

MAY 2021

Report by The Niagara Falls Social Justice Commission



The City Of Niagara Falls

City Of Niagara Falls, Niagara
Falls Social Justice Commission
(2021)

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Statement from the Mayor of Niagara Falls

To the Niagara Falls Community,

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd was killed by the senseless act of Derek Chauvin, then a police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota. While this wasn't the first incident of its kind, it was *the* incident that seemed to be a tipping point on the issue of inequality in the criminal justice system across the country and in places around the world. In many cities, the homicide of George Floyd created uncomfortable but necessary conversations about race relations, public safety, and the need for change. As protests were organized across the country, Niagara Falls residents joined the protests and a call for change.

While in the custody of the police, the unnecessary death of George Floyd sparked the outcry, and the focus for many was on law enforcement. My administration saw this as an opportunity to have a broader discussion about injustice, inequality, and race across many aspects of society. On June 26, 2020, I announced the formation of a Social Justice Commission -- charged with the task of examining and proposing solutions to inequality in law enforcement, education, employment, healthcare, and housing. The appointed commissioners were asked to lead discussions with other selected community members in each of these areas during the Summer and Fall of 2020, having what I called the necessarily uncomfortable discussions about inequality. Commissioners and members were selected for their knowledge in particular subject areas and a previously expressed position that my administration believed relevant to the conversation. Over the next several weeks after being appointed, these committees met regularly. As commissioners would advise from time to time, they had spirited debates on necessary topics in each field of examination.

The Social Justice Commission's goal is to present to the residents of the City of Niagara Falls a plan that highlights the deficiencies our community faces in various areas and a potential pathway to correcting them. It is not a recipe, quick fix, or easy answer; that was not the intention. This plan should be seen as a "living" document that will need to adapt, grow and mature as we continue this work. If the fundamental issue of inequality is to be effectively addressed, it will take all of us working together to achieve that success. This report, the work of the commissioners and members, is a starting point for our community. By remaining committed to the goals outlined in this report and realizing that change comes through people working together and not by government fiat, we can, and we will, move our City forward to a more just and equitable place and again be proud of our City as we were when we received national recognition for our peaceful protests. We can be proud that Niagara Falls is a community respectful of all people and a shining example for Western New York.

With sincerity and thanks,

Robert M. Restaino

Robert M. Restaino

Mayor of the City of Niagara Falls

Acknowledgments

Listed below are the dedicated individuals who actively contributed to the compilation and completion of this report by the Niagara Falls Social Justice Commission. We take this opportunity to thank each of them and the many others not listed here who joined the conversation for the commendable work they have done for our City in the name of progress and justice.

Law Enforcement

Co-Chairs:

- **Anthony Restaino**, City Administrator
- **Pastor Craig D. Pridgen**, Senior Pastor of True Bethel Baptist Church, Branch Manager at M&T Bank

Education

Co-Chairs:

- **Rev. James J. Maher, C.M.**, President, Niagara University
- **Mark Laurie**, Superintendent, Niagara Falls City School District

Employment

Co-Chairs:

- **Bishop Jesse Scott**, President of NOAH, Pastor of Word of Life Ministries
- **Rolanda L. Ward, Ph. D**, Associate Professor of Social Work, Niagara University

Healthcare

Co-Chairs:

- **LaVonne Ansari, Ph. D.**, Chief Executive Officer Community Health Center of Buffalo, Inc.
- **Joseph Ruffolo**, Chief Executive Officer Niagara Falls Memorial Medical Center

Housing

Co-Chairs:

- **Robyn Krueger**, President & CEO: Community Missions
- **Clifford (Cliff) Scott**, Executive Director: Niagara Falls Housing Authority

City of Niagara Falls (Executive Office)

- **Robert M. Restaino**, Mayor of Niagara Falls
- **Anthony Restaino**, City Administrator
- **Kristen Cavalleri**, Public Information Officer
- **Nancy Shiah**, Executive Assistant
- **Maren Geiger**, Student Intern

Report Terminology

Described below are the series of terms used throughout this report and the format followed for each recommendation for further explanation and clarification.

Terms:

- **Diversity:** “the inclusion of people of different races, cultures, etc. in a group or organization.”¹
- **Equity:** treatment that acknowledges, respects, and responds to the specific concerns and needs of communities negatively affected by systemic oppression.
- **Inclusion:** “the act or practice of including and accommodating people who have historically been excluded (as because of their race, gender, sexuality, or ability)”²
- **Social Justice:** the equitable and inclusive distribution of opportunities and privileges within a society.
- **BIPOC:** Black, Indigenous, People of Color.
- **Minority and Underrepresented Communities:** groups of people that have been systemically and historically oppressed, marginalized, silenced, and excluded from the privilege and opportunities that society provides.

Findings and Recommendations Format:

- **Title:** The name of the below recommendation.
- **Recommendation:** The summary statement of the proposal.
- **Lead:** The organizations and departments that will be responsible for implementing the recommendation.
- **Observation:** The background information behind the proposal’s creation.
- **Desired End State:** The ultimate goal that will ideally be achieved after the implementation.
- **Recommended Actions:** The specific strategy and steps that need to be taken to achieve this recommendation.
- **Time Frame:** The ideal, flexible timeline in which the proposal will be addressed and completed.
- **Assessment:** The means of evaluation and accountability by which the plan is subjected.

¹ “Diversity,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/diversity>.

² “Inclusion,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/inclusion>.

Introduction

The Black Lives Matter protests in the Summer of 2020 against systemic and institutionalized racism, this nation's mechanisms of oppression, and unjust police brutality, illustrated the need for each community throughout our country to initiate social change to do better and to be better.

The Mayor of Niagara Falls, Robert M. Restaino, announced the Niagara Falls Social Justice Commission in light of the unjust deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks, and of too many others who have fallen to the hands of racism and injustice. The Commission sought to start the conversation and deliver the change needed within Niagara Falls if our City is to progress and become a place where equity, diversity, and inclusion are central values to how we act, live, and treat each other.

The Commission designed five subcommittees, each focusing on one of five central aspects of City life: law enforcement, education, employment, healthcare, and housing. The members of these committees consist of various individuals with unique, essential backgrounds and perspectives that all have a passion and a desire to see the City of Niagara Falls progress.

Their task was to meet over the remainder of the Summer of 2020 and the beginning of Fall 2020 and discuss the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to the City of Niagara Falls through their particular lens. Once determining what those precisely are, they were asked to submit to Mayor Robert Restaino a series of recommendations that address them. The action steps and strategies outlined within the separate proposals use the City's strengths, resources, powers, and the entities and leadership within to ensure their successful implementation.

After submission to Mayor Robert Restaino, each recommendation was reviewed and assessed by his office to certify that they fall within the City's power and reach, accurately reflecting and addressing their intended target issue. The commissioners then reviewed those interpretations to supply their approval or further suggestions, with the final product of that collaboration subsequently included and outlined within this plan for the City.

The findings and recommendations discovered by the Niagara Falls Social Justice Commission illustrate the power of communication, collaboration, and a mutual dedication to seeing improvement, progress, and healing within our City while crafting social change. The proposals consistently include avenues for continued discussion, transparency, and accountability, all of which are vital to the breath of this plan as a living document. All members displayed passion and commitment by finding the time to help better and build our City through the guiding principles of equity, inclusion, and diversity. For this, the City of Niagara Falls thanks them for their work in driving change within our community.

Findings and Recommendations: Full Report

Law Enforcement

Purpose Statement:

The Law Enforcement Committee met throughout the Summer of 2020 and drafted a series of recommendations that identify strengths and areas for improvement within the Niagara Falls Police Department (NFPD). In response to the 2010 Consent Decree with the New York State Attorney General's Office, the NFPD had revised departmental policies and procedures. The changes addressed the items outlined in Governor Cuomo's Executive Order #203 dated June 12, 2020. The Committee acknowledges the positive changes that have been instituted in the Department and recommend that it remains vigilant in ensuring that these changes stay in place. Despite this, there is still room for further improvement. The recommendations below show areas where the NFPD can improve its relationship with community residents, develop more transparent communication, and reform its current procedures, practices, and training requirements.

Recommendations:

Title: Quick Response Team

Recommendation: Develop a Quick Response Team composed of local community organizations, Police Liaisons, and Mental Health Professionals from County Mental Health. The Police Liaisons and community organizations would help respond to major incidents such as fatal accidents, etc. These individuals would lend support to family members and other residents that arrive at the scene and become emotional. The County Mental Health Professionals would perform ride-along with the officers. The goal is to develop a better working relationship between the two parties. The Mental Health Counselors would respond to calls concerning distressed individuals, yet a crime has not been committed.

Lead: City of Niagara Falls; Community Organizations; Police Liaisons; County Mental Health Association

Observation: Often, residents call police officers to respond to situations they are not entirely trained or qualified to de-escalate and contain. For example, when an individual is distressed but has not committed a crime. In these circumstances, officers are not trained to de-escalate and adequately help the resident, whereas a Mental Health Professional would be qualified to do so. In addition to this, police officers' lack of attention to family members or individuals at the scene may appear as uncaring, when in reality, this is not necessarily true. Having Peacekeepers, Liaisons, and Mental Health Professionals present at these scenes would help those residents by providing them with the care and attention they need in those given situations.

Desired End State: The practical and effective implementation of this Quick Response Team and an expansion of its resources as needed by the community.

Recommended Actions: The NFPD is already in the process of incorporating this program into their daily responses. They will increase the resources once the initial runs have proved successful. Eventually, a group of professionals will be available 24/7 within the police station to assist in ride-alongs and respond to major incidents.

Time Frame: To have the program operationally and effectively implemented by the end of 2021.

Assessment: Partner with a third-party organization to review the program's effectiveness and see that it is appropriately responding to residents' needs.

Title: Implicit Bias and Cultural Diversity Training

Recommendation: Incorporate Implicit Bias and Cultural Diversity Training and training on de-escalation and reasonable force, anti-bias, and interacting with the mentally ill for the NFPD. These would occur annually to ensure that new officers receive the training and that the learning objectives are reinforced and updated for others.

Lead: City of Niagara Falls

Observation: The NFPD currently lacks sufficient training in these areas, and, at times, this negatively affects the quality of interactions between them and community residents. To address the changing needs of residents and encourage interactions unaffected by bias and strengthened by awareness, the NFPD must prioritize expanding its officers' education and training. The training will seek to improve relations between officers and the surrounding community and ensure that NFPD officers act justly and fairly during their interactions with City residents.

Desired End State: NFPD is better equipped to respond to calls and react in a way that corresponds to the lessons taught through the training.

Recommended Actions: For the NFPD to partner with a third-party organization specializing in these types of training. Ensure that the collaboration addresses the long-term goal of these sessions occurring on an annual basis and the need for flexibility to respond to any current events or concerns of the community as they develop.

Time Frame: Solidify a partnership with an organization by the end of Spring 2021. Implement training sessions by the end of 2021, subject to financial requirements.

