the United States.
- **East African:** Group of people who come from East Africa.

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- **Diverse:** Including or involving people from a range of different social and ethnic backgrounds and of different genders, sexual orientations, etc.

The following is a synthesis of the participants' recurrent themes and notes taken during the four convenings. These themes and notes will help the readers identify some of the proposed recommendations for next steps in creating and advancing a policy agenda to promote sustainable and effective community-based equity initiatives.

Convening One: Building Relationships - Bonding and Learning



Convening one broadly focused on bonding and learning from participants across sectors. During the first stage of the first convening, a series of questions were devised to reveal three important things: a) challenges/barriers b) suggestions/solutions for improvement and c) community strengths. Participants were asked about how they have been impacted by the inequities and the top three challenges in the St. Cloud area to expose barriers/challenges faced by diverse residents. To reveal suggestions and strengths, participants were asked to envision their hopes for racial equity efforts, what a racially equitable community would look like, and the changes they have and have not seen in the St. Cloud area regarding racial equity.

Perceptions of Disparities - POC and Non POC

Throughout this report disparities between the perception of challenges/barriers reported by POC and non-POC are distinguished and touched on when significant. Differences in suggestions/solutions between non-POC and POC are also explored when

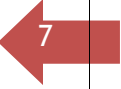
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particularly noteworthy. This distinction is important because opinions, barriers, suggestions, and solutions from POC communities are crucial to view apart from majority non-POC opinions and suggestions for the recognition, empowerment, and ownership of POC input and solutions in future community action groups. Differences in life and racial experience for POC and non-POC will reveal important distinctions for more effective action groups that address racial disparities.

Overall perceptions of the St. Cloud Community: Barriers for POC

Both POC and Non-POC participants agree that the St. Cloud area has a bad reputation, especially around race. The detailed responses indicate that this reputation might be accurate, especially regarding the experiences of both POC and non-POC. POC participants report feeling unsafe in St. Cloud, being unable to outwardly express diversity, experiencing racism in everyday interactions from business transactions to casual interracial encounters on the street, lacking equal access to opportunities, and general poor intercultural/interracial communication. POC community members report feeling a lack of belonging in the St. Cloud area. Even POC leaders reported feeling a lack of belonging among white-led tables, committees, conversations, meetings, boards, etc. POC respondents are acutely aware of the disparities they experience and of data that is available that illustrates the issues in our area. Both POC and non-POC participants reported that much of the data collected at both the local and state level is showing no progress, despite our organizational efforts.

Further, some of the key barriers to racial equity reported by POC are educational attainment disparities (the achievement gap for kids of color), income and economic



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hardships, discipline disparities in schools (kids of color suspended at a higher rate for subjective behaviors or cultural misunderstandings, which is also illustrated by Minnesota Department of Education data). Even non-POC participants reported the educational and discipline gap being a key barrier for POC in St. Cloud.

The contrasting viewpoints of non-POC participants - Real Progress or Growing Banal Racism?

Non-POC respondents report two contrasting viewpoints in terms of the perceptions of area DEI efforts and perceptions of area diversity. Many Non-POC reported feeling like the area has made great strides in diversity, equity, and inclusion in both public and private companies. However, as facilitators delved deeper into these opinions, we found that this is due to some respondents being exposed to isolated DEI efforts with questionable results and non-POC respondents feeling as if seeing more diversity in the area is progress. Non-POC participants' awareness and understanding of DEI efforts and area diversity tends not to go beyond the surface. To illustrate this, many non-POC also report not knowing what to do to build the trust that is lacking between POC and non-POC, feeling drained by DEI efforts that encounter pushback from those in certain organizations, and being acutely aware of racial rhetoric in the community both publicly and privately. Further, many non-POC reported that they are implicitly expected to agree with racially charged rhetoric.

