

“Day After” Roundtable of Urban League Affiliates

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

August 6, 2020

On August 6, 2020, workforce and economic development senior executives from a dozen 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. All were passionate about the mission and roles that Urban Leagues 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. As one person observed, “if a law or a policy or an action benefits the Native American and the African American, it probably will definitely benefit the rest of the country as a result.”

Finally, an editorial note: 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 summary is not a consensus document. The opinions are those of the individual participants and does not purport to represent the positions of the Urban Leagues represented at the roundtable, the National Urban League, and the Institute for Work & the Economy.

1. The pandemic and the civil actions taken in the wake of the murders of African Americans, Latinx, and other People of Color make clear the **intersectionality** of racial and economic justice, economic mobility, and social and economic equity and equality. COVID-19 has become a truth-teller. This reality is not news to the Black community; it is just now apparent to the rest of the world. There are many people in the same economic boat who never before thought that they have the same interests. There will probably be a push to get back to the pre-dual pandemics view of “normal,” whatever that may be, so as to stand in the way of change. But the excuse of ignorance has been eliminated.
2. Now is the time to act and leverage broad public awareness and appreciation of the existence of pervasive, systemic injustices experienced by Black, Brown and other

People of Color. New allies are emerging in support of Black Lives Matters. Businesses who have long histories in working with an Urban League are admitting that they had never understood how they never understood the depth of inequities experienced by People of Color in their workforces. The events of 2020 present a collective opportunity to make systemic and systematic changes. The actions that accomplish these changes must be strategic and bold. There is a great danger in aiming too low and being susceptible to being satisfied by only a few crumbs. As one participant said, “If you push people hard enough, they'll give you a few crumbs and maybe even be a nice big crumb. But they have a plan just like we have a plan. And their plan is to keep their doors closed, shut them up and give them something for now. And I don't want to get caught up in that.”

3. Some “allies” are friends in name only and will use their relationships to preserve their advantages. Authentic allies will stick around and those are the ones who advocate truly for the better good. Some believe that it is enough to light the sides of their buildings with “Black Lives Matter.” Capitalism protects capitalism. In the end, businesses will do just enough to protect their interests. Ultimately, they must be held to account for their behaviors. They must do more than put a sign on their building, by adding African Americans to their boards of directors and by moving them into their executive suites where they hold true positions of power and authority.
4. It is not enough to have allies. A broad, successful, collective effort requires **accomplices** – people and groups who are willing to risk a great deal in order to accomplish great changes. People and organizations in positions of power must begin to use their power for good. They must also cede power to those who have been locked out. Black, marginalized and oppressed people should have the authority, autonomy and resources to lead and make their way forward.
5. The path forward is not necessarily linear. Change is often one step forward, and then dissipated by taking two steps backwards. Hopefully this is a time when the motion is predominantly forward. There is a danger that this moment will create a competition among civil rights groups and the people they represent. This pits groups against each other. Some noted that they are seeing such competition in their own communities among organizations that serve the same constituencies. Taking a strategic and systematic approach will help to address this.
6. Movements are vulnerable to fatigue. People lose interest. The wins come slowly. Long term success, therefore, requires that today's efforts must be built with the aim of being sustainable. It is easy to conflate sustainability with institutional longevity. Consequently, today's movement must be goal focused and have measurable expectations. For example, [A Path Forward for Louisville](#) is the work of a broad coalition that the Louisville Urban League helped build that sets forth specific actions that must be taken by city leaders. The group will not accept compromise or partial steps. It requires that every demand be met before it will move on. As this person said, “Until we

get these things, we're not done. Right. And so you need to stick around and to this list is complete, basically, as opposed to it being, 'Oh, well, they offered you this.' Well, was that on the list? No? OK. And that's not good enough."

7. Changing the mindsets of those who have long been oppressed and disenfranchised is difficult but essential in order to achieve equity. This includes helping people to understand the power that they possess, and also that things are changing, albeit slowly. Actions can lead to results. As one participant said, "I think one thing that we need to do is to begin to push the narrative that things are changing. It really does a disservice when people say nothing is changing." Another said, "The greatest challenge that we see is convincing and persuading our people who they are and how valuable they are."
8. Lasting changes are the results of elections. Electoral processes need to be harnessed to put people in places where they can make systems work more efficiently, effectively and more equitably for People of Color. There are two significant challenges to achieving this. First, there is a counternarrative that is suppressing people's interest in voting. Some simply believe that circumstances cannot get worse; that the country and their community has hit rock bottom. So, there is no danger in doing nothing. The challenge is to convince these potential voters that there are consequences to this and other elections. Conditions can, in fact, get worse and that succumbing to the narrative that nothing can be changed will prove this point. Second, addressing this narrative is even more complicated due to the Urban League's nonpartisan status, and the scrutiny that comes with that. This challenge needs to be grappled with; as one participant said, "How do we strategize around this idea of getting messages out that make the point that this is still important?"
9. Next steps: Roundtable allowed for an exchange in general ideas and specific actions that individual Urban Leagues are pursuing. There is room for growth in three areas. One is continued peer-to-peer exchanges on strategies, tactics and substantive ideas that local Urban Leagues and their partners may undertake. Another is collective action by a group of Urban Leagues. This may include coordinated efforts with respect to businesses operating in multiple Urban League jurisdictions. Or, it may include collective efforts to increase electoral participation. Finally, the National Urban League may be the conduit for ideas emanating from Urban League affiliates that address national public policies, electoral participation, and a common vision for leveraging the twin pandemics of 2020.