

HEARTLAND ALLIANCE

ENDING POVERTY

TO: My Brother's Keeper Initiative Stakeholders

FROM: Melissa Young, Director, Heartland Alliance National Initiatives on Poverty & Economic Opportunity

DATE: April 2, 2014

RE: My Brother's Keeper, Charting Pathways to Employment and Greater Economic Opportunity for Low-income Men and Youth of Color

We applaud the stakeholders and partners involved in the My Brother's Keeper (MBK) Initiative for their strategic vision, wisdom, guidance, and tireless energy that laid the foundation for and brought forth the My Brother's Keeper Initiative. We are immensely grateful and indebted to you for the opportunity to submit the recommendations included in this memo.

The My Brother's Keeper Initiative represents a historic moment to galvanize the nation around improving the well-being of men and boys of color. **Fundamental to improving the well-being of low-income men and youth of color – across a myriad of factors – is ensuring access to employment opportunities and sufficient earnings.** Indeed, African American men and youth persistently encounter more severe and more frequent barriers to employment and economic success due to hundreds of years of political, economic, and social marginalization and discrimination, which still exists today. In 2012, there were almost 6 million African American men and youth unemployed or not actively seeking work. Of this number, nearly 3.5 million were low income – at or below 200% of the federal poverty threshold.ⁱ From the 1960's until today, unemployment rates for black men have been [2 to 2.5 times](#) the white unemployment rate.

Among young men recently released from prison – who are disproportionately African American - intensive employment interventions have demonstrated rarely seen impacts in [reducing recidivism](#). Moreover, stable employment is one of the most [important causal factors](#) in promoting healthy relationships between co-parents and children and significantly influences fathers' engagement with their children. Furthermore, employment is emerging as an important element in [youth violence-reduction strategies](#). Finally, early work experience for youth is one of the strongest predictors of future employment and earnings success. Increasing employment and economic opportunity can positively contribute to the economic health of communities through [increased demand](#) for goods and services and can positively [benefit employers](#).

We urge stakeholders involved in My Brother's Keeper to leverage this historic opportunity to address the decades-long disproportionate unemployment and underemployment situation faced by millions of low-income men and youth of color. In order to realize the goals set forth by My Brother's Keeper, we suggest that resources and attention are aimed at advancing a bold national goal and corresponding policy, systems and community infrastructure building campaign specifically focused on reducing unemployment and underemployment among low-income men and youth of color.

CHARTING PATHWAYS TO ECONOMIC SUCCESS FOR LOW-INCOME MEN & YOUTH OF COLOR

In order to realize the goals set forth through My Brother's Keeper, we suggest that resources and attention are aimed at advancing a bold national goal and corresponding **policy, systems change, and community infrastructure building campaign specifically focused on reducing unemployment and underemployment among low-income men and youth of color**. The needs of individuals and communities informs us that in order to improve the employment and income trajectory for low-income men and youth of color, three parallel objectives with a singular goal must advance concurrently and inform each other including policy change, systems improvements, and field building.

Policy Change. There are negligible dedicated federal resources to support the employment interests and needs of low-income men and youth of color and most often an ill-coordinated and under-resourced set of federal and state agencies are responsible for responding to the employment and service needs of low-income men and youth of color. Moreover, hundreds of years of federal and local policies – including education, labor, housing, lending, asset building, criminal justice, health care, welfare, nutrition assistance, child support and others – have created numerous barriers to employment access and advancement for low-income men and youth of color. Unless efforts are redoubled to dedicate new, consistent, and flexible resources; undo current harmful policy and defend and advance positive change; as well as secure champions at all levels of government and within the private sector to sustain these efforts, the goal of increasing economic security for low-income men and youth of color, their families and their communities hangs in jeopardy. To this end, we suggest.ⁱⁱ

Connect Low-Income Youth of Color to Work Quickly.

- Fully fund summer and year-round youth subsidized summer jobs initiatives this year and target interventions to underrepresented communities, communities of color, and communities with high unemployment and poverty. In order to support career development, blend these initiatives with concurrent education and skill building, apprenticeships, mentoring, and cognitive behavioral interventions as appropriate to meet the needs of low-income youth of color and support access and success in employment.
- Promote and pass the [Pathways Back to Work Act](#), which includes \$2.5 billion for summer and year-round employment opportunities for youth ages 16-24 who are neither employed nor in school.

Connect Low-Income Men of Color to Work Quickly.