Assessment: Conduct surveys before and after each training to see whether the officers retained the information taught to them and understand the learning objectives. Encourage conversations with community members to see whether or not they notice a positive change in officer behavior. Analyze the complaints made after the training to find areas for improvement and identify officers who are not responding, as anticipated, to the training

Title: Greater Good Initiative

Recommendation: The relationship between the NFPD and the community can benefit from improved transparency and visibility. To do this, officers need to be more engaged with residents to demonstrate that they are also members of the community rather than outsiders. This will serve to increase trust between the two parties, leading to better and more effective interactions.

Lead: City of Niagara Falls

Observation: The NFPD must demonstrate adequate visibility within the City, improving their relationship with residents. Unfortunately, an unstable connection leads to a lack of trust, transparency, and communication between officers and residents. Officers can work to improve this relationship by making a considerable effort to involve themselves in the community. Suppose residents know officers personally; in that case, this may make them more comfortable in reaching out to law enforcement if an issue arose and to communicate with them any concerns.

Desired End State: For the NFPD to increase presence in the community as members, which correlates to the development of trust between police and citizens and improved communication and collaboration.

Recommended Actions:

Community Relations Committee (CRC)

Create a Community Relations Committee (CRC). The CRC would consist of a minimum of three people and a maximum of five, who are all appointed by the Mayor of Niagara Falls, and each member will serve a two-year term. The individuals will be from the Executive Office and the Niagara Falls Police Department. The Committee would communicate with community liaisons, policy aids, and residents and report the Deputy Chief's necessary feedback. The CRC will aid the Greater Good Initiative by distributing information about police programming. The goal would be to build trust through an open line of communication and feedback.

Committee Relations Newsletter

Develop a Community Relations Newsletter informing community members about filing a complaint against the Department and a section labeled "Meet the Officer." The newsletter will seek to provide information and resources for residents to use if they have an issue with the NFPD. The "Meet the Officer" section will illustrate different officers' lives, allowing residents to learn more about the individuals sworn to protect them.

Niagara Falls Police Department (NFPD) Chaplain Program

Organize an NFPD Chaplain Program consisting of faith-based leaders within Niagara Falls. They will be called upon during times of need when the relationship between residents and officers requires improvement. The Chaplains will partake in a program that will provide them a better understanding of law enforcement's job. They will work with the NFPD to organize events and venues to strengthen the officers' bonds with the residents.

Improve Visibility and Community Relationships

Increase visibility and presence of officers within the community by attending congregation services, where they are recognized during the event. To have officers go into local businesses and make an effort to get to know the owners, workers, and customers. Similar to the other recommended actions, this would allow residents to get to know the officers and see them as members of the community.

Time Frame: For each recommended action to be implemented before the end of 2022.

Assessment: Conduct a community-wide survey after incorporating these programs to see whether or not residents have felt an improvement in their relationship with the police department.

Title: Recruiting a Diverse Police Force

Recommendation: To develop a police force that accurately represents the community by which it serves. This requires increasing diversity within the NFPD, and the Niagara County Law Enforcement Academy (NCLEA) since the Department typically recruits cadets who have graduated from that program.

Lead: City of Niagara Falls; Niagara County Sheriff's Office

Observation: The NFPD needs to increase diversity and should work to increase an applicant pool that is deficient in diverse candidates. Having a police force that reflects its community's diversity is necessary to strengthen the NFPD's relationship with the City's minority and underrepresented communities and facilitate communication and understanding.

Desired End State: A police force reflecting the diversity and voices of the community it serves. The creation of a scholarship program for low-income, minority students applying to the NCLEA.

Recommended Actions: To improve the opportunities for minority adults that face a financial barrier, this recommendation suggests conversations begin about creating a scholarship fund to counter the financial obstacle that may be deterring some minority residents from applying. If that conversation is successful, spread awareness of this opportunity during recruitment campaigns. An increased effort by the NFPD to prioritize recruitment in

minority and low-income communities, making young adults aware of the careers available to them in law enforcement.

Time Frame: Host the initial recruiting events and begin conversations by the end of 2021. The process to improve diversity within the NFPD will be ongoing.

Assessment: Annually review the police department's demographics after the NFPD has been able to host a series of these events to see whether diversity has improved. If the scholarship is created, examine the incoming classes of the NCLEA and compare them to the applicant pool's demographics to see whether the scholarship is being utilized and if that has encouraged more BIPOC residents to apply.

Education

Purpose Statement:

The Education Committee, composed of community leaders and leadership from both the Niagara Falls School District and Niagara University, met throughout the Summer of 2020 to discuss racial injustice and analyze how the City's education system can improve and reform its practices to fight the perpetuation of poverty and inequity within the City of Niagara Falls. The best way to give meaning to the protests of 2020 against inequity and police brutality is to act. We know the pain is real. We have to listen. But even more than that, we have to embrace the long-overdue changes necessary to create a fairer world. We can honor the lives of George Floyd, Rayshard Brooks, Breonna Taylor, and countless other individuals taken too soon at the hands of absolute injustice by being better and doing better. The recommendations outlined below are crafted to do precisely this. They analyze the changes the City and the education system can make in continuing this conversation, improving faculty and staff training, conducting critical reviews of the school's practices and curriculum, and determining the role played by the education system in perpetuating poverty and the school-to-prison pipeline within the City of Niagara Falls.

Recommendations:

Title: Task Force to Address the Niagara Falls School District's Low Graduation Rate

Recommendation: Develop a task force to analyze the low graduation rate within the Niagara Falls School District and require them to publish a report to the Mayor outlining their findings and recommendations for improvement.

Lead: Niagara Falls School District; City of Niagara Falls

Observation: To combat poverty within Niagara Falls and the socioeconomic variables involved, this report must analyze all potential contributing factors, one of which might be the high dropout rate within the local School District. For 2018, the dropout rate for k-12 students throughout New York State was approximately 8%, and the Niagara County graduation rate was 82%.³ For the City of Niagara Falls, the dropout rate for 2018 rested at 25%, with an average of 63% of all students graduating, differing significantly from the county and state averages.⁴ According to the American Psychological Association (APA), those without a high school diploma are "less likely find a job and earn a living wage, and more likely to be poor and to suffer from a variety of adverse health outcomes."⁵ Though the APA points out the positive correlation between family and community poverty and a student's likelihood to drop out, this analogy does not so cleanly fit the high dropout concern within Niagara Falls. In 2019, students that were not economically disadvantaged experienced a dropout rate of 42%, while those that were financially disadvantaged saw only a 12% rate.⁶ This trend does not exclude, by any means, the impacts of poverty on dropout rates but instead suggests that it is not the primary influence. Therefore, a poverty-oriented approach to lowering the dropout rate may not be the appropriate solution to addressing this specific issue, even

³ "Poverty and Disparities in Niagara County," [Microsoft Word - Poverty and Disparities in Niagara County 11.13.19.docx \(ppgbuffalo.org\)](#)

⁴ "2018: NIAGARA FALLS CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT - Graduation Rate Data: NYSED Data Site," <https://data.nysed.gov/gradrate.php?year=2018&instid=800000041624>

⁵ "Poverty and High School Dropouts," [Poverty and high school dropouts \(apa.org\)](#)

⁶ *Id.*

though it may be warranted entirely in other areas concerning the School District. However, the necessity to address this issue lies within the fact that dropout students are at an increased likelihood of becoming immersed in poverty and economic hardship. In order to attack the influx of residents into poverty, the Niagara Falls School District needs a plan to lower their student dropout rate.

Desired End State: For the dropout the Niagara Falls School District's dropout rate to match or lie below the New York State average.

Recommended Actions: Establish a task force consisting of qualified individuals from the Niagara Falls School District, local Teachers Union, local community leaders, Professors from Niagara University's Education Department, NF School Students, and City representatives. This group will seek to address the low graduation rate within the Niagara Falls School District, analyze how that may perpetuate the cycle of poverty within the City, and what changes can be made to increase the graduation rate. This may require a look into the curriculum, practices, and management within the City School District. Ultimately, the group will publish a report to the City stating its findings and recommendations.

Time Frame: Create the task force by the end of 2021. Publish the report by the end of 2022.

Assessment: Once the report's recommendations are implemented, analyze the annual dropout rate in the subsequent years to see whether or not it is lowering. It may take a few years to see if any successful progress has been achieved.

Title: Critical Review of Evaluation Practices for Student Performance/Achievement

Recommendation: Assess current practices for evaluating student performance and achievement within the Niagara Falls School District. Determine whether or not changes must be implemented based on the findings of the assessment.

Lead: Niagara Falls School District

Observation: Evaluation and assessment protocols can impact students on a spectrum of severity, from negative to positive.⁷ Suppose these practices are conducted in manners influenced by implicit bias or stereotyping. In that case, they can negligently perpetuate the cycle of injustice for students of color, further influencing the school-to-prison pipeline seen too often today within K-12. In addition to implicit bias training for the faculty and staff, as recommended previously, a review of the evaluation system used by the Niagara Falls School District is vital to ensure students are fairly and equitably assessed.

Desired End State: A published report explaining the assessment protocol for students within the Niagara Falls School District and its impact on students. If the report finds that the current protocol negatively influences students, the document must include recommendations and proposals to address and reform existing practices.

⁷ "Teaching Toolkit: Effects of Assessment on Learning," *University College Dublin*, <https://www.ucd.ie/t4cms/ucdttl0031.pdf>

Recommended Actions: For the Niagara Falls School District to partner with a third-party organization specializing in the impacts of educational practices to work collaboratively on assessing the district's evaluation methods. After the assessment concludes, conversations should take place concerning any areas of concern, and potential recommendations addressing them should be introduced and discussed. A report containing the official findings and recommendations should then be submitted to the City's Executive Office and published on the City's website. The School District will then be responsible for integrating said proposals.

Time Frame: Find and partner with a third-party organization by the end of 2021. Publish the findings by the end of Spring 2022. Assemble a team within the School District that will take on the lead responsibility of implementing the recommendations by the end of 2022.

Assessment: Continue to involve the third-party organization throughout the implementation process. The School District should provide regular updates to the City Executive on the progress of the proposals.

Title: Mandated Teacher and Staff Training

Recommendation: Mandate annual training for faculty and staff within the Niagara Falls School District that addresses Implicit Bias and Adverse Childhood Experiences.

Lead: Niagara Falls School District

Observation: Each individual holds implicit biases formed as a direct result of their past experiences and societal influences. Implicit bias "refers to the attitudes and stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner."⁸ They may affect faculty and staff's ability to fairly guide and justly discipline children and young adults. Training would allow faculty and staff to become aware of their implicit biases and learn how to counter them. Aside from unconscious biases, children and young adults experience various Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Often, faculty and staff are involved in situations where they can make a positive impact on the lives of students facing ACEs. An interaction of understanding, kindness, empathy, and welcoming between students and faculty, and staff has the potential to reduce the long-term consequences of ACEs. Training would serve to encourage these types of relationships and act as a means of possible prevention. Refer to Figure 1 to see the decrease in health aftereffects for individuals with traumatic childhood experiences due to preventative measures.

