

EQUITY OR ELSE



A GRASSROOTS-DRIVEN QUALITY OF LIFE PLATFORM



SEPTEMBER 2022

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

I was born on the south side of Chicago in 1966 at the historic Mercy Hospital. As a “70’s baby” I grew up in a working class community known as Rosemoor and is referred to today as the “Wild Hundreds.” My neighborhood was an interesting mixture of union workers (steelworkers, truck drivers, bus drivers), hustlers, nurses, bartenders and folks piecing together jobs “just to get by.” What was beautiful about Rosemoor was that almost every business owner looked like me. From the White Hen Pantry, the Clark gas station, the neighborhood cleaners to the ice cream parlor we saw ourselves. Our school administrators and educators primarily looked like us and had the autonomy to tell us to be Black and Proud. While we were confronted with systemic inequity, our elders had the community infrastructure to, to the best of their ability, protect us from and prepare us for the evils of white supremacy that lurked right outside our doorstep.

As a community organizer since the age of 25 and now the national director of the Journey for Justice Alliance, I have had the honor and experience of spending significant time in Black and Brown communities across this country and I am sad to report

that the Black community I remember no longer exists. Our communities are infested with fast-fried food spots, beauty supply houses, liquor stores and gas stations that both double as over-priced grocery stores and the overwhelming majority of the businesses are owned by people outside of our community who operate these institutions based on their opinions of us. Across the country, hospitals that serve Black families have closed. To illustrate this point, during the height of COVID we formed the Chicago Health Equity Coalition to stop 13 billion dollar health care conglomerate Trinity Health Systems from closing the aforementioned Mercy Hospital. At this time, we were 31% of Chicago’s population and 70% of the COVID deaths!

Many of our school districts are besieged by the scam called “school choice”, where charter operators have advocated for school closings to open up largely mediocre charter schools whose primary “innovation” is to pick the children they want and dismiss the ones they don’t. It’s no accident that in cities where the charter school industry has taken root, the Black population has decreased. Across the country, corporate interests have purchased

government loyalty to either snatch away our right to elect our school board, through schemes such as mayoral control or state takeovers or pour millions into school board races to seat pro-privatization candidates; as if democracy and not inequity was at the root of our schools' struggles. Municipalities have ignored inequity and the decades of documented abuses faced by Black families and signed off on the "purge" of Black families from American cities politely termed gentrification through weaponizing our basic quality of life institutions against us. Every quality of life area that most white Americans take for granted; housing, education, food production and delivery, health care, economics, environment and youth investment is infested by structural and institutional racism. The return on our tax investment is entrenched racial and class inequity and this violation is bipartisan.

America has ignored poverty, while sinking her teeth into the poor. While working and low-income Black, Brown and Indigenous families are taxed at an inequitable rate, we are never consulted on our vision of the world and allowed to shape our institutions to fuel that vision. *As base-building, grass-roots community organizations we are doing exactly that; we have engaged thousands of people in our communities through well over 200 listening projects. During COVID, we held several virtual town halls, engaging tens of thousands of people directly impacted. We have interviewed membership based groups across issues to understand what they cared about.* All of this to understand the impact of racism on a particular quality of life area and most importantly, their vision of solutions in these areas. This honest, deep community engagement is the strength of this living, breathing document; our Equity or Else Quality of Life Agenda. We have as a foundational belief, that "those closest to the pain must be closest to the power."



At the soul of this quality of life agenda is a united call for self-determination. We have the right to define, name and speak for ourselves instead of being defined, named and spoken for by others. We have locked arms across issues to understand that the infection called structural racism is not issue specific. We are prepared to organize to make America be her best self. Our job is to impact America, not integrate into the status quo of "state sponsored sabotage" of our lives. Equity or Else.

Jitu Brown

Journey for Justice Alliance
National Director

ENVIRONMENT

Racism and inequity have poisoned the environment in the United States for Black, Brown, Indigenous and working class families through sacrificing BIPOC environmental health conditions for the benefit and profit of white communities. The Flint lead water crisis, jet fuel burning in Newark, and buildings on top of toxic landfills in Garden Plaza, New Orleans are just a few recent national examples of how environmental racism has directly and negatively impacted our communities. Through the racist practices of environmental inequity, communities suffered deteriorating health, flooding and sewer issues, and have been excluded from infrastructure improvement plans. We are in a time where millions of people in America are without access to the basic human right of safe, healthy living environments.