Suggestions for Change

Convening one did not focus on a particular topic, instead allowing participants to express what the most pressing issues are and general solutions for those issues. Here, again, a divergence between POC-suggested solutions and non-POC suggested solutions arose.

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According to POC attendees, area organizations and leadership need to take more practical steps, informed by data and accompanied by full inclusion and participation of the POC communities they wish to serve. POC also reported that non-POC leaders tend to group all POC together and assume they face similar challenges, therefore, POC suggested that non-POC leadership needs education and more data collection on the different ethnic/cultural groups and issues they face. For example, African Americans and Somali Americans are both prominent groups in St. Cloud yet, feel grouped together in program development implementation without much regard for distinct cultural-historical differences and challenges.

One POC powerfully spoke about the need for non-POC leaders to understand what is meant by racial equity, indicating that racial equity is not quite understood by non-POC. They expressed that racial equity is not something we will achieve, but rather something we will continually work on, and that racial equity cannot be worked on without non-POC bringing themselves to communities of color to increase intercultural understanding. Many POC participants feel that too many area leaders express visible discomfort and reluctance when they venture out of their areas of familiarity.

Non-POC participants suggest that we need more conversations (like 'Building Equity Through Dialogue') to better understand the issues that POC are facing in our community. Others felt the need to tell positive stories of POC succeeding in the area. However, POC participants resoundingly voiced that "enough talking" has been done and that telling positive stories is not the only action needed to affect the change desperately needed in the St. Cloud area.

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Once POC views on solutions were expressed, non-POC leaders then talked about educating staff for intercultural awareness and inclusion, white privilege, and tokenism. More solutions from non-POC included intercultural relationship building for increased trust, targeted needs assessments for specific cultural groups and communities, diversifying staff, providing more culturally aware resource delivery, and culturally competent education in schools for educators and administrators.

Convening One Strengths

General strengths the area possesses to combat racial inequities reported in convening one include: area is increasing in awareness of differences, more dialogues are occurring around race and equity, and companies are starting to recognize the impact of DEI and integrating it into their organizational structures. The Sherburne County Public Health Department, for example, is tackling inequities they are aware of; Granite Partners is working hard to infuse DEI concepts within partner companies and area leaders; United Way is working with communities of color with diverse staff; and Filsan Talent Partners is providing DEI services to area businesses and hosting events to increase cross-cultural understanding. Finally, many new POC-run businesses are increasing collaboration with local organizations.

Convening Two: Economy and Employment Disparities Summary



Convening two focused on employment and economy disparities in the St. Cloud area. Again, respondents were primarily asked questions to reveal barriers that plague racially diverse St. Cloud residents, make suggestions and propose solutions for change, and identify strengths in the areas being explored.

Barriers/Challenges - Economy and Employment

Overall, both POC and non-POC respondents felt that the poverty rate in the St. Cloud area is one of the biggest barriers for both POC and non-POC families, preventing them from living healthier, stress-free, and quality lives. Additionally, nationwide inflation is affecting all of St. Cloud, but it is reported to be affecting POC particularly hard.

Regarding POC respondents' expressed barriers to employment, there are strong overtones of racial discrimination throughout the employment cycle. Somali respondents reported only being able to obtain minimum wage employment. Even when some POC have educations, training, and experience for next level positions, they are unable to attain higher level employment. When given an opportunity for higher-level and higher-paying employment, East African respondents reported racism in the interviewing process and suspected racism when employers view their resumes (suspecting recruiters are "throwing

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out” resumes with foreign or Somali names “right off the bat”). Many POC reported very few employer callbacks when attempting to apply for positions beyond minimum wage. Further, when POC get into the workplace, companies are neither welcoming nor accommodating concerning cultural differences. Some POC report being punished in the workplace when bringing up diversity, equity, and inclusion issues to management. Others reported certain industries—ironically those struggling for workers—are not taking advantage of the abundance of POC looking for better work. They report that companies are not prioritizing DEI efforts and uninterested in beginning DEI efforts within their organizations.

