



**State of Black Chicago Congress (SBCC)
Politics Group Solution Paper**

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Statement of the Problem

In 1970, there were 1,469 black elected officials in the U.S. Currently, there are more than 10,500, yet the socioeconomic status of African Americans has not changed relative to whites.¹ The growth in black elected officials in Chicago and Illinois has witnessed parallel gains amidst similar patterns of socioeconomic disparity. In 2000, Illinois ranked fourth among the top ten states with the largest number of black elected officials, with a total of 621.²

Despite this impressive ranking however, black elected officials in Illinois represented a mere 1.5% of all elected officials in the state.³ This is particularly disturbing when one considers that a simple majority is needed to pass legislation in any legislative body, be it the City Council, the County Commission, the state legislature, or the Congress. Thus, increased numbers of black elected officials has not translated into higher socioeconomic status among blacks, nationally or locally.

The fruit of local politics is jobs, contracts, and services. However, even a cursory examination of the West and South sides of Chicago would illustrate vast disparities in services such as streets and sanitation, parks and recreation, and the most consequential public service of them all—education. Since 2001, 98 of the 100 schools being closed or phased out in Chicago have been located in predominantly African American and Latino communities.⁴ Equally

¹ “National Roster of Black Elected Officials Fact Sheet,” November 2011. Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, Washington D.C., <http://www.jointcenter.org/research/national-roster-of-black-elected-officials>

² Bositis, David, “Black Elected Officials: A Statistical Summary, 2000,” Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, pg. 8.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Caref, C., Hains, S., Hilgendorf, K., Jankov, P., & Russell, K., (2013). “Privatization: The Black and White of Education in Chicago’s Public Schools. Report for the Chicago Teachers Union. Accessed at

troubling, is the vast resource gap between neighborhood schools that children of African descent attend in comparison to those attended by whites.

Poverty among people of African descent in Chicago (32.2%) is three times the rate of white poverty (10%). Despite increases in the number of African Americans in elected positions, Chicago black to white poverty rate ratio is number one among major cities in the U.S. This gripping poverty has a tremendous impact on everyone, and particularly, the lives of African American children, 44.7% of whom live below the poverty line, compared to 8.6% of white children, and 28.9% of Latino children.⁵

In the area of jobs, African American employment rate has seemingly gotten worse as African American representation in elected positions has increased. In 1970, 72.1% of African American men 16-64 were employed, compared to 48.3% in 2010. Although much of the decline in employment, particularly among African American men, results from deindustrialization and down-sizing, African Americans nonetheless are employed at lower numbers than even Latinos, who have also been negatively impacted by these factors. For example, in 2010, 79.1% of whites in Chicago were in the labor force, compared to 56.8% of blacks, and 68.5% of Latinos.⁶

As should be expected given the higher rate of unemployment, the income of African Americans in Chicago is much lower than for whites and Latinos. The average household

<http://www.ctunet.com/quest-center/research/position-papers/privatization-the-black-white-of-education-in-chicagos-public-schools>

⁵ Cottrell, Megan. "Second City or Dead Last? Income Apartheid in Chicago." *The Chicago Reporter*, February 28, 2011; U.S. Census Bureau, Selected Economic Characteristics, 2006-2010 American Community Survey Selected Population Tables.

⁶ Ibid, U.S. Census Bureau.

income for whites in Chicago for example, is \$94,877, compared to \$44,274 for black households, and \$52,473 for Latino households.⁷

In the area of contracts, much can be gleaned from the data on minority/women business ownership. Although Chicago represents one of the largest concentrations of black owned businesses nationally, they are not receiving a commensurate proportion of the dollars emanating from Chicago businesses. Black businesses represent 32.4% of all businesses in the city of Chicago, yet yield a mere 1.11% of total receipts.⁸ Clearly African American businesses in Chicago are not receiving their fair share of contracts from the city, county, or state. It is also evident that African Americans are not patronizing black business owners.

Although there is much to be said for having a seat at the table in the grand halls of the city council, county commission, and state legislature, having a seat at the table is not enough. People of African descent in Chicago must employ an internal and external strategy that couples efforts to increase the numbers of elected officials who are sensitive to their needs, with efforts that hold elected officials accountable, and level the political playing field. People of African descent in Chicago must also mobilize a critical mass of concerned citizens, who are able to leverage their numbers/votes for policies that are in the interest of the whole community.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Statistics for All U.S. Firms by Industry, Gender, Ethnicity, and Race for the U.S., States, Metro Areas, Counties, and Places: 2007.

http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=SBO_2007_00CSA01&prodType=table

Solutions

The solutions that emanated from the politics focus group meetings revolved around four desired outcomes, 1) creating an independent political entity; 2) holding elected officials accountable; 3) changing the political system; and 4) mobilizing and engaging citizens of African descent.

An Independent Political Entity:

One consistent theme of the politics focus group meetings has been growing disenchantment with the Democratic Party. There is a sense that people of African descent in Chicago have unfailingly given their votes to elected officials who have little regard for their interests. This trend must end if the community is to witness positive socioeconomic gains. An independent political entity would develop leaders and elected officials, and could be tied to a public policy institute (see below).

Holding Elected Officials Accountable:

Efforts to hold elected officials accountable would be closely aligned with an independent political entity, in that they would monitor the voting patterns of current elected officials. Proposals include: 1) individual and group meetings with elected officials to solicit and gauge support for the State of Black Chicago Congress agenda; 2) an evaluation system that measures candidate effectiveness (a candidate report card); 3) greater assessments of boards and commissions; and 4) assembling volunteer court watchers to assess judges.

Changing the Political System:

Efforts include electoral mechanisms and measures that serve the community better: 1) a ballot initiative that restricts pass through contributions; 2) establishing penalties for frivolous challenges; 3) moving the primary to the third week in September; 4) an elected civilian police

accountability committee; 5) an elected school board that demands a high quality education for our children; 6) term limits; 7) compelling elected officials of African descent to bloc vote in order to maximize their limited vote potential; 8) proper planning for the redistricting process so that the community of African descent will receive proper representation at all levels of government; and 9) requiring that elected officials agree to participatory budgeting—citizen input on how discretionary funds are spent.

Mobilization Strategies

Solutions include those that compel people of African descent to get involved, and that engage them on issues impacting their daily lives. These activities would be sponsored by a public policy institute that is located within the community, i.e., the Robertson Center on the campus of Chicago State University. The public policy institute would: 1) address issues that impact all members of the African diaspora; 2) convene community forums and town hall meetings on pertinent issues and problems; 3) conduct workshops that provide public service training and preparation for office, i.e., on issues of integrity, and public responsibility, 4) research, document, analyze, and comment on the problems impacting the community; 5) disseminate pertinent information to the public in the form of *You Tube* video clips, websites, blogs, and community pamphlets; 6) register youth to vote at their high school graduations; 7) contract the services of a lobbyist in order to pursue a legislative agenda; 8) create a civic engagement prisoner reentry program; 9) mobilize community protest activities; 10) create a youth leadership development curriculum and program; 11) institutionalize the SBCC focus group meeting structure; convene a block club convention; 12) convene experts and community leaders to assist elected officials as they legislate, investigate, and appropriate resources; and 13) convene a town hall meeting of organizations whose missions are relevant to the community of

African descent, i.e. The Rainbow/PUSH Coalition, Black on Black Love, the Chicago Urban League, etc., in order to promote collaboration.