⁸ "Understanding Implicit Bias," *The Kirwan Institute*, <http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/research/understanding-implicit-bias/>

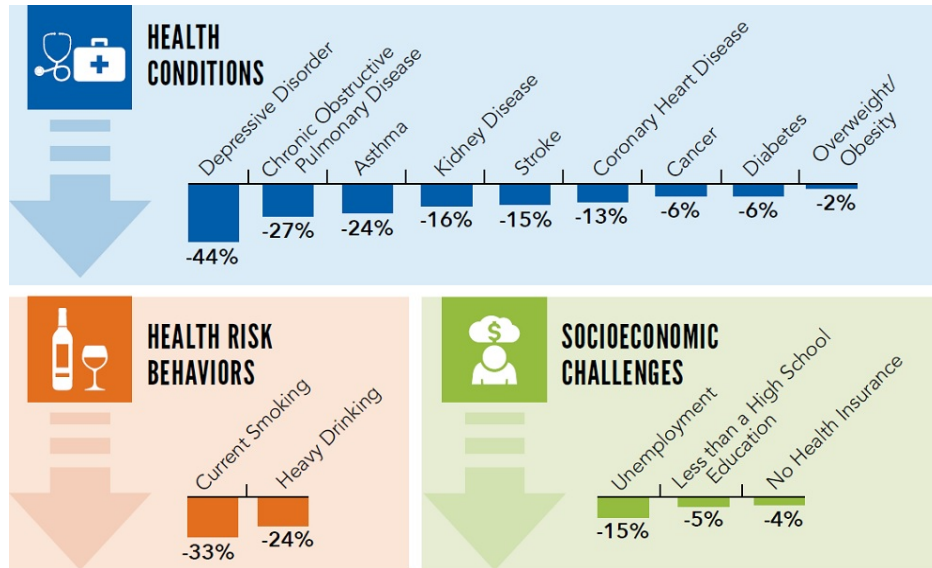


Figure 1: This chart was created by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention in November 2019.⁹

Desired End State: For the Niagara Falls School District to have implemented an annual training series on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and Implicit Bias for their faculty and staff.

Recommended Actions: Coordinate with an external organization to conduct the annual Implicit Bias and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Training. Converse with faculty and staff about what they would like to see included in the training and provide that feedback to the organization. Set a date for the preliminary training and mandate all of the Niagara Falls School District's faculty and staff.

Time Frame: Start collaborating with an external organization during Summer 2021 to set up a training for Fall 2021.

Assessment: Conduct surveys before and after the training sessions to receive feedback from faculty and staff on the training programs' effectiveness.

Title: A Curriculum and Teaching Methods that Inclusively and Accurately Tells the Nation's History

Recommendation: Engage in a deep dive into the Niagara Falls School District's curriculum to ensure that it is accurately and inclusively presenting our Nation's history.

Lead: Niagara Falls School District; Niagara University

⁹ "Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)," <https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/aces/index.html>

Observation: "As institutions seek to improve all students' success, the inclusion of people with diverse backgrounds, ideas, and methods of teaching and learning is an educational imperative," as stated by the Association of American Colleges and Universities.¹⁰ An educational institution cannot hope to be inclusive and diverse if its curriculum does not teach its students material following the same principles. To achieve this, educators must also be trained in how to encourage these principles in their classrooms and how to teach the curriculum with that perspective: "Initial teacher education in the 21st century must be comprehensive enough to fully equip an individual to meet the opportunities and challenges of the inclusive classroom and school."¹¹

Recommended Action: Create a committee consisting of leaders of the education community in Niagara Falls and professionals that specialize in creating and implementing inclusive, accurate curriculums and teaching methods. The committee would analyze and evaluate the School District's current practices and curriculum, identifying areas that need to be either reformed or replaced and suggesting proposals to achieve that. Have the committee look at the Niagara University's Education Department and its course requirements for incoming student teachers to see whether they are being taught how to create an inclusive classroom and methods for teaching a curriculum with the guiding principles of inclusion, diversity, and accuracy. The committee should report their findings to the City Executive and continue their work by focusing on implementing their proposed recommendations.

Desired End State: A curriculum formed through the guiding principles of diversity, equity, inclusivity, and accuracy, and a faculty and staff prepared to teach it to the student body.

Time Frame: Establish this committee by the end of 2021 and conclude the analysis by the end of the 2022 school year. Throughout the remainder of 2022 and start of 2023, design a new curriculum and training series that match the recommendations suggested by the committee. Implement the changes by Fall 2023.

Assessment: Have a third-party organization actively involved and require updates to the Niagara Falls Board of Education (NFBOE) and City Executive while the School District and Niagara University develop and implement their action plans as a means of oversight and accountability.

Title: Common Language in the Niagara Falls School District

Recommendation: Establish a common language, modeled off of the one implemented by Niagara University, throughout the Niagara Falls School District to promote conversation and consensus on topics relating to race, diversity, inclusion, and equity.

Lead: Niagara Falls School District

Observation: Niagara University is in the process of incorporating a common language throughout their community, a direct recommendation from their Social Justice Task Force. Within the Niagara Falls School

¹⁰ "Reconsidering the Inclusion of Diversity in the Curriculum," <https://www.aacu.org/diversitydemocracy/2014/fall/nelson-laird>

¹¹ "The Importance of Educating Student Teachers in Inclusive Education: A Disability Perspective," <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ914626.pdf>

District, there is a lack of awareness of particular topics related to race, diversity, inclusion, and equity. Establishing a common language within the Niagara Falls School District would seek to educate the student body on these topics and encourage conversation and discussion between students and faculty. Having a set definition of words, like equality, equity, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc., taught with a consensus between schools and classrooms would take the politics out of the language and normalize their discussion in informal and academic settings.

Desired end state: A common language actively used and taught throughout the entire Niagara Falls School District.

Recommended action: For the Niagara Falls School District to work with Niagara University to establish common terms and design a way to implement them within the classroom.

Time Frame: Start teaching the common language by the start of the Fall 2021 academic year. Re-introduce it to students on an annual basis.

Assessment: Conduct a yearly survey on the student body after the annual implementation of this plan to assess the effectiveness of the teachings, as well as to gauge the knowledge of students on topics that relate to race, inclusivity, diversity, and equity.

Title: Preventing the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Recommendation: Evaluate Niagara University and Niagara Falls School District's traditional disciplinary practices to determine any hindrances to restorative justice and proportionality within current methods.

Lead: Niagara Falls School District; Niagara University

Observation: Nationally, Black American students are increasingly more likely to receive an out-of-school suspension and stricter punishment, dependent on an office referral, than their White counterparts.¹² A single break in a student's first year doubles their chances of dropping out.¹³ Traditional disciplinary practices, like out-of-school suspensions, are given arbitrarily, reinforcing the school-to-prison pipeline for students of color. In comparison, disciplinary decisions issued in the light of restorative justice encourage students to self-reflect in a meaningful way. Restorative practices do not differentiate between "bad" and "good" children but seek to have each child consider their actions through alternative means, like volunteering. These disciplinary methods should be expanded within the Niagara Falls School District and Niagara University and need to be included to foster an environment that supports equitable and restorative practices.

¹² "Racial Disparities in School-Based Disciplinary Actions Are Associated with County-Level Rates of Racial Bias," <https://www.pnas.org/content/116/17/8255>

¹³ "How Implicit Bias Impacts Our Children in Education," <https://www.americanbar.org/groups/litigation/committees/childrens-rights/articles/2017/fall2017-how-implicit-bias-impacts-our-children-in-education/>

Desired End State: The review of traditional disciplinary practices and the replacement of any discovered concerns with restorative justice methods.

Recommended Actions: Partner with a third-party organization to assess both Niagara University and Niagara Falls School District's traditional disciplinary practices. Replace in-school and out-of-school suspension with methods that encourage restorative justice and self-reflection. Utilize the Youth Court, which is run almost exclusively by students and offers their peers the opportunity to complete community service or receive counseling as an alternative disciplinary action. Junior Peacemakers provide an excellent opportunity for volunteerism, as well, and work to build a positive relationship between the City's youth and law enforcement.

Time Frame: Create a partnership and submit the assessment results to the NFBOE and City Executive by the end of 2022. Implement changes by the beginning of the 2023 academic year.

Assessment: Record the levels of out-of-school suspensions for students today and identify demographic differences. Once instituting the changes, do another review in a few years and analyze the findings to identify improvements in equity and any unintended consequences.

Title: Advocating Against Policies that Negatively Impact Previously Incarcerated Candidates of Color in the Hiring Process

Recommendation: For the City of Niagara Falls to advocate for the striking down of policies that negatively impact candidates of color during the hiring process to state and federal officials. Such policies include, but are not limited to, fingerprinting, drug testing, and previous criminal activity.

Lead: City of Niagara Falls

Observation: To effectively challenge the school-to-prison pipeline and the cycle of crime within our City, obstacles in the hiring process for candidates of color, especially those with criminal backgrounds, must be addressed and reformed. In 2014, the barriers for individuals with felony convictions resulted in a loss of 1.7 million workers from the national workforce, creating a financial loss of \$78 billion for the national economy.¹⁴ This statistic weighs heavily and disproportionately on communities of color. Individuals from minority and underrepresented communities aged between 18 and 19 are 11.8 times more likely than their White counterparts to be incarcerated. As of 2018, African Americans made up 12.6% of the national population yet accounted for 27% of arrests.¹⁵ Since African Americans are disproportionately more likely to be incarcerated, the impacts of laws that complicate the hiring process for citizens with a criminal record in turn arbitrarily affect that community, thereby perpetuating the school-to-prison pipeline and systemic racism.

¹⁴ "Barriers to Work: People with Criminal Records,"

<https://www.ncsl.org/research/labor-and-employment/barriers-to-work-individuals-with-criminal-records.aspx>

¹⁵ *Id.*

Desired End State: For the City to actively advocate for removing specific state and federal policies and the reforming of others that reinforce the school-to-prison pipeline through partnerships with organizations already dedicated to this cause.

Recommended Actions: For City representatives to reach out to organizations currently advocating for removing these policies and offering them support.

Time Frame: Begin to orchestrate relationships with these organizations and advocate state and federal officials throughout 2021 and 2022. Plan to continue advocating efforts throughout the following years.

Assessment: Report to the public through the City platform any partnerships enacted and advocacy efforts initiated. Communication should begin within the time frame outlined above.

Title: Museum on the Environmental History of Niagara Falls

Recommendation: Coordinate and develop a museum within Niagara Falls dedicated to the City's environmental history and environmental justice.

Lead: City of Niagara Falls; Local Stakeholders; Local Community Leaders; Local Community Organizations; Niagara University

Observation: Niagara Falls is home to one of the seven wonders of the world. Historically, it is one of the foundational birthplaces of green energy and environmentalism. Though filled with commendable progress in environmental justice, the City's past reflects lessons taught when greed overtakes respect for the environment. Environmental justice and social justice are not mutually exclusive; in fact, they are intersectional and complimentary. Environmentalism's progress serves to benefit society, while regressions have undercut specific communities, as the tragic consequences of Love Canal represent. Even though the environmental history of Niagara Falls holds national significance, the City does not yet have a building dedicated to the telling of this story.

Desired end state: A museum within the City dedicated to Niagara Falls' history that focuses on the City's environmental history through the lens of environmental justice.

