

# 2<sup>nd</sup> “Day After” Roundtable of Urban League Affiliates

*Hosted by the National Urban League and the Institute for Work & the Economy*

*October 2, 2020*

On October 2, 2020, workforce, housing, and economic development senior executives from eight Urban League affiliates representative of all regions of the U.S. participated in a metaphorical “Day After” roundtable on the aftermath of acute phases of the twin “pandemics” of this year’s spate of killings of African Americans and other People of Color and of COVID-19. This conversation was organized by the [National Urban League](#) and facilitated by the [Institute for Work & the Economy](#).

Each participant received a worksheet to help them prepare for the conversations and for their initial observations in response to the questions: “Existing economic and social fissures separating people have been exposed by the events of this spring. What may result for workers and workers’ rights if no action is taken? What actions should be taken?” The group narrowed their ideas into an agenda for future action.

This summary attempts to capture the hopes and ideas shared during the conversation and in written comments in the lead up to the roundtable. It is impossible to capture the energy and emotion of the group. Like the first “Day After” Roundtable collaboration, all were passionate about the mission and roles that Urban League affiliates will play in their communities and across the country in charting new paths forward in behalf of African Americans and the country as a whole. A common thread throughout this conversation as well as in the first is that the crises of 2020 are collectively an opportunity for a new beginning. As one participant put it:

*“So, we have an opportunity. But we also have a challenge, because what I’ve seen since the Civil Rights movement is that people like to take the same old solutions and try to make them fit into new problems, or they’ll come up with new solutions and they want to make them fit into all methods of implementation. And we have an opportunity to take all of the good and bad learnings over the last 60 years. And we have an opportunity to do something new, something creative, and something that is sustainable. We have to understand that it’s not going to happen overnight. It’s going to take commitment. It is going to take a ton of money to do this. So, unless people are prepared for the long term, everybody’s kind of wasting their time. I think that this is one of the few times in our history where everybody’s prepared to look at long term solutions.”*

Finally, an editorial note: Just as in the quote above, the words of various people will be included in this summary. By prior agreement, none of the quotes will be attributed to a speaker. We promised anonymity in exchange for candor. In addition, this is a summary and is not a consensus report. The opinions are those of the individual participants and does not purport to represent the positions of the Urban League affiliates represented at the roundtable, the National Urban League, and the Institute for Work & the Economy.

1. The primary recipients of Urban League services have been, and continue to be, on the front lines of the battle with the pandemic. They either work in essential jobs that exposes them to possible infection, or they are laid-off because their employers shut or cut operations. There has been a dramatic uptick in under- and unemployment. As one participant put it, “our folks are actually petrified and terrified to return to work. And, so have looked towards the unemployment rolls to ... help them survive.” Another participant commented: “... why am I going to put myself at risk of going to work if there’s a pandemic out here that’s killing, you know, Black and Brown people by leaps and bounds. And, so we have to figure out how to get a handle on a pandemic before we can really ask people to just step back into the workforce. ...We also have the pandemic of what we call the unknown. We don’t know if [there’s] going to be a cure. Where is it? Will Black and Brown communities have access to care first so that we can, you know, secure our families, secure our economic status. It’s very difficult right now.”
2. Returning citizens are facing new barriers in their efforts to obtain work. One affiliate reported that returning citizens who are laid off are put under strict parole supervision as opposed to being able to work at home or be with their families. This affiliate has re-doubled their efforts to help them “re-tool” their skills so that they can expand the range of opportunities beyond low-skill jobs. Another affiliate noted that the challenges also go beyond employment: they include housing and education. Given the reluctance of employers to hire returning citizens, one important option is to start a business so that they can help themselves as well as employ others who have the same life issues.
3. Entrepreneurship is a viable option for Black and Brown communities—but additional support is needed. Financial institutions need to focus on the \$10,000 commitments rather than the \$10,000,000 deals. Young entrepreneurs need to be recognized and supported. Millions poured onto the streets this year with probably half being under twenty-five. How do we provide them with megaphones to greatly expand the things that they are already doing to advance their interests and causes?
4. People served by Urban League affiliates need to become technologically proficient in order to maximize resources that are available. This requires a level of proficiency that goes beyond routine use of cell phones. One affiliate launched a technology center that was under development prior to the pandemic. It uses it to stay in touch with its participants as well as push out services, such as a virtual job fair. The challenge now is

to get their participants to take full advantage of these services. For example, the affiliate pushed out 27,000 emails and found that only 4,000 emails were opened. Ultimately over 50 employers participated in the fair and about 360 people joined in, with some resulting hires.

5. The notably increased support for the Urban League’s mission over the past few months is very welcome, but is it just a flash in the pan? Several affiliates reported that there has been an influx of interest and resources in support of the mission of Urban League and to address long-festering problems that are now exposed by the pandemic and by the spate of murders of African Americans and other people of color. The motivations spurring the jump in contributions are varied but are effectively immaterial--except to the extent that they may be short-lived. That is, the additional resources may be tied mostly to emotions arising from the moment of the crises rather than signifying a true and enduring sea change. While all contributions are needed and appreciated, the truth remains that, as the speaker at the top of the summary put it, real solutions require long term commitments.
6. The conversion of short-term gains in funding to long term commitments and partnerships requires a resolute mindset. As one participant put it, organizations serving Black, Brown and other people of color are used to getting “crumbs.” These organizations need to be clear as to what they really need and want and not be hesitant to make that clear. Another participant observed that Urban League provides a service and that financial support is not a matter of doing them a favor. It is essential that they stay true to their mission rather than whatever is expedient in an effort to obtain donations.
7. The focus must be on sustaining for the long term what is being started in this moment. The money that is being received now needs to be leveraged for something much larger. “Race fatigue” is going to happen; performative and symbolic actions will disappear. So, it is important to establish that businesses – banks especially – make investments that are commensurate to the value in contributions and capital of Black and Brown communities. It is also essential to be data driven and purposeful in the use of resources. Partnerships with large technology companies have helped affiliates document their accomplishments as well improve their services and operations.
8. The violence that has damaged and destroyed neighborhoods cannot be condoned or excused, but it needs to be understood in the context of a pattern of violence experienced by African Americans and other people of color. As one participant put it: “... unemployment is violence. Hunger is violence. Eviction is violence.” Employment is a basic need. If people are not employed, they have to rely on state benefits and handouts and pantries and food drives.

9. There is a terrible toll that is being taken on the minds of younger generations. This is captured by this observation:

*“The spotlight ... has been put on the systemic racism and the social injustice and how it’s impacting economically on our young people. My high schoolers are saying, ‘What’s the point?’*

*We’re going to end up losing another generation. And we’re not going to lose them to a drug war. We’re getting ready to lose them to apathy, because they don’t care. And it’s not that they don’t care about what’s going on in the world. They feel as though nobody is caring about them.*

*Well, how does this fit into economic development? If you don’t have a pool of people to put to work, then there is no economic development.*

Some solutions include dual enrollment apprenticeships, improved education, better training, and a greater focus on careers and not just jobs.

10. This is a seminal moment in the history of Civil Rights. One participant compared cited the stories about the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s that she heard from her grandmother and parents. That movement was effective because it was “more than just us. We had other folks walking with us. This is a time now where I see the Urban League’s all 90 plus affiliates truly making a difference in the realm of social injustice. We can talk about the economic standpoint of all of that, but not until we address the system racism and the social injustice that we see.”