Environmental inequity impacts our daily lives and has long-term implications on the safety and wellness of communities. Decision-making regarding this issue is mostly white-dominated and the most negatively impacted individuals are underrepresented and ignored during these discussions. Oftentimes, communities are uneducated or information is intentionally suppressed regarding environmental inequities and their consequences.

We demand safe, healthy living environments – air, land, water – for all!

- **Federal, state and municipal resources for community colleges to train and place young people into green technology trades**
- **Diversify decision-making bodies and processes to center the experience of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people from the communities directly impacted**
- **Address blighted buildings and areas, including asbestos and other toxins being released into the environment**
- **Institute federal support for housing in Black, Brown, Indigenous and working class communities to transfer to solar and other renewable power**
- **End lead and other harmful chemicals in drinking water through federal infrastructure investment and penalties for municipalities that continue these practices**
- **Ban the development of factories and other businesses that discharge harmful chemicals in populated areas**
- **Make environmental justice information readily accessible for all**
- **Prevent investors from driving up prices and crowding out affordable housing in underserved communities**
- **Place stronger restrictions on animal farms, waste and sewage removal**
- **Exempt homeowners negatively impacted by environmental issues from city taxes**
- **Provide safe protection to undocumented citizens with clean air and resources**
- **Partner with formerly incarcerated people for living wage agricultural careers instead of jails & prisons (slave labor)**

HEALTHCARE

Racism and inequity has poisoned Health Care and contributed to the lack of access to health insurance, the consistent practice of disproportionate hospital closings, and the under-representation of people of color in health care professions. Black, Brown and Indigenous people suffer more preventable illnesses and disproportionate deaths in our healthcare systems due to ineffective treatment and bias. People of color are simply not receiving the quality of care received by others.

We demand free, culturally and community-responsive, competent, holistic, and trauma-informed healthcare for all, including undocumented people.

- **Enact and enforce proposals in the Mental Health Parity Compliance Act**
- **Increase and regulate cultural competency training among medical professionals**
- **Offer higher education incentives for Black, Brown, Indigenous people entering in healthcare majors, through Federal Service Learning programs in Medical Facilities**
- **The United States Department of Health and Human Services should mandate promotion of public health intersections with public education**
- **Institute senior inpatient and outpatient treatment education that goes beyond informed consent, by offering centralized information for Black, Brown and Indigenous seniors seeking healthcare**
- **Provide federal and state support for the training of culturally responsive doulas from the communities they serve, and for their services to mothers**
- **Impose national spending caps on costs for necessary medicines, such as insulin and high blood pressure drugs, for moderate income households and marginalized communities, utilizing the Federal Community Reinvestment Act Income Guidelines**
- **Enact Federal oversight of Pharmaceutical Companies to mandate a portion of their profits go to preventative medicine services**
- **Require access to Community Child Public Health Services for Black, Brown and Indigenous people in all fifty states at school**
- **Establish improved oversight of safety net hospitals, including equitable funding, medicaid and medicare reimbursements, and community representation on boards of directors**

HOUSING

Racism and inequity has poisoned Housing in the United States for Black, Brown, Indigenous and working class families through a consistent history of policies that target – as opposed to supporting – these populations. Due to racist practices of red-lining, predatory loan practices, inferior public housing and gentrification, coupled with inequities in education and municipal and private disinvestment in our communities, decent housing is unstable and inaccessible for millions of people.

We demand housing for ALL as a human right.