Recommended actions: Organize a committee dedicated to this project. They would undertake the responsibility of deciding the museum's content while collaborating with external organizations that are committed to environmental justice and specialize in the ecological history of Niagara Falls. The purpose of working with those groups would be to provide oversight and assistance to ensure the story is told correctly and through the appropriate perspectives. The physical building should be constructed in a sustainable and resourceful manner, and developers should prioritize Niagara Falls residents for any employment opportunities the project presents.

Time Frame: Create the committee by the end of 2021.

Assessment: Require the partnered external organizations to assess the committee's plans throughout their progression to ensure they are consistently upholding the principles of environmentalism, inclusion, transparency, and accuracy.

Title: Regular and Ongoing Community-Wide Conversations

Recommendation: For the City of Niagara Falls to create and further encourage dialogue between community members, leaders, and City officials about social justice topics within the City of Niagara Falls.

Lead: City of Niagara Falls; Niagara Falls School District; Niagara University; Local Community Leaders

Observation: Before Mayor Restaino created the Social Justice Commission, conversations diving into equity, diversity, and inclusion within the City were missing from Niagara Falls. Uncomfortable but necessary community-wide conversations were had in the making of this report. The findings and recommendations set forth by the different Committees reflect the necessity of these conversations for progress within the City. The line of communication should not disconnect solely because the City's Social Justice Report is published. They should be encouraged to ensure that suggestions, observations, and concerns regarding social justice within Niagara Falls have an open platform where all community members can discuss them.

Desired End State: The continuation of the community-wide conversations initially crafted for the City's Social Justice Commission initiative but reorganized to address the City's ongoing and future concerns and issues.

Recommended Action: Organize a meeting between all members involved in the Social Justice Commission and determine who would like to be involved in continued conversations. Reach out to other residents of Niagara Falls to gauge whether they would be interested, as well. Once new committees dedicated to the longevity of these City-wide conversations about social justice are formed, set and publish a schedule outlining when they plan to meet. After each meeting, post to the City's website the summary notes from the discussion and have a forum open for comments so that residents not directly involved have the opportunity to participate indirectly. Allow residents, leaders, and officials to walk-in to the discussion if they so choose.

Time Frame: For these conversations to continue and have a timeline of meeting dates set by the end of 2021, with the assumption that these will be ongoing discussions.

Assessment: Whether conversations are continuing effectively and inclusively by the end of 2021.

Employment

Purpose statement:

Throughout the Summer of 2020, the Employment Committee met every week to learn and discuss emerging City-initiated job promoting practices. Committee members invited guest speakers to their meetings and conducted three focus groups with Niagara Falls residents between the ages of 16-24, 25-39, and 40 and above. This Committee addressed one of the most significant structural barriers to real racial equity in Niagara Falls: the BIPOC community and working-class people's economic marginalization. In general, Niagara County experiences elements of segregation by race and socioeconomic class. Many of the most challenging social problems confronting our society that impact the quality of life in our City stem from or are exacerbated by poverty. Poverty is generational, with children who grow up in poverty far less likely to make it out of poverty in their lifetimes. To change the generational cycle, we need to eliminate the barriers that keep people unemployed and underemployed.

Ultimately everyone deserves access to the economic resources they need to thrive -- and until we change the economic structures that keep people poor in Niagara Falls, true racial equity will *not* be possible. The report and recommendations herein provide strategies and action plans to improve our City's ability to overcome poverty and, therefore, challenge racial inequities.

Recommendations:

Title: Skilled Trades and Work Pipelines

Recommendation: Implement citywide changes and strategies for addressing the lack of skilled trade opportunities available and the limited work pipelines that are currently and positively reinforcing the cycle of poverty within the City of Niagara Falls.

Lead: Local Trade Unions; Local Service Providers; Local Community Leaders; Niagara Falls School District

Observation: According to the NYS Department of Labor, as of the week ending in 8/15/2020, initial Unemployment Insurance (UI) claims increased by 280% for Western New York when compared to last year. For Black or African American New Yorkers, the over-the-year change in initial UI claims shows an increase of 428%.¹⁶ Now more than ever before, the City of Niagara Falls needs a plan leading to employment for our unemployed and underemployed residents.

The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on our community, as well. According to the Rural Opportunity County Employment Risk Map, Niagara County has 56.5% of the workforce in high-risk industries likely to be adversely affected by the COVID-19 virus. Niagara County also has 23.5% of its workforce who are 55 or older, a population that is increasingly susceptible to the disastrous health consequences of COVID-19.¹⁷

¹⁶ "Initial Claims Data," <https://dol.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2021/03/research-notes-initial-claims-we-8152020.pdf>.

¹⁷ "Employment Risk - Rural Opportunity Map," <https://maps.ruralopportunitymap.us/county-employment-risk>.

The triple threat of the COVID-19 pandemic, the shortage of trained individuals to fill the construction trades job openings pre-pandemic, and the rising age of our Niagara County workforce has resulted in a substantial increase in the need for training job candidates and to develop a pipeline for the construction trades in the City of Niagara Falls.

Desired End State: The implementation of the below strategies leading to the creation of a new pool of trained job candidates qualified for trade-specific work and increased job opportunities in those trades.

Recommended Actions:

Existing Resource Awareness

Recommendation: Provide awareness of existing resources within the City of Niagara Falls and Niagara County through the City’s website and social media platforms.

Background: Already within Niagara Falls, service providers exist and assist residents by helping them access construction jobs and work pipelines. For example, Niagara’s WorkSource One offers a variety of programs to help residents.¹⁸ Unfortunately, many residents are unaware of these programs and how to utilize them. The City’s online platform allows them to spread information quickly and easily; therefore, using its platform would help resolve the lack of knowledge about these different opportunities.

Lead: Local Service Providers; City of Niagara Falls

Strategy: Research existing options. Information found should be promoted by the City and posted on the website and social media platforms.

Time Frame: Share resources for employment by the end of 2021. This should be done regularly as new services become available for residents, as well as a quarterly reminder. The City recently created the Workforce Development Consortium to gather all workforce development providers into a more cohesive group. In doing so, they also appointed a Director of the Workforce Development Consortium to manage and organize this effort moving forward.

Desired End State: The promotion of City and county resources through the City’s online platform.

Work with Your Hands Event

Recommendation: Host an event that explores the opportunities available through hands-on construction trades.

Background: Events like those proposed offer hands-on construction activities and observations of large construction equipment in action, emphasizing hands-on activities. Providing residents, particularly women, minorities, and local youth, with the opportunity to learn more and

¹⁸ “On-The-Job Training,” <http://worksource1.com/training>.

experience certain features of the trade, which may spark their interest and encourage some to pursue that field of work.

Lead: Local Trades Union; Niagara Falls School District; City of Niagara Falls

Strategy: Invite local construction trades with job openings and local union apprenticeship programs to participate in the event. Offer hands-on opportunities for all attendees to lay brickwork, watch a concrete sidewalk being poured, try their hand at roofing, siding, small construction projects with 2x4s and nails, and watch bucket trucks and other large equipment in operation. Refer to the Finger Lakes Works with Their Hands / Glow with Your Hands as a model (www.fingerlakesworks.com and www.glowwithyourhands.com).

Time Frame: Host the first event once the pandemic is over and gatherings can begin again. We anticipate a time frame of 2-3 years after completing this report. The event should then take place on an annual basis after its premiere.

Desired End State: The increase of residents interested in pursuing a career in the construction trades.

Expanding In-City Training Options

Recommendation: Support new training options that are interested in locating to Niagara Falls. An example is Craft Technical Institute (CTI), a minority-owned training provider that plans to bring upper-level trades training to the City. Existing training providers should be leveraged to encourage new training providers to locate within City limits.

Background: Craft Technical Institute (CTI) has a fully operational training center in Erie County and is adding a location in the City of Niagara Falls. There may be other training providers interested in locating within the City limits if they are approached by the City of Niagara Falls representatives. An increase in training providers allows for more residents to become trained in the trades, raising their qualifications and eligibility as job candidates.

Lead: Local Training Providers; Local Trades Union; City of Niagara Falls

Strategy: The promotion of training opportunities expanded through social media outlets, economic development publications, chamber of commerce publications, and print.

Time Frame: Already in progress

Desired End State: Expansion of training provider and workforce development in the city.

Micro-credentials/Upskilling

Recommendation: Focus on upskilling our local talent, emphasizing the skills local employers find valuable for the job openings of today and tomorrow.

Background: Employers are increasingly looking for job candidates that can certify that they have specific skills (such as blueprint reading, construction math, etc.) rather than a college degree. Microcredentials allow job seekers to “prove” that they have a particular skill by completing shorter training and testing sessions. Some Microcredentials are “stackable” towards a college degree should the job seekers wish to pursue one in the future. This would require a conversation with Niagara University and Niagara County Community College as to whether they would accept these micro-credentials as class credit.

Lead: Local Trades Union; Local Training Providers; Niagara Falls School District; Niagara University; Niagara County Community College; City of Niagara Falls

Strategy: Survey local trade businesses and determine which skills, or micro-credentials, they would find most valuable and beneficial in a candidate. Have local training providers convene and choose which of these micro-credentials they are already offering and which they could expand their programming to include. The Niagara Falls School District should also consider providing such programs directly to their students since a significant portion of their student body does not continue onto higher education.

The NFSD should communicate with local youth groups and non-for-profit organizations and pitch a possible partnership to develop said programs.

Time Frame: Local training providers, the local Trades Union, and the Niagara Falls School District should all meet by the end of 2021 and discuss what micro-credentials exist and how they can expand those opportunities for residents. A list of existing service providers should be publicized on each of their online platforms as well as the City of Niagara Falls.

Desired End State: A promotion of current services offering micro-credential training and the development of programs to increase those opportunities for residents.

City Contracts and Job Shadowing/On-site Mentoring

Recommendation: Contractually require a percentage of local job-shadowing or on-site mentoring with adults at each City of Niagara Falls funded construction project, in conjunction with NFHS seniors age 18 and over and with the NYS Department of Labor, ON-BOCES, former construction trainees, and other training providers.

Background: Individuals may not be familiar with a typical day on a construction/trades job site. This program will allow City residents to gain a greater understanding of these occupations. Providing job-shadowing or on-site mentoring may lead to additional women and minority candidates applying for these jobs or applying for training to qualify for them.

Lead: City of Niagara Falls; Niagara Falls School District; ON-BOCES

Strategy: The City of Niagara Falls will provide contractual language to include the contractual requirement of a percentage of job-shadowing or on-site mentoring in each qualifying City-funded construction/contract.

Time Frame: Such a contractual requirement should be included within the design of new contracts and as an added condition within contract renewals after the publication of this report.

Desired End State: Increased number of City residents who apply for the job-shadowing/mentoring program and then go into jobs within those trades.

Time Frame: Each recommended action has its own time frame; therefore, the overall timeline for this recommendation is subject to that.

Assessment: Each of the parties involved in the recommended actions above will provide updates to the City government and the public about the steps they are taking and whether they will make the predicted outline.

Title: Child Care

Recommendation: Address the lack of affordable, accessible, and reliable child care options available to its residents and the funding available for such facilities and individual child care providers.