- Build off President Obama's [Executive Report Addressing the Negative Cycle of Long-Term Unemployment](#) which focused on strategies to get the long-term unemployed back to work and included subsidized employment and transitional jobs strategies in order to launch a national initiative aimed at reducing long-term unemployment through the expansion of subsidized employment programs. Ensure that such an initiative:
 - In policy, program design, and funding mirrors the widely successful ARRA TANF Emergency Fund to allow for states and communities to design and implement programs swiftly and respond to local needs as well as create incentives for states and communities to leverage and efficiently use federal, state, and private funding for the creation and implementation of these programs. Build on lessons learned as

well as best and promising practices in implementing subsidized employment programs.

- Depending on local needs, be crafted in such a way as to benefit private employers and incentivize private sector hiring as well as benefit local communities and the public.
 - Creates on-the-job training, skill building, and education opportunities that give workers the skills they need to be successful in work.
- Promote and pass the [Pathways Back to Work Act](#), which includes \$8 billion for subsidized employment and supportive services for low-income adults and a range of work and learning opportunities that help low-income adults obtain education and training.
 - Through the Department of Interior, explore the expansion of policies recommended through [President Obama's FFY15 budget](#) that would revitalize National Parks for the next century through WPA-like work opportunities - putting people back to work quickly restoring national parks. Ensure that such opportunities provided access to employment for underrepresented populations and communities of color.
 - Ensure that the [SNAP E&T Pilots](#) included in the reauthorization of the Farm Bill include projects that provide underrepresented populations and communities of color greater opportunities to access employment and training resources and opportunities. Identify and work with states to develop proposals that specifically aim to serve the employment needs of low-income men, individuals with a criminal record, those experiencing homelessness or unstably housed, veterans, and those experiencing chronic unemployment and poverty. Beyond this, support state expansion of 50/50 SNAP E&T program funds to support innovative employment interventions for low-income men, individuals with a criminal record, those experiencing homelessness or unstably housed, veterans, and those experiencing chronic unemployment and poverty.

Support Testing, Innovation, Dissemination & Replication of Findings at the Departments of Labor and Human Services.

- At the Department of Labor, support the Enhanced Transitional Jobs Demonstration Project and disseminate the findings in order to continue to grow the body of promising employment solutions for connecting individuals exiting incarceration and non-custodial parents to work. Leverage the findings to promote replication through Workforce Innovation funds and DOL discretionary funds.
- At the Department of Human Services, support the Subsidized and Transitional Employment Demonstration project and disseminate findings in order to grow the body of promising employment solutions for low-income individuals including youth and those participating in state Temporary Assistance to Needy Families programs and non-custodial parents. Leverage the findings to promote replication through HHS discretionary funds, TANF block grant funds, and set-asides when appropriate.
- At the Department of Human Services Office of Child Support, continue the current strategy and planning-focused grant projects focused on developing evidence-based innovative State approaches to child support and workforce development partnerships.
- At the Department of Human Services Office of Family Assistance, continue to support Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Marriage grants and testing of subsidized

employment approaches for noncustodial fathers. Invest in future Responsible Fatherhood grants and testing to build off current efforts and findings.

Make Work Pay.

- Raise and index the federal minimum wage for inflation.
- Expand EITC for childless adults and as suggested by the [President Obama's FFY15 budget](#) double the value of the Earned Income Tax Credit for childless workers to \$1,000 and drop the minimum age requirement from 24 to 21 and raise the maximum age to 65.
- Support innovative state Paid Leave policies that provide access to paid family leave for fathers.
- Lift up and disseminate progressive state child support policies and innovation in Kansas, Indiana, Wisconsin, and Maryland among others to inform a national discussion and replication of policies that reduce state-owed child support payments for the benefit of low-income men and their families.

Acknowledge the Criminal Justice System's Role in Improving Employment Outcomes for Low-Income Men of Color.

- Fully fund the Second Chance Act. Advance efforts to [reauthorize the legislation](#) and include greater resources for reentry employment efforts for adults and juveniles and a definition of transitional jobs. Transitional jobs programs have been shown to contribute to [dramatically decreasing recidivism](#) for those who have been released from incarceration – a rarely seen impact in criminal justice field.
- Build on the recommendations in the *Integrated Employment and Reentry Strategies* [brief](#) to address the need for effective employment interventions for those returning from incarceration. Educate federal and state Departments of Corrections about the need for employment interventions for individuals returning from incarceration.

Leverage Full Employment Caucus to Promote MBK Legislative Agenda.

- The [Full Employment Caucus](#) is aimed at strengthening America's economy and restoring dignity for the tens of millions of Americans who have suffered the physical and emotional pain of joblessness. The caucus will regularly host expert economists and policymakers to discuss proven job-creation proposals and implement strategies for their adoption. We recommend that MBK collaborate with experts to identify full employment policy recommendations, offer to host, and convene roundtables with experts and impacted populations in Washington D.C. and in communities across the country.