- **Enact Homes for All Federal Legislation with housing for the homeless and pathways for undocumented families to own land and homes**
- **Use Tax Increment Financing (TIF) used to address Inequity by Increasing Affordable Housing (addressing blight is the stated purpose)**
- **Establish Federal Housing Development Fund with local branches, that functions like the Neighborhood Assistance Corporation of America (NACA), but provides funding support for affordable home ownership and housing co-ops**
- **Institute Community Benefits Agreement that can be used widely to insure equitable percentages of affordable housing**
- **Enact federal rent control laws as an anti-gentrification strategy, making state bans on rent control illegal**
- **Provide readily accessible information on appealing and lowering property taxes**
- **Stop rent increases based off property tax**
- **Abolish Land Forfeiture laws, government and business codes that make it easy to take land**
- **Build affordable housing on vacant lands**
- **Require community benefits agreements on all professional sports team developments, e.g. Staples Center**
- **Stop land giveaways and subsidies to professional sports teams**
- **Stop the importation of drugs into marginalized communities, which labels them drug and gun zones and lowers property value**
- **Provide federal resources for home improvements in working class Black, Brown, indigenous communities**
- **Stop Evictions! Address evictions from COVID-19 and stop the practice of eviction trauma**
- **Promote community-led governance of housing policies**

PUBLIC SAFETY

Racism and inequity has poisoned public safety, producing intimidation, violence, and murders of Black, Brown and Indigenous people. Targeting communities of color for acts of violence/malice throughout the United States is common practice. Disproportionate policing and surveillance result in distorted crime data and statistics and negative media portrayals that are further weaponized against people of color. This threatens our basic right to life.

Police departments' refusal to immediately release information after use of excessive force continues to enable and encourage repeated attacks on marginalized communities. This culture – of the system as predator and the people as prey – causes Black, Brown and Indigenous youth to inherently fear and mistrust law enforcement, even if no offense was committed. Inequitable education is a public safety issue. Lack of economic opportunity is a public safety issue. The abundance of corner liquor stores is a public safety issue. Generational poverty is indeed a public safety issue. The system of inequity perpetuates distrust and dishonesty, which keeps Black/Brown/Indigenous communities disillusioned and in poverty. This also encourages infighting within our communities.

We demand fairness and justice for marginalized communities at all levels of the criminal legal system.

- **Reverse the school to Prison Pipeline through ending zero tolerance discipline policies and implementing restorative justice culture/practices in schools and prisons**
- **Eliminate laws that criminalize cannabis and expunge prior cannabis-related convictions across the states**
- **Enact and enforce strong Anti-Profilng Legislation, preventing Law Enforcement from deliberately targeting Black youth due to a false, stereotypical beliefs that they are criminals**
- **Restore the right to vote to those currently and formerly incarcerated, with access to voting/placing ballot boxes in all prisons/jails.**
- **Hold District Attorneys accountable for their record**
- **Require Implicit Bias Training for all Law Enforcement - to prevent stigmatizing of the black community for any acts of violence/malice in the general community**
- **Hold the court system accountable for proper sentencing against individuals who have negatively impacted the families of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people**
- **Enforce proper penalties on gun manufacturers, gun shops and individuals selling/importing illegal firearms in the community to our youth**

PUBLIC SAFETY (CONT'D)

- **Establish equitable treatment for those that commit gun crimes**
- **Stop all deportation of nonviolent offenders and create pathways to document all people so they can travel safely**
- **Guarantee interpretation for undocumented immigrants in court hearings**
- **Enact bail reform and racial equity on secure bonds**

EDUCATION

Racism and inequity have poisoned education for Black, Brown, and Indigenous people in urban and rural areas. Inequity is reflected through inadequate school buildings and courses, inequitable school funding formulas across states, school closings, the invasion of the charter school industry in our communities, denying democratic representation through state takeovers and mayoral control, lack of teaching equipment, unfair teacher wages, poor working conditions leading to classroom teachers' low morale, loss of male teachers, purging Black teachers from the system, over emphasis placed on uniforms and student dress code and a lack of regard for the voices of Black, Brown and Indigenous parents, students and communities.

We demand the urgent defense and transformation of public education.

