COMMENTARY

How we can reduce the income gap for blacks

Yes, the statistics are startling. So here are several solutions to help increase earnings for African-American Minnesotans.

By Louis J. King II | SEPTEMBER 25, 2015 — 6:05PM

Minnesotans must face the facts and unite to reverse the economic disparities that plague the black community in this state.

Fact is ... the latest statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau found black Minnesotans’ median household income dropped to $27,000 in 2014.

Fact is ... Minnesota now trails Mississippi when it comes to median household income for blacks.

Fact is ... the unemployment rate for blacks in Minnesota is 15.6 percent — four times the state’s overall rate of 4 percent.

Fact is ... the state and many business leaders seem willing to give blacks everything but a job.

Now that we know the facts, here are concrete solutions that must be implemented to eradicate what many have become accustomed to hearing about Minnesota.

Offer GED services for older adults. Statistics show that 60,000 adults in Hennepin County, 29,000 in Minneapolis alone, do not have a GED — a basic requirement for any type of vocational training or higher education coursework. To be successful we must provide a structured learning environment that is culturally based and not only supports student retention but puts them on a path to industry-relevant careers.

Promote small-business start-ups in the African-American community. Entrepreneurship is prevalent in this state and we need to ensure that we provide technical assistance and funding for business start-ups in African-American communities.

Implement the Emerging Workforce Coalition’s proposal. Nine agencies of color recently partnered to propose the creation of a referral and placement system to bring minorities into the workforce by training low-skilled populations and tapping into the underemployed workforce. The report is being considered by the state Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED). It needs to be implemented now.

Increase SNAP benefits. MSPWin — a philanthropic collaborative formed in 2013 to strengthen the workforce in the seven-county metro area — recently issued a report that found the Minnesota Department of Human Services and DEED are leaving millions of dollars on the table that could be used for job training. Leaders need to change their strategy, accept these dollars and use them to fund community-based agencies that provide short-term training in high-growth areas that will effectively transition minorities and other low-income households from the food-stamp program to earning a living wage.

Provide free short-term training certificates. The economic value of the short-term certificate cannot be overstated, given that workers with occupation-based certificates earn an average of 20 percent more than workers with a high school diploma. In high-demand industries, 39 percent of male certificate holders earn more than the median male worker with an associate degree and 24 percent earn more than the median male bachelor’s degree holder.

Add to that the fact that by 2018 more than two-thirds of the 47 million job openings in America will require some level of postsecondary education or training, with a growing demand for industry-specific certification, and it cannot be denied that these certificates
successfully change low-income workers into middle-income workers.

The sooner we implement these solutions, the better, but we can’t do it alone. We need a coalition made up of a rainbow of faces, including whites, that has one goal in mind — to ensure that every person in Minnesota has the ability to succeed.

History has shown that there is strength in numbers, and while our talking points may differ, we must remain laser-focused on our purpose to finally do the right thing by the black community.

Fact is ... Minnesota continues to have one of the worst racial disparities in the nation in employment and academic achievement.

Fact is ..., our region cannot succeed without everyone contributing to the regional economy and vice-versa.

Time to face facts and implement solutions. Are you with us?

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