Non-POC respondents reported knowing that low wages are an issue for POC, along with childcare issues, flexible working schedules, and a lack of remote work availability in the area. Interestingly, POC did not mention remote work availability being an economic/employment issue on their radar.

Many employment barriers were strongly connected to access barriers in terms of education, skills, and job requirements. POC report that skills training is hard to access due to economic and/or language barriers. One POC reports that his community has trouble simply accessing workforce development programs despite being low income because the income thresholds and/or skills requirements are so low families that are struggling and could potentially benefit from the workforce programs are somehow making too much money to qualify for workforce development help. The income threshold, they report, “requires you to already be in the ground” (economically). Suspending minimum wage work to enter workforce programs is impossible for economically struggling POC, already in precarious financial situations. Other POC and non-POC report that there are too many

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requirements for good jobs that could be filled by training individuals with identified capacities to learn, thus lifting area families out of poverty.

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Economic barriers reported include the following: POC businesses and families are struggling because of a lack of culturally appropriate financial products (like Islamic friendly financing), lack of culturally informed finance education, and the prevalent general racism when pursuing economic opportunities. The following are specific examples of the above listed barriers: Information to navigate the financial system is hard to access for many POC in the area; a Latinx respondent reports that Latinx businesses owners encounter racist strip mall landlords who favor white renters over POC; some POC report being told higher monthly rents and being asked for additional requirements when compared to what non-POC are told when inquiring about rent for businesses. Somali respondents report that the combination of these economic issues creates situations in which running businesses for POC are disadvantageous and much more costly than what non-POC encounter.

Suggestions/Solutions - Economy and Employment

POC participants feel that access barriers for employment and skills training must be addressed. Solutions include: forming state partnerships with employers to develop, train, and retrain individuals for better jobs; and innovating current local employment programs to dismantle employment access barriers and provide alternatives or improve access to certification requirements.

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Other participants feel that area industries need a type of town hall meeting between leadership, prospective employees, and current employees to gather feedback on how to fill positions, make the organizational climate more welcoming, and improve retention.

Both POC and non-POC participants report that employers need to take part in DEI training, with some participants mentioning the importance of implicit bias training in DEI efforts. DEI efforts at companies may also include altering onboarding programs for more inclusive language and a focus on strategic intercultural relationship building among front-line staff and management for better employee retention, as one respondent reports. Finally, one POC respondent feels that those involved in the hiring process for area businesses need to learn fair and unbiased hiring techniques (like resume blinding) and that interviewers need to be educated in DEI and other fair practices to suspend bias.

Lastly, strategic large scale interorganizational and intraorganizational efforts were mentioned as being important to economic and employment barriers. They include: mass education of leaders and employers in DEI workshops and cultural awareness, mapping minority businesses and doing needs assessments, and large-scale collaborative ventures between large non-POC organizations and smaller POC led organizations to identify and break down economic and employment barriers.

Convening Two Strengths - Economy and Employment

Strengths the area possesses to combat economic and employment inequities reported in convening two include that some public employers have changed the way they interview prospective employees and are opening interviews up to more people regardless of experience. Also, leaders in the area have the passion and desire to make things better,

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the area has high levels of human capital, and there are many POC in St. Cloud ready to make a difference. Investment companies are prioritizing the development of DEI in partner companies, and there are training opportunities offered by the Minnesota Workforce Development Centers available.

Convening Three Summary: Education and Community Engagement



Two major themes for education barriers reported *are institutional barriers and family/cultural barriers* in terms of academic outcomes.

Education: Challenges and Barriers

Importantly for this session, POC were acutely aware that the State of Minnesota Department of Education data shows that the state provides excellent quality education for white students, but not for students of color.