Lead: Niagara University; Local Child Care Providers; City of Niagara Falls

Observation: In 2017, 49% of residents lived at or near the federal poverty level. More than half of single parents and 43% of children under the age of 18 live in poverty.¹⁹ For most residents, stable, living-wage employment is the pathway out of economic insecurity. However, about two-thirds of all jobs in Niagara Falls pay less than \$40,000 a year.²⁰ To secure sustainable employment, accessible and affordable child care is a requirement.

Child care is both an economic necessity and a barrier to employment for most families. More and more, the cost of child care is squeezing middle-class families and has become unaffordable for many low-income families. Child care is a major household cost and it is increasingly eating up a larger portion of a family budget. The average annual cost of full-time care in a center is over \$10,000 and can be as much as \$16,000. Over the last ten years, a typical middle-class family saw child care expenses rise by more than \$2,000 while wages remained stagnant.²¹ The situation is even more severe for families living in poverty; among those that pay for child care, they spend over one-third of their total income on those services. This leads to a situation where it may become unaffordable for them to work.

Limited child care options impact the local business community. According to the annual report from the Community Child Care Clearinghouse of Niagara, businesses lose \$4.4 billion to employee absenteeism from child care breakdowns each year. On average, a parent or guardian will miss from 5 to 9 days of work due to a child care crisis. The work schedules for 67% of parents are affected by child care challenges.²² Niagara Falls families desperately need accessible, affordable, and reliable child care throughout the community if the City is to try and repair the economic obstacles facing local families due to childcare inefficiencies.

¹⁹ *Numbers in Need in Buffalo Niagara*, www.numbersinneed.org

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.*

Desired End State: Affordable, accessible, and reliable child care for Niagara Falls families and improved wages for child care providers.

Recommended Actions:

Advocate for Center-Based and Home-Based Child Care Centers

Recommendation: Encourage center-based and home-based child care centers to open within Niagara Falls City limits.

Background: The lack of child care options is a significant barrier to residents of Niagara Falls. Stringent restrictions on the ratio of providers to children, number, and ages of children all increase the difficulty for individuals who want to open a child care facility. In light of this, there are very few daycare centers within the City of Niagara Falls. Most neighborhoods in the City are classified as child care deserts by the Center of American Progress.²³ Most options for professional child care services are home-based sites with limited capacity. There needs to be an increase in center-based sites and home-based services to respond to Niagara Falls residents' needs.

Lead: Leaders in Local Child Care Services; Local Child Care Advocates; City of Niagara Falls

Strategy: Advocate to the state and county for more funding to grow child care service opportunities within the City. Communicate and develop relationships with the Early Childhood Education Department of Niagara University to combine resources and knowledge for how best to combat the City's current child care system's ineffectiveness. One example is that Niagara University is already developing a center-based child care service within the City. By offering access to its online outreach platform, Niagara University informs residents about the upcoming opportunity. They also serve as an advocate to State and County representatives for funding and policy requests.

Time Frame: Advocate to State and County officials by the end of 2022. Throughout 2021, meet with Niagara University Early Childhood Department representatives to establish a child care center within the City.

Desired End State: Increase in funding for the development of child care services within the community.

Advocating for the Community Child Care Clearinghouse of Niagara

Recommendation: Better engage with and support the work of the Community Child Care Clearinghouse of Niagara.

Background: The Community Child Care Clearinghouse of Niagara, administered by the Niagara Community Action Program (NiaCAP), offers programs for parents, child care providers, and the business community. They provide technical assistance, funding, and support for new and

²³ "Do You Live in a Child Care Desert?" www.childcaredeserts.org

existing home-based child care centers. Working with NiaCAP to build up the Clearinghouse's capacity would lead to more safe and accessible home-based child care options.

Lead: Leaders in Local Child Care Services; Local Child Care Advocates; City of Niagara Falls

Strategy: Have City officials meet with representatives of the Community Child Care Clearinghouse of Niagara and the Niagara Community Action Program to discuss how they can advocate for both organizations' efforts. Devise an action plan and schedule subsequent meetings to follow through on the initial meeting's recommendations. The City is limited in its support capabilities, but, hopefully, this conversation will identify alternative ways in which the City can aid both programs that do not rely solely on financial funding.

Time Frame: Meet with both organizations by the end of 2021.

Desired End State: The advocacy of the City to both the Community Child Care Clearinghouse of Niagara and the Niagara Community Action Program, which are intended to expand their programming capabilities throughout the City of Niagara Falls.

Advocate for the Improvement of Child Care Services and Wages of Child Care Providers

Recommendation: Work with County, State, and Federal officials to advocate for more funding and to modify policies to make child care affordable to low and middle-income workers, as well as to increase the minimum wage of child care workers.

Background: The Western New York Women's Foundation reported that the people paid to watch America's children tend to live in poverty. Nearly half receive some kind of government assistance: food stamps, welfare money, Medicaid. Their median hourly wage is \$9.77 -- about \$3 below the average janitor's.²⁴ In 2015, 46% of child care workers were part of families enrolled in at least one public safety net program, compared with 26% of those in the broader workforce.²⁵ We must do better on a local level to implement a living wage standard for child care workers. In addition to this, too often, the costs for low and middle-income families are overbearing, stressing their home budget, and the unreliability of certain services threaten their ability to work.

Lead: Local Healthcare Providers; Community Child Care Clearinghouse of Niagara; City of Niagara Falls

Strategy: The Community Child Care Clearinghouse of Niagara, in partnership with Child Care Aware of America, petitioned congress on a series of policy recommendations that address the lack of affordable, accessible, and reliable child care services for low to middle-income families, as well as the quality of child care providers available and the poor, unlivable wages for child care workers. Advocating for these recommendations with Federal, State, and County elected officials and local businesses will increase the potential for greater child care opportunities for the expanding workforce of Niagara Falls and better the wages and assistance for those that will provide the care.

²⁴ "WNY Women's Foundation: Childcare Fact Sheet," CHILDCARE-FACT-SHEET.pdf

²⁵ *Id.*

Time Frame: Further relationships with the Community Child Care Clearinghouse of Niagara and Child Care Aware of America and hold a meeting to discuss how the City can lend its support in advocating for these recommendations within two years after the publication of this report.

Desired End State: Adopting these recommendations into a bill proposed and passed through the county, state, and federal legislatures.

Time Frame: Each recommended action has its own time frame; therefore, the overall timeline for this recommendation is subject to that.

Assessment: Each of the parties involved in the recommended actions above will provide updates to the City government and the public about the steps they are taking and whether they will make the predicted outline.

Title: Transportation

Recommendation: Address the lack of affordable and accessible public transportation options available to residents.

Lead: Community Leaders; Local Stakeholders; City of Niagara Falls; Federal and State Representatives

Observation: One of Niagara Falls residents' most significant barriers in accessing health and social services, participating in vocational training and education, and securing stable employment is their lack of transportation options. According to a report published in 2012 by the John R. Oishei Foundation, the Mobile Safety-Net Team, and the University of Buffalo's Regional Institute, traveling difficulties are the second most common barrier reported by the City's most economically vulnerable residents. At the time, 4,500 households across Niagara Falls didn't have access to a vehicle. 36% of the City's most vulnerable report walking to work.²⁶

Niagara Falls' distance from job centers in Erie County creates barriers, too. A major employment and training provider reports a perception among job seekers in Niagara Falls, even those with a car, that anything beyond the Grand Island Bridge is too far or that the cost of gas becomes too expensive.²⁷ Often, public transportation is not available for those who work nights and weekends. Distance to job locations can, at times, add hours to an individual's workday. An 8-hour shift can quickly turn into 12 hours with the existing public transportation, which makes finding child care even more difficult and expensive.

Suppose Niagara Falls is to experience an economic resurgence seen in other parts of the region, and the City is serious about addressing the racial and economic disparities seen among residents. In that case, there must be a concerted effort to address the woefully inadequate options for moving people within and around the City and region. This must be done strategically and inclusively to ensure the effectiveness and longevity of any proposed solutions.

²⁶ "Strengthening WNY's Safety Net: A Community Report, City of Niagara Falls," [Community Assessment_Niagara Falls_12-9-13.pdf \(numbersinneed.org\)](#)

²⁷*Id.*

Desired End State: Collaboration across multiple sectors within the City, State, and Federal agencies that lead to the improvement of transportation options for residents that are affordable, accessible, and reliable.

Recommended Actions:

Transportation Needs Assessment

Recommendation: Discuss creating a Transportation Needs Assessment (TNA) report examining the existing transportation resources, barriers to transportation, and community needs.

Background: A TNA report will guide the City's decision-making on how to address Niagara Falls' long-range transportation needs, guiding future decision-making on which projects to pursue. It is essential to prioritize residents and the business community's needs to guide the City's investment decisions. The information included in the Needs Assessment will establish a baseline for the performance measurement process and track progress toward the City's goals and objectives for transportation options.

Lead: Community Leaders; Local Stakeholders; City of Niagara Falls; USA Niagara

Strategy: The first step in developing a TNA is to include an honest and unbiased description of existing transportation services. It must consist of input from businesses, service providers, and most of all, residents -- with an intentional emphasis on equity. It is also important to include the regional transportation authority's justification for dwindling services in and around Niagara Falls. If this is done thoroughly and independently, City leaders and stakeholders can begin to understand the needs and barriers to transportation, allowing them to strategically and effectively address them. It should include options, best practices, and case studies to guide planning for better transportation options. The information discovered may further demonstrate the need for private and public funding.

Time Frame: The timeline is dependent upon when funds become available to the City that can be allocated for a Transportation Needs Assessment.

Desired End State: A proposal of plans and innovations that will seek to resolve the issues uncovered.

Advocate for More Funding to Build Up Transportation and Infrastructure

Recommendation: Work with County, State, and Federal officials to advocate for more funding to build up transportation options and infrastructure.

Background: The vast majority of transportation dollars comes from federal transportation grants. Many of these dollars come from a federal gasoline surcharge, which has not been increased in many years. There needs to be a concerted effort to lobby state and federal officials for more funding in significantly underserved communities like Niagara Falls. The data found through the Transportation Needs Assessment will prove invaluable in these efforts.

Lead: City of Niagara Falls; Local Community Leaders; Local Private Stakeholders

Strategy: Partner with local and national agencies that advocate for funding in underserved communities. Devise an action plan for the lobbying efforts through a collaborative and inclusive lens.

Time Frame: Develop this relationship by the end of 2021 and begin lobbying county, state, and federal officials throughout the following years.

Desired End State: An increase in County, State, and Federal funding to assist Niagara Falls in improving residents' reliable transportation.

Identify and Develop Models of Public/Private Transportation Outside of the NFTA

Recommendation: Research and discover other public transportation options outside of the region's transportation authority (NFTA).

Background: The Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority (NFTA) has decided to shift its primary focus for public transportation to the Buffalo urban core. This means services have been cut in many suburban and rural communities, and limited services now exist in the City of Niagara Falls and Niagara County. In addition, rates have increased to the point that affordability is as much of a barrier as accessibility. To look to the NFTA to solve current and future transportation barriers is impractical. If alternative options exist, the City must work to adopt them.

