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ECONOMY

Springfield's longstanding equity gap has created 'whole different world' on the east side

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Dominic Watson is intimately familiar with the disparities that exist in Springfield and Sangamon County.

Growing up, he would travel from the north side of town to the east side to attend St. Patrick's Catholic School near the corner of MLK Drive and South Grand Avenue.

"Driving from the north side to the east side, or from the west side to the east side, you can see how things change," said Watson, 37, who is president and chief executive officer of the Springfield Black Chamber of Commerce. "You transition. It's like a whole different world."

In Sangamon County, the median household income for a Black family is $27,003, while it is $66,648 for their white counterparts, according to five-year estimates from the 2019 American Community Survey, the most recent available. The survey shows that 39.2% of the county's Black residents live in poverty while 10.3% of white residents live below the poverty line. Of the 13 Illinois counties with Black populations of 15,000 or more, Sangamon has the highest poverty rate among Black people in the state.

While the income disparity is not new, the way the community is coming together to address the issue has changed. Organizations such as the Springfield Sangamon Growth Alliance, Memorial Health System and the Springfield Black Chamber of Commerce are working with elected city officials to find sustainable solutions to equity issues and ensure the city's diversity is reflected throughout the community.

"I've never seen a time where people were so motivated to expand their understanding of diversity and inclusion," said Watson, who works as a labor lobbyist. "The conversations that we've had from a Black community standpoint for generations are finally being heard."

Springfield's equity gap: By the numbers

'Teaching people how to fish'

Local leaders determined to bridge the area's equity gap say training and employment are key to helping Springfield's east side — where poverty is prevalent — narrow the gap that goes back generations.

Within the neighborhoods bordered by 11th Street to the west, East Cook Street north, MLK Drive east, and just a few blocks north of South Grand Avenue to the south — 53% of the population lives in poverty, according the ACS estimates.

"For a long time we've been doing it wrong, in my opinion," said Ward 2 Ald. Shawn Gregory. "We haven't been teaching people how to fish. We've been like, 'Here's $400 a month.' But you can't always provide that. So how do people make their own money? How do they become self-sustainable, so they don't have to keep leaning on government? How do we help people get better instead of keeping them at the same place?"

William Bishop IV, who was born and raised east of the 10th Street railroad tracks, is using his platform as the owner of Solid Ground Solutions construction

company to open doors for people in the neighborhoods where he grew up.

In partnership with O'Shea Builders, Bishop runs a pre-apprenticeship program that works to connect people of color with trade unions.

So far, eight men have completed the training program which includes visits to local unions and introductions to business managers and training coordinators. The training lasts about three months. When participants complete the pre-apprenticeships, they begin the union application process and work to land a job.

Seven men who finished Bishop's initial pre-apprenticeship training have jobs. The eighth is set to start work within the next month.

"Getting the guys into these unions, it's a life-changer," said Bishop, 32, who played basketball and football at Western Illinois University where he earned his bachelor's in construction management. "Some of these guys have gone from making $12 an hour to now they're making about $27-$28 an hour."

A second class started the pre-apprenticeship program earlier this month. Even though program participants have been in their early-20s to mid-30s so far, the opportunity is open to high school graduates as young as 18 and minority adults of all ages.

"We just want people that are ready to work and ready to change their life," Bishop said.

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Understanding the need

Ryan McCrady admits that he hasn't always understood the obstacles some people who live in predominantly Black communities and communities of generational poverty regularly face in trying to change their realities.

Having gained a better understanding over the years, he now — as the president and CEO of the Springfield Sangamon Growth Alliance — says he is committed to listening to the needs of those in underserved communities and working to be a part of the solution.

More than half of Black children — 54.4% — in Sangamon County live below the poverty line compared to the 14.8% of white youth who are being raised in poverty, according to the ACS.

"Early childhood education is part of economic development," McCrady said. "It's an important part of it. It does two things: It allows parents to become part of the workforce, and it starts training the next workforce through early childhood education."

With many low-income families having little or no access to childcare, those circumstances often serve as one of the obstacles for people trying to enter the workforce, McCrady notes.

As a result of the barriers, many in communities of poverty often lack the educational training, work experience and connections to help them in escaping the cycle of poverty, according to Tiffani Saunders, who is a sociology and African American studies lecturer at the University of Illinois Springfield.

"Our social capital — or those people in your network that you're able to access — and our social networks tend to be segregated on the basis of not only race, but especially social class," Saunders said. "That's where this whole idea of generational poverty comes into play. Because even if you can't necessarily get yourself out of poverty, maybe you know someone that could help you get a job or help you access resources. That's where the sort of deficit comes in when we're talking about social class."

McCrady, who has been having conversations with the Black Chamber of Commerce and the Springfield Urban League to better understand how the business community can help reduce that disparity, said programs like Lincoln Land

Community College's Open Door Workforce Equity Initiative are essential. The workforce equity initiative provides education and training programs to people from underserved communities to assist them find employment.

In Sangamon County, the most recent five-year ACS estimates show that 15.5% of the area's Black population was unemployed. Meanwhile, just 4.4% of the county's white residents were unemployed.

SIU School of Medicine: Pandemic brings lessons in medical education, equity

The COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbated the gap. While local unemployment data by race is not yet available beyond 2019, statewide the Black unemployment rate went from 8.7% in 2019 to 14.4% in 2020. At the same time, Illinois' white unemployment rate went from 3.3% in 2019 to 8.5% in 2020, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"We have to improve how we communicate opportunities and be very deliberate about getting that information to the individuals that need it," said McCrady, who was hired in March 2020 to lead the public-private partnership organization aimed at promoting economic development. "You can't simply put up a billboard or something like that and say you're trying to tell everybody. You have to get connected with the community and figure out the best way to provide the information and also improve access to it for folks that are dealing with lower income levels or no income."