Systems Improvements. The programs and systems that make up the United States workforce system and other systems including welfare to work and income-supports, SNAP employment and training, criminal justice and re-entry, veterans employment services, and others have failed to adequately prioritize the employment needs of low-income men of color and instead have often created significant barriers to employment and economic success. Indeed, between April 1, 2011 and March 31, 2012, black men accounted for only 21 percent of those that were served by the public workforce system.ⁱⁱⁱ Low-income, less-educated young black males are less likely than other low-income, less-educated individuals to receive job services, occupational skills training, or on-the-job training.^{iv} Moreover, most of these systems are ill-equipped and too often ill-coordinated to

meet the diverse employment and service needs of low-income men and youth of color. Thus, it is essential to begin to weave connective tissue among these and other systems through:

- peer learning;
- lifting up and disseminating promising and practical coordination practices;
- seeding innovation;
- trainings; and
- one-on-one consultation among other activities.

Doing so can chart progress toward ensuring that low-income men and youth of color are prioritized, resources leveraged, interventions targeted, expertise shared, and programs expanded. Additionally, we suggest that it is essential that every federal agency involved in President Obama's [My Brother's Keeper Task Force](#) examine the programs and policies under their authority with the goal of creating greater access to employment and economic success for low-income men and youth of color. To this end, we suggest that every federal agency:

- Identify existing legislative and regulatory barriers to employment entry, success, and advancement imposed by current programs and policies under their jurisdiction;
- Foster program and service alignment towards the creation of a comprehensive continuum of employment and training services and supports for low-income men and youth of color;
- Foster program and system coordination to maximize the availability and use of current resources and programs in order to maximize efficiencies at the federal, state and local levels;
- Identify and share best practices, lessons learned and emerging promising practices in supporting transitions to employment and economic self-sufficiency for low-income men and youth of color; and
- Bring to Congress legislative recommendations when appropriate and when agencies are called upon to do so, that are intended to support increased local, state, and federal collaboration among administering agencies and promote progress toward employment and self-sufficiency for low-income men and youth of color.

Field Building. While promising and proven employment approaches exist for low-income men and youth of color, few providers and communities have fully adopted them and few communities have brought them to scale. Providers and communities who have not adopted employment best practices have scarce time to devote to research, practical adaptation and implementation. There would be a huge benefit to the goals set forth in My Brother's Keeper to invest in efforts that equip practitioners and local, city, and state leaders with the tools and resources to implement best and promising employment practices. Such efforts might include:

- peer learning;
- best, promising and practical practice identification and dissemination;
- robust web and virtual assistance;
- piloting and testing;
- training; and
- one-on-one support among other activities.

These efforts are essential to grow the number, size, and effectiveness of groups that are likely to first encounter low-income men and youth of color in communities and respond to their employment needs. Failure to do so may likely perpetuate the unemployment crisis among low-income men and youth of color.

ABOUT US.

[Heartland Alliance’s National Initiatives on Poverty & Economic Opportunity](#) focus on ensuring that everyone who wants to work has the tools and opportunities to do so. Our initiatives include the [National Transitional Jobs Network](#) (NTJN), the [Black Men Overcoming Barriers and Realizing Employment \(B.MORE\) Initiative](#), and the [Working to End Homelessness Initiative](#). These initiatives are designed to address chronic unemployment through the capturing and dissemination of best practices, seeding of research on promising practices, field building activities and policy change. We are strategically aligned and frequently collaborate with thousands of employment, training and service providers, anti-poverty, workforce, reentry, and homelessness advocates, researchers, and government officials. Our theory of change suggests that policy change, systems improvement, and field building efforts must advance concurrently – informed by providers, participants and research – in order to improve the life outcomes of individuals facing chronic unemployment and poverty.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss this memo in more detail and provide more information about promising employment models, place-based efforts underway or in development that aim to improve access to employment and economic success for low-income men and youth of color, and additional policy recommendations not included here.

Please contact Melisa Young, Director of Heartland Alliance’s National Initiatives on Poverty and Economic Opportunity with questions or requests for more information.

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ⁱ Social IMPACT Research Center’s analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2012 American Community Survey 1-year estimates program micro data.

ⁱⁱ For brevity, the policy suggestions included in this memo reflect a partial list of current federal policy leverage points. Additional policy improvements and systems changes are necessary to support access to employment and economic opportunity for low-income men and youth of color.

ⁱⁱⁱ Social Policy Research Associates (2012). *PY 2011 WIA Trends Over Time*. Retrieved from <http://www.doleta.gov/performance/results/pdf/py2011trends2012.pdf>

^{iv} Nightingale, Demetra Smith and Elaine Sorensen (2006) “The Availability and Use of Workforce Development Programs among Less- Educated Youth” in Mincy, ed. *Black Males Left Behind*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute Press.