Family and cultural barriers impede educational success for POC families. For some, home life and resettlement challenges experienced by parents make it difficult for both the parents and children to succeed in education. The main barriers for families that make education equity difficult are a lack of family literacy/language barriers to help with homework, cultural misunderstandings and mismatch between education professionals and families of diverse backgrounds, the inability of schools/educators and parents to connect and engage with one another, and a lack of family experience and access to information within the education system to better navigate problems and guide children to success. The

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language barrier issue was communicated by Latinx and East African participants, particularly.

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African American participants expressed a lack of cultural understanding at the school level, specifically that schools are lacking other African American staff who can relate to and help African American students with community and culturally specific issues that arise and affect student success. Another theme brought up by African American respondents was a feeling of a lack of safety in schools and the feeling/reality of the inability to succeed in schools due to the school's lack of understanding of crucial issues affecting African American communities. They reported that families are unprepared, unfamiliar, and frustrated with how best to guide their children to success in a school system that works to oppress them.

POC and educators of all backgrounds reported a wide variety of educational institutional barriers facing our community. Repeated by many POC is the lack of teachers that are educated to be culturally competent. This leads to teachers who do not know how to make meaningful connections with students of color. School staff do not know how to recognize some forms of racism and do not know how to tackle it. With teachers not prepared in cultural competency or DEI, they will not have the tools to tackle inequities in the schools. Because of a dominant white school staff that is under-educated in cultural competency, parents also feel uncomfortable dealing with the school district, leading to parent disengagement.

POC participants also report outside policy groups fighting against DEI and cultural awareness in schools. This leads to POC being uninterested in working at schools where those dynamics are at play. One particular outcome of these dynamics has been the further

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segregation of schools with the opening of ethnic specific charter schools where some POC are considering enrolling their children instead. Whether those ethnic-specific charter schools are good or bad for students of color is hotly debated amongst POC.

Institutional barriers were commonly expressed regarding education. POC participants felt that there are too many entrance barriers for college that set them back from the beginning, such as high-level language skills, high GPAs, unfamiliarity with the college entrance processes, etc. Because of these entrance barriers, many POC will enter schools and programs that are easy to pass and have no real economic value or realistic career paths. POC also notice that gifted programs predominantly consist of white students. After-school programs that further develop students, additionally, have very distinct racial lines (i.e., participation is low for students of color).

In terms of education equity, POC report not seeing themselves in educational models as discouraging, commonly seeing educators holding their children to low expectations (letting a student of color use a textbook to take a test but not white students), and schools/educators adhering to standards of *equality* rather than *equity*.

Finally, access to technology equipment and education has been a huge challenge for POC families with children in the area school district. For East African families, language assistance to learn how to navigate school technology is lacking.

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Suggestions/Solutions

The three categories of solutions that arose from the discussion regarding education disparities for POC were education efforts, collaboration efforts and activities, and hiring practices.

For collaboration efforts, participants mention a need for more focus groups to understand educational issues; intentional community partnerships (POC suggest more white-led organizations collaborating with POC led organizations); multicultural mentorships for higher education throughout high school; the inclusion of college student groups (ethnic-specific or diversity based) into community solutions; and general intentional inclusion of youth and students into organizational program development to retain area graduates.

For schools and educators, POC suggest more educational efforts of school staff in cultural competency, culturally specific education for teachers, and overall DEI education for school staff.

In regards to educational-based solutions to education barriers for students and parents, both POC and non-POC reported the following: that education for students and parents requires a new focus to re-teach what careers are viable and in demand locally/statewide/nationally so that students choose better career options; that there needs to be an increase in dual language programs and courses for language development; and that educational institutions and organizations must invest in more ESL efforts for non-English speaking parents.

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Finally, many POC responded that the schools need to hire AND develop diverse staff to remedy the cultural misunderstanding between educators and students.

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Community Engagement

The topic of community engagement was overshadowed by concerns about education. Many participants continued to link education with community engagement.