'Accountable to our community'

Income gaps have created other disparities among the community's poorest residents — especially in the areas of health and wellness.

The social determinants of health — meaning a person's income, environment, health behaviors and access to care — are linked to 80% of health outcomes. Meanwhile, 20% of health outcomes are tied to the actual care provided by medical professionals, according to the American Hospital Association.

"If you're living in an environment where you have experienced constant racial trauma, trauma through violence in the community, anything like that, that can exacerbate those negative health behaviors," said Becky Gabany, who is the director of community services for Memorial Health System. "While it's personal choices, it's also very rooted in trauma."

In order to improve health outcomes, Memorial and other local health care organizations have taken their work into the communities most in need. Together, Memorial, HSHS St. John's Hospital and SIU Center for Family Medicine have a community health worker program working to improve access to care by assisting with things like scheduling doctor's appointments, transportation to and from appointments, and ensuring patients are able to access their prescriptions.

"We've got to be accountable to our community," Gabany said. "And that's what we're striving to do."

Similarly, the Community Foundation for the Land of Lincoln provides funding for programs like the Nurse-Family Partnership, which helps low-income first-time mothers with skills, assistance and home visits through the first couple years of their child's life.

The nonprofit also helps to fund the Sangamon County Citizen Survey. In doing so, it hopes to provide greater insight into the experiences of those within the community as a way of creating a roadmap that allows local organizations to establish effective programs that can have lasting impacts.

In the 2019 survey, 46% of non-white respondents reported that being a person of color is a large barrier to career success in Sangamon County. However, only 19% of white respondents recognized it as a large barrier to career success in the county.

"On racial and equity discussions, I've never been more heartened to hear the discussions I've been hearing of late," said John Stremsterfer, who is the president and CEO of the Community Foundation for the Land of Lincoln. "I think the horrible tragedy with George Floyd really kind of brought a lot of these emotions

and feelings to the consciousness of people. And I think that's very true here in Springfield."

'Opportunities to make things better'

Driving down South Grand Avenue, 11th Street or in the heart of Southtown, dilapidated homes and businesses have become part of the east-side fabric as city dollars and investments have flowed west.

However, with 1.5% of tax revenue on local recreational marijuana sales earmarked for the city's east side, some long-awaited changes are in the works.

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In March, the Springfield City Council unanimously passed an ordinance proposed by Gregory to use the approximately $445,000 in cannabis tax revenue designated for the east side to create a pair of programs for homeowners and business owners within the area bound by 11th to the west, Carpenter to the north, Dirksen Parkway to the east and Ash to the south.

Just over three-quarters of the money will be used to award grants of up to $100,000 to minority-owned small businesses. The businesses — which must be at least 51% minority-owned — are responsible for a 10% match.

For Clay's Popeye's BBQ, the money would ensure the mortgage on its South Grand Avenue building is paid and would make it possible for the longtime family-run local barbecue to take care of outstanding bills.

"We have a group of customers who are regulars and who make sure that they come in and patronize us on a regular basis to make sure that we stay a staple in the community," said Dee Clay, who owns the restaurant with her parents. "This way, it gives you a foundation, it helps you to stay afloat and you don't have to worry about those outstanding debts, because they will have been paid."

The rest of the east side's money from the cannabis tax will be used to provide homeowners in the area with grants up to $25,000 to assist them with the beautification of their properties. The homeowners would be responsible for a 5% match on any funds they receive.

Applications for the two programs are expected to be available in July on the city's website at Springfield.il.us.

"As that revenue grows, we'll do more things," Gregory said. "We have some opportunities to make things better a little bit at a time. But execution is a must."

Moving forward

Across the state, recreational marijuana sales totaled nearly $115 million in April, setting a new record since it became legal in Illinois at the start of Jan. 2020. The new record topped the previous record set just a month earlier when sales hit $108 million in March, according to the Illinois Department of Financial and Professional Regulation.

With the growing revenue stream, community leaders have ideas for other programs that could help to decrease the poverty on the city's east side.

Gregory would like to see banks take rental payment histories into account when considering longtime home renters for mortgage loans. He also would like to see more of a willingness for employers to hire people looking to provide for themselves after serving time in jail. The alderman said that could decrease some of the financial struggles and violence in the community he represents.

A centralized hub incorporating innovation, entertainment and education is something Watson would ultimately like to see on the city's east side.

"The only way really to change the social construct that exists is by ensuring that there is access to opportunities — whether it be business capital, social capital or just extending people's scope, allowing them to dream," Watson said.

University of Illinois Springfield professor Kenneth Kriz, who has studied economic development programs for more than two decades, warns that there are not many examples of communities overcoming generations of structural poverty — much like what exists on Springfield's east side. However, he said increased access to quality education can contribute to lowering a city's overall poverty rate by helping people in poor neighborhoods gain opportunities that can ultimately help them move to other areas within a community.

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"A lot of our economic growth at the local level is determined by the national economy," Kriz said. "So, if we have a few years of the type of growth we are experiencing right now, we'll be back."

In the meantime, some of the county's largest employers, like Memorial Health System — which employs a workforce that is currently 88% white — are working to increase staff diversity to ensure more people can see themselves reflected throughout the community.

"I feel a lot of hope about what we can all do together as a community, and especially the more that we're centering on these very real disparities," Gabany said. "I just hope it's something we can all rally behind."

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