



THE ANTI-POVERTY SOLDIER

By Clarence Hightower, Ph.D.



Community Action

For the third consecutive year *24/7 Wall Street* ranks Minnesota as the second worst state for blacks to live

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Nearly two full years ago, I penned an *Anti-Poverty Soldier* column that asked the question, “Did Dr. King’s Dream ever make its way to Minnesota?” This essay focused on the glaring racial disparities that have persisted in Minnesota for years. Most affected by these inequities has been the black community and this racial gap is particularly troubling when considering the high marks Minnesota achieves in just about every quality of life measure there is.

That column, from February 19, 2015, came on the heels of a *24/7 Wall Street* report that ranked Minnesota as the “second worst state for black Americans” to live. The following January, *24/7 Wall Street* released its 2016 report regarding the worst states in which to live for black people in America. And, for the second consecutive year Minnesota ranked as the second worst state behind only Wisconsin.

Later today, I will have the tremendous privilege to deliver one of the keynote addresses at National Community Action Partnership’s 2017 Management and Leadership Training Conference here in Long Beach, California. The title of my presentation is “Beyond Building the Case for Racial Equity Strategies: A Local Agency Perspective,” which is intended to identify some of the racial inequities in Minnesota, while offering

thoughts and strategies and how to remedy the absurd conditions in which far too many of our fellow citizens live, regardless of color.

Interestingly enough, my original draft contained a passage that highlighted Minnesota’s status as the second worst state for black Americans for two years running. Then, the day before I flew out to the west coast, *24/7 Wall Street* released its 2017 report that for the third straight year ranked Minnesota as the second worst state for blacks to live. After making a minor edit to my speech to reflect this fact, I started to reflect on some of the data that made up this latest report.

The first statistic that jumped out at me was Minnesota’s black unemployment rate, which at more than 14% is the highest of all 50 states. In addition, black Minnesotans have the fifth lowest homeownership rate in the nation at just under 22%. This compares quite unfavorably not only to Minnesota’s white homeownership rate of more than 75% but also to the national black homeownership rate of just over 40%. The *24/7 Wall Street* report also notes that Minnesota’s “racial poverty gap” is among the worst in the nation as black residents are nearly five times more likely to live below the poverty line as compared to whites. And finally, the report reveals that while blacks make up less than six percent of the Minnesotan’s total population they account for 36% of those incarcerated in the state’s prison system.

These types of statistics, while intensely disquieting, are no longer shocking. We have seen

them all before. It is important to note that the clarion call to do something about this problem has started to resonate and currently there are legislative, agency-based, and community-based initiatives under way to combat racial disparities in Minnesota. We also must realize that sweeping changes might not occur overnight. The struggle to transform the systems, structures, and barriers that foster and perpetuate inequality will take time.

Nonetheless, I think it is only right that to declare that we can no longer without seeing at least some progress. I don't want to see the 2018 *24/7 Wall Street* report that for the fourth year in a row lists Minnesota as the second worst state in America for blacks to live.

As we prepare to celebrate what would have been the 88th birthday of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., let us reflect on his 1964 classic text *Why We Can't Wait*. In this book, Dr. King writes that:

We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single

garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.

And this is why none of us can wait. There can no longer be us and them. The tolerance of poverty, division, and despair is not acceptable. As poverty expert Dr. Mark R. Rank states:

Poverty drains Americans both individually and as a community and society. Each individual directly and indirectly pays a high price for allowing poverty to walk in the midst of society.

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