By bringing together stakeholders from all sectors and backgrounds, there will be an increased opportunity for collaborative and economical solutions. Current possible, local options tend to have a financial barrier preventing them from being fully utilized and adopted. An effective model of this is ridesharing programs that can also act as job creators. However, the cost of ridesharing is often too burdensome for those that are economically vulnerable. This suggests the need for collaboration in finding and developing new, innovative means of public transportation that overcome current obstacles for economically disadvantaged residents.

Lead: Local Community Leaders; Local Private Stakeholders; Federal, State, and County Representatives; City of Niagara Falls

Strategy: Convene a diverse, representative group of individuals from across all sectors, social and economic backgrounds, and areas of expertise. This group, named the "Committee on Innovative Transportation Development," will research and develop alternative models of accessible and affordable transportation services. Regional and national experts should be brought in to discuss best practice models used in other regions of similar size and demographics.

Time Frame: Establish the "Committee on Innovative Transportation Development" by the end of Spring 2022. The Committee should use the following year to research potential solutions. Once finished, the Committee should submit a report consisting of their findings and recommendations.

Desired End State: The development of innovative public transportation options and their implementation into the City.

Challenge the Economic Barriers Placed on Residents by License Suspension

Recommendation: Advocate to and collaborate with County, State, and Federal representatives about the financial obstacles to residents with a suspended license.

Background: An individual's driver's license can be suspended for many reasons, including unpaid child support, failure to pay state taxes, lack of insurance, outstanding court costs or fines, and misdemeanor citations.²⁸ A resident with a suspended driver's license cannot secure stable employment because there are so few alternative transportation options in Niagara Falls. This perpetuates the cycle of poverty or near-poverty experienced by almost half of the residents of Niagara Falls. The administration of suspension disproportionately affects Black Americans, as well, and as founded by an Investigative Post study in 2019.²⁹ This finding further demonstrates the need to discover solutions for suspended driver licenses' disproportionate impact on lower-income communities and Black Americans.

Lead: City of Niagara Falls; State Representatives

Strategy: Develop relationships with organizations that are already advocating and lobbying to develop solutions to address this issue or remove policies perpetuating its impacts.

Time Frame: Find agencies to support and collaborate with by the end of 2023.

Desired End State: A partnership with agencies advocating for solutions to the disproportionate socioeconomic impact of suspended driver licenses on residents.

Time Frame: Each recommended action has its own time frame; therefore, the overall timeline for this recommendation is subject to that.

Assessment: Each of the parties involved in the recommended actions above will provide updates to the City government and the public about the steps they are taking and whether they will make the predicted timeline.

Title: City of Niagara Falls Employment Policies

Recommendation: Analyze the current City of Niagara Falls Employment policies and develop new measures to fix the application that has previously led to a disproportionate and unrepresentative City workforce.

Lead: City of Niagara Falls

²⁸ "The Cost of Suspending Driver's Licenses," [The cost of suspending driver's licenses - Investigative Post](#)

²⁹ *Id.*

Observation: The City of Niagara Falls employment policies previously generated a sense of unfairness when it comes to hiring individuals from the BIPOC community, particularly Black residents.

In 2009, the New York State Attorney General’s Office came to Niagara Falls to announce a new agreement covering the City’s discrimination policies and procedures. Attorney General Andrew Cuomo said in his statement, “every employer has the obligation to maintain a fair and effective system to address and prevent incidents of discrimination and harassment... Government employers are not exempt. Without effective measures for curbing and preventing discrimination, real and perceived incidents of bias can create workplace tension and fester into a crisis of mistrust and hostility.”³⁰

The Attorney General’s investigation determined that the City of Niagara Falls lacked sufficient employment policies and procedures to ensure that employment decisions are made fairly, and discrimination complaints addressed appropriately, including the lack of an Employment Opportunity Officer or an Equal Employment Opportunity Plan to ensure compliance with nondiscrimination laws.³¹

As a part of the settlement with the Attorney General’s office, the City agreed to several employment policies and procedures, such as creating, adopting, and implementing formal tasks and standards for all exempt and non-exempt municipal positions. The City agreed to create, adopt and implement a formal evaluation system for all municipal employees to comply with NYS Civil Service Law, as applicable. The City planned to review policies regarding seasonal and temporary employees, making concerted efforts to recruit, train and hire seasonal employees for available permanent positions, maintaining a list of such employees who received positive performance evaluations. City representatives also agreed to encourage outreach and training, and assist temporary and seasonal employees to take civil service exams, which may require the establishment of a formal policy of notifying seasonal workers first of seasonal positions as well as open permanent positions.³²

The City has yet to fulfill these agreements fully, and the previous administration, in 2012, adopted a policy inconsistent with this recommendation by merging the Human Resources and Equal Employment Officer into one position. In order to lead initiatives on social justice throughout the community, the City needs to first look at itself and its own practices.

Desired End State: The improvement of City work culture to reflect the guiding principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Recommended Actions:

Committee on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Recommendation: Create a committee, named the “Committee on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion,” of diverse composition that includes individuals who are committed to the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

³⁰ “Attorney General Andrew Cuomo Announces Agreement With City Of Niagara Falls To Reform Its Employment Practices,” [Attorney General Andrew Cuomo Announces Agreement With City Of Niagara Falls To Reform Its Employment Practices | New York State Attorney General \(ny.gov\)](#)

³¹ *Id.*

³² *Id.*

Background: The City is in need of a committee of qualified individuals that will be given the responsibility to assess diversity, equity and inclusion within the City's hiring practices and employee culture and ensure fairness in both employee treatment, promotion and pay. The additional recommended actions of the recommendation "City of Niagara Falls Employment Policies" requires a group of individuals qualified to address and ensure their implementation.

Lead: City of Niagara Falls

Strategy:

Individuals selected as part of this committee must be a variety of community leaders, City representatives, professionals with backgrounds in the central values, and from the Public Employee Unions. Once the Executive Office has selected individuals to fill this committee, they must receive training on the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion. This committee must receive training on best practices in diversity and equity and implicit bias training and other antiracist practices. This committee must also be made aware of the City's historical track record in these areas, so that they can effectively lead the City staff in improving diversity and inclusion practices. This will, in turn, drive innovation and improve public perception of the City's commitment to social justice. Diversity and inclusion go hand-in hand; diversity practices must be paired with an inclusive work culture in order to achieve the desired results.

The Committee should adopt the following values:

- **Awareness of unconscious bias:** The Committee should review City policies and union agreements for unconscious biases and practices that seem fair on paper but, when used, exacerbate inequality. Additionally, the Committee should work with the Niagara University's Rose Bente Lee Ostapenko Center for Race, Equality, and Mission to implement implicit bias training for all City employees; they are well qualified to lead such training sessions.
- **Communicate:** While awareness is the first step, employees need tools and training that guide actions for moving forward. Policies should be clearly written to eliminate the potential for bias. Training can be designed to reduce defensiveness by explaining that everyone has implicit biases, that we develop them over our lifetimes through the cultural messaging we consume daily, and that training works to counteract those external influences.
- **Acknowledge holidays of all cultures:** This Committee must work with the City to include and acknowledge the variety of upcoming religious and cultural holidays. This will work to build awareness of diversity and foster greater inclusivity. Be respectful of these days when scheduling meetings, and understand that employees may have different needs and require flexibility
- **Mix up teams:** A diverse cross-section of talent allows for enhanced perspective, spurring creativity on teams and committees. This should be a factor of consideration for

when any team, group, committee, or commission is formed as a response to any of the recommendations within the Report by the Niagara Falls Social Justice Commission.

Below are further recommendations for which the Committee on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion will be responsible:

Integrating Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

Recommendation: Integrate elements of diversity, equity, and inclusion into management and employee performance reviews and professional development plans. Enforce accountability among staff, departments, and units to demonstrate a commitment to providing a high quality of care to all the diverse clients.

Strategy: For the Committee to collaborate with the City's Human Resources Department and the different City Department heads. This conversation will seek to reform the current employee performance review guidelines, and professional development plans to ensure the inclusion of areas intentionally designed to address diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace. Encourage employees to make reports to the City's Human Resources Department and the Equal Employment Opportunity Coordinator, once hired, about unfair and discriminatory employment practices between employees and between clients by providing information on how to report.

Desired End State: An update of employee performance reviews and professional development plans, the spreading of awareness about the City's resources for reporting, and the creation of a work culture that encourages accountability through these avenues.

Time Frame: Create the Committee on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion by the end of 2021.

Assessment: The Committee on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion should conduct regular audits to help reduce opportunities for unethical actions and serve as a means of accountability. Employees should be regularly surveyed anonymously to identify potential issues and challenges with racism or bias within the workplace culture. The surveys should be conducted by an outside agency to ensure confidentiality and eliminate potential for conflicts of interest. The result should be taken seriously, with concrete action steps put in place to ensure that any issue brought to light is addressed in an appropriate and timely manner.

Title: City-wide Partnership to Take Niagara Falls First

Recommendation: Take Niagara Falls First. Ask businesses to become partners with the City of Niagara Falls to prioritize applicants that reside within City limits before expanding their search to the surrounding areas.

Lead: City of Niagara Falls; Local Private Businesses

Observation: According to local law, all City employees otherwise not covered by a state law, contractual, or other exemption must be City residents. In light of this requirement, the City can still improve its hiring practices

to prioritize and actively recruit qualified candidates that already live within City limits. Additionally, for this initiative to take root within the City and lead to noticeable change, local businesses must also be encouraged to join this partnership. As the City grows and changes, Niagara Falls has to take deliberate actions to communicate with local and new businesses to ensure that residents are not left out of the opportunities and benefits of major projects coming to the City.

Desired End State: Niagara Falls residents receiving priority for job opportunities in City employment, local businesses, and major projects brought to the City.

Recommended Actions: Hire Niagara Falls First is a strong strategy for bringing good opportunities to qualified residents Niagara Falls who are also underserved and low-income. To do this, the City should increase employment recruiting efforts towards these communities, converse with local businesses, and suggest they join in a partnership with the City on this initiative

Time Frame: Begin conversations with local businesses and assess their practices as soon as this report is published. Roll out the Niagara Falls First initiative for City employment practices by the end of 2021, and work with local businesses to do the same.

Assessment: Periodic review and analysis of employment data to ensure that the City is dutifully considering and prioritizing the Niagara Falls First Initiative when filling open City positions.

Healthcare

Purpose Statement:

The Niagara Falls Healthcare Disparities Subcommittee met throughout the Summer of 2020 to discuss inequities in resident healthcare through the lens of poverty and with an emphasis on social justice. This subcommittee's goal was to improve collaboration among community leaders and healthcare organizations to expand the provision of education, prevention, and related healthcare services within communities most impacted by the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, especially racial/ethnic minorities who reside in the City of Niagara Falls zip code areas 14301, 14302, 14303, 14304, and 14305. This group sought to develop a series of recommendations and action steps that identify, explain, and substantiate community health priorities and support initiatives that provide the Niagara Region and surrounding communities with the opportunity to be better served. These recommendations illustrate strategies, goals, and objectives to address the outlined priorities and suggest a community communications plan/event to support their implementation.