Challenges and Barriers

POC feel that many organizations that engage their communities are white-led and donors for those organizations are also predominately white. Organizational decision-making processes for community engagement efforts are hindered by a lack of diverse staff (people who look like the communities they serve), leading to ineffective community engagement. POC have a lack of trust in organizations that are currently doing the work, again leading to less community engagement. Additionally, POC do not understand what organizations are doing to engage the community. Whether this is because of a lack of awareness or that organizations are not doing enough to engage communities of color is something to be explored.

Non-POC also felt like their organizations do not know how to connect and engage in outreach with diverse communities. Non-POC even expressed feeling uncomfortable in community engagement efforts where their staff or their selves must leave their comfort zone to make contact with diverse communities. Many non-POC feel they do not know where to begin to better connect with diverse communities for program outreach.

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Suggestions and Solutions

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The suggestion for improving community engagement efforts from POC and non-POC are for organizations to assemble more community get-togethers with POC communities and organizations. White-led organizations need to make an effort to show up and get involved with communities of color, coming to POC communities, not the other way around. Many stories were shared about POC feeling upset and neglected when non-POC organizations ignore their neighborhoods and/or demographic.

Convening Three: Strengths for Education and Community Engagement

Strengths the area possesses to combat education and community engagement inequities reported in convening three include: Many participants (both POC and non-POC) expressed that the St. Cloud area has strong institutions and educators that truly care about the success of the children, though they may not know how to move forward in terms of equity and culturally competent education. Further, participants expressed that there were many POC-led non-profits and community centers that assist children of color with homework and engagement in recreation. POC-staff/leaders from these organizations relayed that because of their more effective culturally aware community engagement efforts, they have seen an increase in culturally competent, diverse staff and student achievement.

Convening Four: Healthcare and Housing Disparities



Healthcare: Challenges and Barriers

The major themes that arose from the healthcare disparity conversation revolve around cultural misunderstandings, information accessibility and communication, racism/lack of understanding amongst hospital/clinic staff, lack of mental health awareness (including varying cross-cultural conceptions of mental health), and a lack of collaboration between major healthcare organizations with appropriate non-profit/city/county organizations.

POC mention accessibility and communication issues within the healthcare system. POC report that accessibility to health information and resources is difficult for English as a Second Language (ESL) speakers. ESL speakers have difficulty in scheduling appointments

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and obtaining information to make informed healthcare decisions. Healthcare providers also do not know how to communicate with those from diverse backgrounds in culturally competent ways, leading to cultural misunderstandings and disengagement with healthcare systems.

POC report racism among hospital, ER, and front desk staff. Specific incidents were kept confidential but racist incidents were particularly pronounced for Somali residents and those with visible diversity (clothing, accent/language, skin color). Perceived/real racism and mistreatment in area clinics and at the hospital was expressed often by POC participants. Many POC and non-POC feel that CentraCare is lacking in outreach and education efforts. Further, they also feel there is a lack of culturally informed community health care collaboration among CentraCare, city and county government, and non-profits.

Suggestions/Solutions - Healthcare

Some healthcare equity strengths in the area that were reported are: that there are many Somali run healthcare transportation and homecare businesses, but beyond that most participants felt there were many potential remedies that should be community-led to reduce healthcare disparities.

Most participants, regardless of race, felt that culturally competent education and DEI education was needed for hospital/clinic staff, particularly the public-facing staff (front desk, check-in, triage, etc.). Further mentioned was the need for mental health education for both diverse communities and healthcare providers (increasing awareness of mental health services and providing mental health education *for diverse communities* to reduce intracultural

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stigma; *AND* providing education for increasing awareness of cultural differences in mental health/illness perceptions *for healthcare providers*).

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An increase in bilingual services is desperately needed for appointment assistance, mental health assistance, pharmacy assistance, and transportation assistance.