- **Stop the privatization and closure of traditional public schools in vulnerable areas**
- **Provide all preschool through twelfth grade students with high-quality school buildings that sustain a learning environment, successful teaching, and well-resourced school administration operations**
- **Institute policing-free schooling with no school resource officers and no immigration enforcement or other federally or state supported law enforcement actions on school grounds**
- **Abandon property-tax-based funding of schools and adopt federally mandated equitable funding formulas**
- **Establish and support at least 25,000 Sustainable Community Schools by 2025**
- **Increase the numbers of Black teachers in school districts across the country (learn from and replicate models such as Grow Your Own Illinois)**
- **Build student-centered school climates through restorative justice practices and student leadership development programs**
- **End zero tolerance discipline practices**
- **Embrace culturally relevant and responsive education for all students**
- **Provide free and high quality pre-K for all students**
- **Reduce the counselor to student ratio in public schools to 1:75 and add other mental health supports**
- **End state takeovers and mayoral control**

EDUCATION (CONT'D)

- **Institute federal equity assessments of local school districts supported by the DOE Office of Civil Rights**
- **Use multiple assessments to gauge student growth and end punitive tests!**
- **Establish elected Representative School Boards with student members with full voting rights**
- **Provide opportunities for students to prepare for adulthood through knowledge work, project-based and service learning and apprenticeship programs in schools**
- **Enact and enforce a National Student Bill of Rights**
- **Mandate Parent-Advocacy Courses in every district**

YOUTH

Racism and inequity have poisoned Black, Brown, Indigenous and working class Youth in the United States through structural and institutional discrimination. As we develop our future generations, it is imperative that youth voices are lifted and at the head of the fight for equity. Our youth identify racist policies and practices that negatively impact their daily lives in the areas of economics, food quality, health quality, housing, and public education. Through the racist practices of mass incarceration, police violence, gentrification of neighborhoods, and the attack on quality and culturally relevant public education, we are in a time where our youth are demanding equity to improve the state of their public education; spiritual, mental, and physical well-being; financial stability and opportunity, and ultimately, their future.

We demand that all youth be nurtured and supported to lead, rather than being criminalized.

- **Develop and sustain robust alternatives to Youth Criminalization**
- **Open facilities to assist youth with housing, jobs, & education**
- **Reallocate/divest police budgets to fund solutions for youth issues. (e.g., community schools, mental health support, restorative justice)**
- **Remove policing practices, personnel and punitive policies from all schools**
- **Support/promote youth leadership, activism & organizing**
- **Work with community organizations to support youth-led initiatives**
- **Institute youth decision-making authority on school boards and other governance bodies**
- **Provide paid opportunities to youth (e.g., grant funding for social media, paid peer tutoring, paid summer school) to empower them to be self-sufficient**
- **Reallocate federal and local funds to create fellowships for youth to get involved in their community**
- **Analyze family structures to determine individual child needs**
- **Youth should be able to learn economics and entrepreneurship in elementary, middle and high school through enhanced funds for school to work programs**
- **Create investment funds to support youth business (e.g., business plans, LLCs, etc.) and co-ops**
- **Provide incentives and tax breaks for BIPOC owned businesses to hire youth 16-24 years old**
- **Ensure every youth that wants a summer job is able to get one**
- **Provide equitable services, including work opportunities, to foster care youth, homeless youth and undocumented youth**
- **Stop excluding youth from challenging classes and engaging learning opportunities**
- **Based on student mental health or disability diagnosis**

ECONOMICS

Racism and inequity poisons personal and community economics for Black, Brown and Indigenous people due to lack of access to resources that will empower communities of color to be economically independent. In our communities, most of the businesses are poverty and sickness generators that are owned by people from outside our community. Our communities are confronted by racism in applying for and receiving loans to open businesses and purchasing or improving homes. This can be described as state sponsored sabotage, which leaves our communities vulnerable to hopelessness, crime, violence and gentrification.

We demand economic equity for Black, Brown and Indigenous communities.

- **Make “Ban the Box” universal by removing criminal history disclosure requirements from housing, education, employment, human services and government business contract applications**
- **Initiate equity business funds in each municipality with at least \$50 million annually for Black, Brown and Indigenous businesses**
- **No more poisoning our mental health around economics, leave the stigma**
- **Give women of color big capital rare more than common**
- **Provide federal support for the creation of more Black-owned banks**
- **Ban predatory lending practices that target people of color and the elderly**
- **Provide education and support for cooperative economics and community-controlled financial institutions**
- **Issue insurance policies on all of our people to improve our quality of life**
- **Big money should be directed to community organizations**
- **Prioritize providing federal resources to Black, Brown and Indigenous communities for equitable economic development, not dependency.**
- **Stop federal level discrimination**
- **Support food and housing co-ops with federal and municipal resources**
- **Community benefits agreements for any businesses opening in Black, Brown and Indigenous community as a recognition of previous harms and to prevent continued discriminatory practices.**
- **Create and sustain land trust endowments**
- **Enact and enforce fair, living wages for all in safe, supportive work environments**