Recommendations:

Title: Increase and Improve Connectivity of Priority Zip Code Neighborhoods

Recommendation: Develop awareness and discuss the issues facing the neighborhoods within the Priority Zip Codes across City Officials, Healthcare Insurers, and Healthcare Providers.

Lead: Healthcare Providers; Community Stakeholders; Health Insurers; City of Niagara Falls

Observation: The Priority Zip Codes, 14301 -- 14305, otherwise known as "The Box," have the highest tobacco use rates and addiction to tobacco, substance use and substance dependence, mental and behavioral health issues, and the lowest rates of education and vaccination.³³ In 14304, African Americans are living a staggering 18 years less than Whites. 14305 has the highest percentage of African American adults who did not have a primary care visit in 2019: 97.77%.³⁴ 45.34% of all residents in the zip code in 14305 recorded an emergency department visit in 2019, the second-highest percentage of ED visits in the City.³⁵ 14305 also has the highest rate of women who did not record a postpartum visit after childbirth: 59.18%.³⁶ Poverty and racism are foundational influencers for the severest of disease states and unwellness within the City of Niagara Falls, especially within the Priority Zip Codes, as identified by the Healthcare Subcommittee.

***"Every seven minutes, a Black person dies prematurely in the United States. That is over 200 Black people that die every day who would not die if the health of Blacks and Whites were equal."**³⁷ - David R. Williams.*

³³ Millennium Collaborative Care Population Health Data and Analytics Team Statistical Data as of 09.2020. [Mayor Robert Restaino – Niagara Falls \(niagarafallsusa.org\)](https://niagarafallsusa.org)

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ "How Racism Makes Us Sick," *TEDMED*, https://www.ted.com/talks/david_r_williams_how_racism_makes_us_sick

On average, African Americans are dying at much younger ages than Whites in all of the five zip codes in Niagara Falls mentioned here. In zip code 14304, the average age of death for Whites is 76, while for African American residents, it is 58.³⁸

Desired End State: Improvement of the quality of life and health within the Priority Zip Codes and expanding the City's focus to Zip Codes outside of "The Box."

Recommended Actions:

Economic Development Task Force

Launch and implement the Zip Code 14305 Economic Development Task Force to focus on poverty challenges and develop initiatives to target them. In 2013, about 10,900 Niagara Falls residents lived on incomes below the federal poverty line, and about 22,425 are doing poorly financially. That is nearly one out of two residents in Niagara Falls.³⁹ Ensure that the assessment is done through the lens of poverty and generational, systemic discrimination and racism -- Blame Poverty, Not the Poor! Assess City government investment and development plans to ensure inclusion of Priority Zip Codes.

Quality of Life Plan

Achieve a "Quality of Life Plan," which will target Priority Zip Codes and devise ways to increase the quality of residents' lives within those neighborhoods. To facilitate this, the City will create a committee, the "Quality of Life Coalition," dedicated to discussing and forming this plan, which will include Community Leaders, City officials, and existing in-neighborhood organizations.

Public Officials Bus Tour and Town Hall Meeting

Conduct "Public Officials Bus Tour" of Priority Zip Codes followed by a facilitated "Town Hall Meeting" on "Understanding the Impact of Poverty." City Officials and Community Leaders will participate in this activity and conversation.

Care Coalition

Organize the City of Niagara Falls "Care Coalition," consisting of the Niagara Falls Memorial Medical Center, Community Health Center of Niagara Falls, Catholic Health of Mount St. Mary's Hospital, and local Health Centers. This will create a unified umbrella group for which

³⁸ Millennium Collaborative Care Population Health Data and Analytics Team Statistical Data as of 09.2020. [Mayor Robert Restaino – Niagara Falls \(niagarafallsusa.org\)](https://niagarafallsusa.org)

³⁹ "A Community Report: City of Niagara Falls," *University of Buffalo Regional Institute*, https://oishei.org/files/archive/niagara_falls2013.pdf

subsequent committees can tackle many of the recommendations suggested by this report regarding health within Niagara Falls.

Time Frame: Form the Zip Code 14305 Economic Development Task Force by mid-2022. Establish the "Quality of Life Coalition" and publish the "Quality of Life Plan" by the end of 2022. Organize and hold the "Public Officials Bus Tour" and the "Town Hall Meeting" by Spring 2022. Announce the creation of the Care Coalition by mid-2022.

Assessment: Have the groups resemble and re-examine the state of health within Priority Zip Codes throughout the years following these actions' implementation.

Title: Advocating for an End to Redlining

Recommendation: Use City resources to support advocating efforts fighting to eliminate redlining within the United States.

Lead: City of Niagara Falls; Healthcare Providers; Community Stakeholders; Health Insurers

Observation: "Redlining" is the systematic denial of various services by federal and local governmental agencies, as well as the private sector, either directly or indirectly through the selective raising of prices. The National Community Reinvestment Coalition (NCRC) found that, since 1930, "low-income and minority communities were intentionally cut off from lending and investment through a system known as redlining."⁴⁰ The Housing Subcommittee explained the impacts of redlining on available, affordable housing for low-income, minority residents due to arbitrary disapproval of loans and zoning policies. Redlining influences the perpetuation of racism and inequity through various avenues, one of which leads to disparate health consequences. The NRCR found that communities with higher rates and impacts of redlining experience poorer mental health, lower birth rates, and a heightened risk of developing chronic health issues, like diabetes, high cholesterol, and obesity.⁴¹

"The legacy of redlining may be contributing to chronic health inequities within urban areas."⁴²

Redlining is a strong perpetrator of inequity and systemic discrimination. This report's findings already illustrated its adverse impacts on housing and health for low-income and minority communities. If we hope to resolve its consequences, the City must make a considerable effort to attack their cause by advocating for an end to redlining.

Desired End State: A partnership between City representatives and organizations dedicated to fighting redlining within the U.S.

⁴⁰ "Redlining and Neighborhood Health," [Redlining and Neighborhood Health » NCRC](#)

⁴¹ *Id.*

⁴² "Historic Redlining and Urban Health Today in U.S. Cities," [Historic Redlining and Urban Health Today in U.S. Cities | Environmental Justice \(liebertpub.com\)](#)

Recommended Actions: City government should reach out to local organizations dedicated to this cause and develop a partnership with them. This collaboration must include a discussion of how the City can best support its mission. City officials should communicate with state and federal officials to discuss this issue and encourage collaboration on policy initiatives to reform the agencies and regulations guilty of perpetuating redlining within the U.S.

Time Frame: Develop relationships with these organizations by the end of 2022 and begin conversations with state and federal officials during that time. This process will be an on-going effort.

Assessment: Publicly announce partnerships and plans so that the City community is aware of the steps being taken. Communicate, often, with the collaborating agencies to see whether or not the City is doing what it can in the fight to end redlining.

Title: Public Health Awareness

Recommendation: Organize leadership within the City of Niagara Falls responsible for coordinating public health awareness events. Work with local healthcare providers and health insurers to develop care plans that acknowledge socioeconomic disparities.

Lead: Local Healthcare Providers; Local Health Insurance Providers; Community Health Center of Niagara; Community Groups; Niagara Falls School District; City of Niagara Falls

Observation: A lack of education about one's health perpetuates and exacerbates many of the health disparities uncovered in the Health Subcommittee's report. Suppose residents are unaware of the harmful effects of specific activities and diets; how could they be expected to make particular changes to their lifestyle to prevent the expected health consequences? Education is an incredibly effective means of prevention and de-stigmatization. Any effort to educate must consider affordability, accessibility, and current life context within Niagara Falls to target the appropriate communities.

Desired End State: Annual educational events that provide access to resources, advice, and health services.

Recommended Actions:

Niagara Falls Health Awareness and Education Committee

For the City's Executive Office to organize a group, named "Niagara Falls Health Awareness and Education Committee," that consists of qualified individuals charged with the responsibility of coordinating educational events on Mental Health "Anti-Stigma," "Anti-Tobacco," "Flu-Shot Vaccination," "Substance Abuse," Preventative Health Week, Health Fairs in Priority Zip Codes, Chronic Disease Education, and Nutrition in schools. Ideally, these individuals will have had backgrounds in health, education or specialize in any of the topics being addressed. The description for each event is described below:

"Anti-Stigma" Event

For residents on Medicaid in Niagara Falls, 53.7% had a mental health diagnosis in 2019. This rate translates to 12,095 residents out of the total 22,532 that are on Medicaid. There were 11,911 Medicaid mental illness claims filed in 2019. Of this number, 60.4% were White and 31% involved African Americans. 43% of the African American Medicaid population recorded mental health-related visits, whereas 59% of the White Medicaid population had.⁴³ These statistics suggest that mental illness is a prevalent issue that many Niagara Falls residents are facing. Unfortunately, a barrier to receiving help seems to be due to a lack of knowledge about mental health and society-reinforced stigmas placed on mental illnesses. The Mental Health "Anti-Stigma" Event would address these topics and provide affordable access to resources and services through awareness and educational programs. This event should take place during May, Mental Health Awareness Month.

"Anti-Tobacco" Event

Conduct an "Anti-Tobacco" event. Social Determinants of Health are available for 17.5% of total Medicaid clients in Niagara Falls. This sample study found that tobacco use is one of the top five issues behind health problems for Medicaid residents.⁴⁴ The Committee should conduct such an event campaign alongside the recommended Preventative Health Week proposed below. This event would seek to distribute various tobacco and its harmful consequences through programming and on social media outlets. In addition to this, coordinators must send out a list of resources to help aid individuals suffering from tobacco use that are accessible, affordable, and reliable. This may require initiatives to make such resources even more accessible and affordable than they typically are, depending upon the communities' abilities and needs that the campaign will target.

"Flu-Shot Vaccination" Event

A "Flu-Shot Vaccination" event will seek to address the low levels of influenza vaccination for all City members. For African Americans, rates range from 1.82% to 4.46%, and for Whites, rates are from 3.9% to 5.02%. In 4 of the 5 zip codes, immunization rates are lower among African Americans.⁴⁵ This event would provide information on the necessity of vaccines and possibly allow access to more affordable vaccines for residents who would usually not afford or access them. Such an event can be re-utilized for City-wide distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine.

⁴³ Millennium Collaborative Care Population Health Data and Analytics Team Statistical Data as of 09.2020.. [Mayor Robert Restaino – Niagara Falls \(niagarafallsusa.org\)](https://niagarafallsusa.org)

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ *Id.*

"Substance Abuse" Event

19.8% of the total Medical population in the City of Niagara Falls had one or more substance abuse diagnosis claims in 2019. Drug abuse complicating childbirth and pregnancy are among the top ten most-recorded substance abuse diagnoses in Niagara Falls.⁴⁶ A "Substance Abuse" Event would shine a light on this problem within Niagara Falls and, similar to the Mental Health "Anti-Stigma" Event, combat the stigmas associated with it. Providing direct access to a variety of affordable resources for individuals struggling with substance abuse would be foundational to these efforts, in addition to education.