Finally, outreach and needs assessments should be improved. Some suggest healthcare surveys need to be multilingual and that service providers need to be more culturally informed so they can better understand the needs of POC in the St. Cloud area. Many others feel that CentraCare, the city, and the county need to collaborate to bring more culturally appropriate healthcare outreach programs to diverse communities.

Housing: Challenges and Barriers

The session on housing challenges and barriers for POC was one of the most detailed conversations of the conversation series. A plethora of issues were brought up by affected POC and non-POC, both groups sometimes having similar challenges and other times having different challenges from one another.

General housing challenges that affect the entire area include: a lack of affordable housing developments, rising rent with no living condition improvements, low availability of affordable housing, segregated neighborhoods with crime, drugs and poverty, affluent communities being against affordable housing efforts (Not in My Backyard rhetoric), an abundance of low paying jobs leading to poor housing choices and situations for families and young adults, and concerns about investors buying up good homes to rent out to families for more money than they would pay if they had a mortgage. Many participants felt the housing

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issue is one that is met with the most combative resistance, and one that has seen little progress in the area compared to other issues.

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For POC, specifically Somali participants, the housing issues seem to be a dilemma that they cannot see a way out of. For instance, there are few large family housing options and those that do exist are very expensive. Also, there is a lack of knowledge regarding the homebuying and real estate process, and throughout St. Cloud there exist predatory practices by financial institutions. Taking out loans with interest is forbidden for Muslims looking to buy homes and they also face racism by landlords and deceitful practices by area realtors.

A few specific examples of racism and deceitful practices include: Somalis reporting that area realtors typically look to knowingly unload old homes on those with no knowledge about the quality of the home. Financial alternatives to interest-based mortgages are much more expensive than traditional mortgages, leaving Somali homebuyers with much higher payments while also being in a lower socioeconomic status. Some Somalis have reported they have stopped buying homes in the current market because of the predatory, deceitful practices accompanying the buying process.

Suggestions/Solutions - Housing

Many of the suggestions for housing disparities revolved around education, development of new organizations focused on housing equity, city/county policy change and land assessments, and more city/county and non-profit collaborations for housing coalitions.

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In terms of housing education, many in the community who are not yet homeowners are vulnerable to being taken advantage of, and thus need education and trainings where they can learn what they need to know about home financing, real estate, tenant rights, etc.

Leadership reports that there is not enough involvement and knowledge about how to tackle the housing inequities in the area. Leaders expressed that they need more education on how to address the housing issue in general. There is need for the development of new grassroots organizations that can help with housing inequities. These new potential organizations will need buy-in and collaboration from city and county government, but only once the appropriate educational resources are both received and understood.

City/County leadership believes renewed efforts are needed in housing policy change and land assessments. These efforts will be crucial to the effectiveness of any new housing organization looking to address disparities. Looking to St. Paul and their rent stabilization efforts could be the start of a city/county led initiative that could combat rising home costs.

POC participants had a few unique and practical suggestions for housing challenges. POC respondents feel that some ESL residents need advocates, education, and navigators to help them understand the housing process with regards to homebuying, renting, and even the eviction process. The development of POC-led housing coalitions could be a viable solution to truly connect and provide the populations in need with the appropriate resources. Finally, there is a great need for Islamic friendly financing in the St. Cloud area if Somali residents are to achieve higher and more equitable homeownership rates.

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Convening Four Strengths: Healthcare and Housing

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Strengths the area possesses to combat inequities reported in convening four include the following for housing: that the City of St. Cloud understands the value of parks and recreation and this attitude can be expanded on to understand the value of affordable housing; there is a surplus budget in the state of Minnesota, and it could potentially be tapped to help fund affordable housing; and there are small businesses coming together to help families with rent assistance and interest free loans for housing. For healthcare area strengths: POC-run (mainly Somali) healthcare transportation services are available; there has been an increase in multilingual translation/interpretation/signage in clinics and hospitals; vaccination clinics are going to POC neighborhoods; there are scholarships and grants available for POC to pursue healthcare careers.