FOOD PRODUCTION AND DELIVERY

Racism and inequity have poisoned food production/distribution in the United States for Black, Brown, Indigenous and working class families through a failure to educate and meet the needs of our communities. Racist policies prevent BIPOC communities from growing and accessing healthy food, put up barriers to the equitable distribution of healthy food and promote food waste. As a result, we are in a time where millions of people in America are without access to the basic human right of access to healthy food options. Lack of access to quality, fresh foods and the abundance of liquor stores and fast food restaurants in our community is an economic development and public health crisis.

Inequities, which include but are not limited to, gentrification, displacement and transportation barriers, plus a lock down of the food industry by big corporations, have prevented underrepresented communities from having access to healthy food options. Mass media markets unhealthy, and unfortunately economically cheaper, food choices and miseducates our communities on healthy eating.

We demand healthy, affordable, nutritious, land-healing, non-toxic food production and delivery systems.

- **Provide support from government and resources for agriculture in Black communities, including land and space to grow our own food and distribute it to each other, thus creating self-sustaining community food systems**
- **Provide resources to grow community gardens**
- **Institute labs and grants in schools to support sustainable food practices in communities (school-based gardens, etc)**
- **Implement a 5-year plan to transform the landscape of investment in locally-owned food production and delivery systems in Black, Brown, Indigenous and working class communities**
- **Develop partnerships with formerly incarcerated people to support agricultural work**
- **Support efforts to eliminate food deserts by developing more healthy and affordable food options, while decreasing the density of fast food, liquor stores and other sources of harmful, unhealthy substances in marginalized communities**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We want to extend a sincere thank you to the following organizations, whose members have participated through hosting listening projects across the country! To every organization not listed who took the time to lend your wisdom and insight to our town halls, we appreciate you! It is our hope that this platform reflects what you shared and warrants your continued participation as we transform this platform into equitable practice and policy!

- **Journey for Justice Alliance (National)**
- **Dignity in Schools Campaign (National)**
- **Clean Water Action (National)**
- **National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression (National)**
- **Alliance to Reclaim our Schools (National)**
- **Black Lives Matter At School (National)**
- **Eastern Michigan Environmental Action Council (MI)**
- **Appetite for Change (MN)**
- **Northside Action for Justice (IL)**
- **Mother's Opposed to Violence Everywhere (IL)**
- **Project Sweetie Pie (MN)**
- **Alliance for Education Justice (National)**
- **Center for Popular Democracy (National)**
- **NEA (National)**
- **AFT (National)**
- **White Coats for Black Lives (National)**
- **Uzazi Village (VA)**
- **National Nurses United (National)**
- **SEIU HC (IL)**
- **Chicago Health Equity Coalition (CHEC)**
- **Michigan We Choose Coalition (MI)**
- **Clinton Hill Community Action Council (NJ)**
- **The Deep Center (GA)**
- **Black Lives Matter South Carolina (SC)**
- **NAACP (University of Texas)**
- **DC One (DC)**
- **Commissary is Very Necessary (TX)**
- **Red, Black and Green Coalition (TX)**
- **Daughters Across the Diaspora (TX)**
- **The City School Boston (MA)**
- **Students Deserve (CA)**
- **Student Voices (CA)**
- **Miami Algebra Project (FL)**

TO OUR PEERLESS POLICY TEAM

We want to offer our thanks to the Equity or Else peerless policy team, led by Ms. Beth Glenn for your diligence, brilliance and humility in respecting the voices that are too often intentionally ignored. This platform was elevated by who you are! Thank you!

- **Beth Glenn-New York University Metro Center**
- **Dr. Charles Payne-Rutgers University**
- **Marquise Goodman-Rutgers University**
- **Nakeefa Garay-Rutgers University**
- **Dr. Rhoda Gutierrez-University of Illinois/Chicago**
- **Dr. Pauline Lipman-University of Illinois/Chicago**
- **Dr. Rico Gutstein-University of Illinois/Chicago**

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