Convenings Five and Six: Action Groups and Action Planning

Our final two convenings in May and June focused on forming action groups in each of the following topic areas: healthcare, education, economy/employment, community engagement, and housing. These convenings drew many professionals and stakeholders in the concerned fields with the goal of identifying one key area in which racial equity work will be done. Participants identified resources and individual strengths, determined how to further engage communities and professionals of color, set individual and group level objectives and action items, and set timelines.

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Housing Action Group

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The housing action group consists of several non-profit professionals, financial institutions, and realty groups. The goal of this group is to improve access to information on homebuying and tenant rights for area Somalis. Workshops will be designed and offered in the Somali language to inform area Somalis about the homebuying process, Islamic financing, tenant rights, and practical homeowner tips. They also envision a hotline for Somali speakers to call in for legal advice regarding renting and homeownership issues.

Their overall vision is to increase Somali homeownership and tenant right education.

Community Engagement Action Group

The community engagement group consisted of those in a variety of sectors from for-profit to non-profit, media, and educational professionals. The goal of this group was to improve awareness of community events and provide new, more culturally inclusive events to appeal to communities of color.

This action group is working to increase awareness through better event calendar coordination, translation of event calendars, providing alternative formats to online calendars (utilizing minority media and social networks), specific outreach efforts to communities of color, and providing forums for wide-community feedback on event participation and awareness. This action group also hopes to design and offer more culturally inclusive events through holding feedback forums aimed at communities with currently low engagement and participation at area events. Additionally, they will conduct

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outreach efforts to area organizations in hopes of offering and advertising new types of events that appeal to the under-engaged local demographics.

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Their vision is to increase intercultural participation and engagement in local community events.

Economy/Employment Action Group

The economy/employment action group is working to provide a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) toolkit to area employers, detailing proven practices in onboarding, retention, recruiting, employee engagement, and leadership strategies for increasingly diverse workplaces. To begin, they intend to engage large area organizations to survey and investigate current practices and their effectiveness and what challenges exist within certain sectors. This information will give the group a foundation on which to base their toolkit.

Their vision is to create more inclusive workplaces for people of color, and workplace cultures that are able to retain all workers regardless of background.

Healthcare Action Group

The healthcare action group is working to provide training materials and toolkits for a more holistic and inclusive concept of healthcare. To start, they intend to hold community conversations throughout the year in a variety of formats to appeal to different segments of our community. The group aims to produce output resources such as booklets and services.

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Their vision is having a community educated on a more inclusive and holistic concept of healthcare.

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Education Action Group

The education action group aims to create a grow-your-own teachers of color program. They intend to investigate other similar programs and get educators and organizations on board to start designing what a potential program would look like in the St. Cloud area.

Their vision is to increase the number of teachers of color so that diverse students can see themselves in the teaching profession, thus empowering the future workforce.

Challenges and Limitations for Action Groups

The Central Minnesota Community Foundation's 'Building Equity Through Dialogue' conversation and work session series comes to a close just as action groups have built an understanding of the issues impacting racial equity and have created tentative action plans. We expect action groups to encounter a variety of challenges implementing racial equity work

Resources- Funding and technical support

The most pressing limitation and challenge these groups will be presented with is funding. Many participants within action groups are attending to these issues without the promise of any future funding. While many participants come from non-profit organizations, action group agendas will still need to be advocated for among those non-

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profits for funding opportunities. Funding for a support structure and action group goals is not yet present.

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Additionally, many groups may be missing essential technical support to move goals forward effectively and efficiently. For some groups, budgeting, grant writing, advocacy, data gathering, etc. may still be needed. While not every action group may come to consist of an entirely new non-profit, it cannot be ruled out that a non-profit *does* form. If a currently existing non-profit or collaboration of non-profits does not take up any given project, much support will be needed to make that action group viable. In this case, a close support structure will be needed to help those groups do the work needed to advance racial equity.

Networks and Connections

While groups are currently configured with a variety of skilled professionals, some are missing crucial partners that would make the action goals more feasible. Gaining crucial partners, such as large area organizations, is going to be instrumental for all action groups.

Sustaining Momentum

Action groups are currently missing incentives or support to sustain momentum. Without strong connections, funding, resources, and motivational support and guidance, goals are likely to fall to the wayside.

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Action Group Recommendations

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Continuing support structure

It is recommended that a support structure be created to coordinate and guide action groups. One proposed idea to coordinate these groups is the creation of an Equity Council, such as Filsan Talent Partners' conceived Central Minnesota Equity Council (CMEC).

CMEC would aim to be a diverse, representative, and visionary team that convenes, supports, and collaborates with partners to advance racial equity outcomes. CMEC would take a leadership role in breaking down the silos between regional partners that prevent the coordinated advancement of racial equity in the areas of housing, economy, employment, healthcare, and education.

It would:

- ASSIST, SUPPORT, AND GUIDE our action group's projects to create inclusive and equitable programs, policies, and services.
- HOST Convening action groups monthly to provide support, advice, resource connection, and strategy.
 - It is imperative that we place a premium on gathering people of color's collective community wisdom to build the capacity of leaders regardless of their backgrounds.
- ADVOCATE to influence and advance racial equity in the political realm.

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- Working with policymakers, stakeholders, educators, families.
- FIND FINANCIAL/FUNDING RESOURCES to sustain and support racial equity dialogue work and action groups in the community.
- PARTNER with county leadership, corporate leaders, public and private sectors to address racial disparities.
- CONTRACT with organizations already working on issues of racial equity to host more action team discussions.
- EDUCATE partners with a specialized training and programming to advance equity projects in any industry.
- CONDUCT research (focus group, surveys, interviews, both qualitative and quantitative) while working with the action team
 - Providing research and technical support to our partners is a crucial component in making effective racial equity stick.
- CREATE a Diversity & Inclusion Employer Action Guide customized by sector.

Organizational Buy-In

Coordinated efforts between strategic individuals will be needed to gain organizational buy-in from large organizations that will provide resources, funding, and support. Currently, the action group projects have not been publicized. Publicity of these racial equity goals may ease the level of advocacy efforts still needed. A

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concentrated and collective effort consisting of publicity and connected individuals doing advocacy work may help draw partners from across the state and thus, expand racial equity efforts outside of the St. Cloud area to Central Minnesota and beyond.

Recommendations

Based on the various themes that emerged from the community conversations, the participants echoed the importance of forming action groups willing to resolve the issues detected during the dialogue. Some of the attendees also suggested that follow-up focus groups be formed to make sure we are doing work for everyone, not just some of the people. One consistent theme among participants throughout the dialogues was that our local organizations should be more intentional about forming partnerships. Many participants expressed that the business/private sector and local politicians must be present in any action group. Finally, echoed in every session is the need for cultural competency education for leaders/organizations and for large non-POC organizations to engage POC-led organizations with capacities for more effective, culturally aware engagement strategies. Many POC-led organizations have overlooked capacities that need to be capitalized on.

Conclusion

This community engagement is the first of its kind to be held in our area. We all are conscious that engaging in such conversations about racial equity and social justice can sometimes be uncomfortable, but the Central Minnesota Community Foundation, along with Filsan Talent Partners, has broken the ground on collecting our diverse community's input, ideas, and experiences. This summary will help action groups amplify the voices of those who are under-represented, and then create a racial equity and social justice policy that will be truly effective throughout our area, throughout the state, and beyond.

CMCF as well as the Filsan Talent Partners team realize that the cultivation of a racially equitable framework in a variety of policy areas requires genuine community partnerships where residents can work together on pragmatic agendas and policy goals and distribute decision-making power in an equitable way for everyone.

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