Preventative Health Week

Preventative Health Week will be a City-wide educational event consisting of speakers, fairs, social-media awareness initiatives, and so on that will address a range of preventive health measures. Each day would focus on a screening modality and conduct a screening clinic, for example, by using a mammography van. Such other examples could include education on nutrition and exercise, substance use, and providing direct access to a primary care physician. The latter is an area of particular relevance within Niagara Falls because, in 2019, 97.4% of African Americans on Medicaid did not have a primary care visit 2019. For Whites, that number is 92.2%, both incredibly high.⁴⁷ For African Americans, this percentage exceeded 97% in 4 out of the 5 zip codes. Primary care physicians are more likely to catch diseases and health concerns in the early stages if their patients visit them regularly. Such a relationship would only serve to encourage preventative health and should thus be encouraged throughout this week, as well.

Community Health Fairs

Community Health Fairs would target the neighborhoods' needs within the City's Priority Zip Codes. These Health Fairs would consist of resources, education, and affordable services offered through the City's partnership with local healthcare providers and community groups. Such a fair could be conducted on the importance of postpartum visits and maternity health. In Priority Zip Codes 14304 and 14305, African American women were less likely than White women to attend a postpartum visit. In zip code 14301, the percentage of African Americans with a low birth weight claim was substantially higher than for Whites: 3.57% compared to 1.96%. In this neighborhood, the rate of Africa-American preterm birth claims was 8.77%, while that rate was 2% for Whites. In zip code 14305, 59.18% of women did not record a postpartum visit after childbirth.⁴⁸ These figures refer to 2019. These statistics further demonstrate the need for fairs catering to each zip code's specific and different concerns.

⁴⁶ Millennium Collaborative Care Population Health Data and Analytics Team Statistical Data as of 09.2020. [Mayor Robert Restaino – Niagara Falls \(niagarafallsusa.org\)](https://niagarafallsusa.org)

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ *Id.*

Chronic Disease Education

Education on Chronic Disease allows individuals to become aware of certain diseases they may be dealing with or are at high risk of developing. However, in addition to spreading knowledge, such education must encourage residents to get the help they need. Similar to the recommendations above, the event must provide resources alongside the administration of this education. The Committee can concentrate their efforts through local schools or as a part of the Community Health Fairs and City-wide Preventative Health week, or in conjunction with each other. The Committee should analyze chronic disease within Niagara Falls to determine which types are the most prevalent and where, and the focus of the efforts should correspond to those findings.

Nutrition Education in Schools

Foundational to Preventative Health is proper nutrition and exercise. Teaching nutrition within the Niagara Falls School District will target increasing rates of obesity amongst young children. Obesity and improper diet and nutrition raise the likelihood of young children developing Type 2 Diabetes, heart conditions, and other chronic diseases that may carry into adulthood, further heightening one's risk.⁴⁹ Socioeconomic variables largely influence obesity. Schools can combat these impacts by providing required education and accessible resources to children through their education. The Niagara Falls School District should incorporate the education into its curriculum or through an annual series of workshops that students must attend. This would require a partnership with the Niagara Falls School District.

Time Frame: Organize the Committee by mid-2022. The series of campaigns and initiatives will form a type of "To-Do List" for the group that will require an on-going timeline, especially since these should become annual or bi-annual events.

Assessment: Require the Committee to design a projected schedule when they think they can implement these initiatives and submit the plan to the Mayor. The Mayor may serve as an oversight to ensure that progress is being had alongside the predicted schedule. The City can use its social media platform to spread information about a variety of events, as well. After these campaigns are incorporated into the community, the Committee should review the updated annual data provided by Medicaid and the National Census changes and analyze the differences. The discrepancies found may suggest that campaigns were, or were not, successful in improving residents' health or point out other areas where the Committee needs to expand and refocus their efforts. The initiatives' success may not be determinable through assessment until several years after their implementation.

⁴⁹ "Childhood Obesity: The Health Issue," *Obesity Research*, [Childhood Obesity: The Health Issue - Deckelbaum - 2001 - Obesity Research - Wiley Online Library](#)

Title: Cultural Awareness and Implicit Bias Teaching in Health Facilities

Recommendation: Incorporate annual training on Cultural Awareness and Implicit Bias for employees working in local healthcare facilities.

Lead: Healthcare Providers; Niagara University; Niagara County Community College

Observation: As this report has discovered, minority and underrepresented communities experience significant disparities in the level of care they receive from the Nation's healthcare system compared to Whites. According to a study conducted in 2015, "most healthcare providers appear to have an implicit bias in terms of positive attitudes toward Whites and negative attitudes toward People of Color."⁵⁰ Such attitudes can influence the treatment and level of care given by providers to patients, perpetuating the current disparities. These differences cannot be overcome unless those in charge of the care administered know how their implicit biases and lack of cultural awareness may be exacerbating the inequalities.

Desired End State: Annual conduction of training sessions for Implicit Bias and Cultural Awareness for local healthcare facilities.

Recommended Actions: Have local healthcare providers meet and work together to accomplish the goal of implementing Implicit Bias and Cultural Awareness training for them and their employees. Partner with an outside organization specializing in these training areas and coordinate annual dates on which the sessions will take place. They can be given at each facility, or the providers can decide to have one large event where employees from multiple facilities participate.

Time Frame: Find an organization to collaborate with by the end of 2021. Plan for these training sessions to occur at the beginning of 2022.

Assessment: Before and after each session, survey participants to determine whether the training successfully taught the attendees about Implicit Bias and Cultural Awareness. Administer an implicit bias test before and after the training to identify what biases are prevalent in the Niagara Falls provider community and analyze if the training made the group more insightful and aware of their biases.

Title: Everyday Discrimination Scale

Recommendation: Spearhead wide-spread implementation of the "Everyday Discrimination Scale" (EDS) as a patient in-take procedure.

Lead: Healthcare Providers

Observation: EDS is one of the most widely used scales in epidemiologic and public health research and was founded by Dr. David Rudyard Williams, the Florence Sprague Norman and Laura Smart Norman Professor of

⁵⁰ "Implicit Racial/Ethnic Bias Among healthcare Professionals and Its Influence on healthcare Outcomes: A Systematic Review," [Implicit Racial/Ethnic Bias Among healthcare Professionals and Its Influence on healthcare Outcomes: A Systematic Review \(nih.gov\)](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6888881/)

Public Health at the Harvard School of Public Health and a professor of African and African American Studies and Sociology at Harvard University. It is based on "everyday" experiences of discrimination, which are defined as "a range of events, many of which appear to be 'trivial' or even 'normal'...Certain rights, respect, and recognition, which Whites take for granted in their own lives, are denied to People of Color."⁵¹ The EDS was designed to assess discriminatory treatment across various domains; thus, items on the scale are created in the context of general mistreatment, without reference to race, ethnicity, gender, or other demographic/personal characteristics. Since the items themselves are framed rather generically, the scale has been used to measure discriminatory experiences for persons from various racial/ethnic backgrounds, including Whites. Incorporating the EDS with support prevention and wellness would encourage a conversation between providers and patients about the impacts of discrimination on an individual's health, both physically and mentally. Appropriate resources can then be provided to those patients as a means of further support. Below is an example of an EDS sample questionnaire; recipients select a number 1 through 5 that corresponds to never as 1 to always as 5:

"In your day-to-day life, how often do any of the following things happen to you?"

1. You are treated with less courtesy than other people are.
2. You are treated with less respect than other people are.
3. You receive poorer service than other people at restaurants or stores.
4. People act as if they think you are not smart.
5. People act as if they are afraid of you.
6. People act as if they think you are dishonest.
7. People act as if they're better than you are.
8. You are called names or insulted.
9. You are threatened or harassed."⁵²

Desired End State: The complete incorporation of the "Everyday Discrimination Scale" into all local healthcare facilities as a part of their patient intake procedure

Recommended Actions: Have local healthcare providers meet and discuss the "Everyday Discrimination Scale." The conversation should seek to determine whether providers are open to such an implementation and what barriers may exist to its adoption. Ideally, providers will be willing to include EDS in their practices. If this is the case, the group will design an action plan detailing how this will be done.

Time Frame: Have healthcare providers meet throughout 2021. If they decide to include the EDS, add the test to patient in-take procedures in 2022.

Assessment: If the EDS is adopted, periodically analyze patients' responses and compare that to the type of care offered by providers as a result. This data would provide valuable information for the City to determine the levels of discrimination facing different communities.

⁵¹ "Racial/Ethnic Differences in Responses to the Everyday Discrimination Scale: A Differential Item Functioning Analysis," [Racial/Ethnic Differences in Responses to the Everyday Discrimination Scale: A Differential Item Functioning Analysis \(nih.gov\)](https://doi.org/10.1177/135910539700200305)

⁵² "Racial Differences in Physical and Mental Health: Socioeconomic Status, Stress, and Discrimination," <https://doi.org/10.1177/135910539700200305>

Housing

Purpose Statement:

The Housing Committee had the opportunity to meet throughout July and August of 2020 to candidly discuss this community's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats from the perspective of housing in the City of Niagara Falls. The Committee also had interaction with outside community entities to gain perspective on their group's work in the community and how to improve housing challenges citywide. The report and the recommendations put forth involve a combination of near and medium-term objectives with the understanding that our City has to come together to move forward. We hope that this Social Justice Commission begins the process of community collaboration and fosters a "buy-in" to the concept of "One Niagara Falls."

Recommendations:

Title: Single-Family Home Construction

Recommendation: To demolish homes past the point of rehabilitation and construct new, affordable single-family homes. The homes would cater to families and consist of 1100 sq ft., with no garage, no basement, and are one story.

Lead: Niagara Falls Housing Authority; City of Niagara Falls

Observation: The City of Niagara Falls lacks available, affordable single-family homes yet has a surplus of unlivable houses in the City's ownership. Demolishing old, unsalvageable homes is necessary to make way for new neighborhood development. This is especially true when revitalization exceeds the cost of demolition. The City's median income falls between \$29,000 to \$34,000 per year, explaining the need for affordable housing, but does not sacrifice modernity, quality, sustainability, and livability.

Desired End State: The demolition of homes past the opportunity for rehabilitation and replacing them with affordable, single-family housing matching the descriptions described above.

Recommended Actions: Contract with companies and collaborators interested in piloting a neighborhood development and revitalization program. Ensure that the housing designs are "right-sized," meaning they fit residents' financial needs.

Time Frame: This process will be on-going and will focus on one block at a time. The House Authority should work to establish relationships and partnerships with interested parties by the end of 2022.

Assessment: Issue a public statement detailing the City's housing development plans once the partnership is clarified and the agenda set. Provide public updates on the progress made and next steps. This will provide transparency, accountability, and visibility to the community.

Title: Registration and Accountability of City Landlords

Recommendation: For the Housing Authority and Code Enforcement to provide more inspection and oversight of landlords than the current policies allow. Reform registration policies and enforcement practices.

Lead: Niagara Falls Housing Authority; City of Niagara Falls

Observation: Without oversight and monitoring, too often do landlord properties fall into disrepair and abandonment, causing the houses to be taken by the City for auction, where they may or may not be bought. This creates a stockpile of unlivable homes within Niagara Falls that take up space and are visible sores within the neighborhoods. In addition to this, some residents face unfair obstacles to renting a home, for example, due to redlining and a requirement of no previous evictions, or fear that the landlord will evict them if they report them to the City. Currently, some individuals are living in homes purchased by out-of-town landlords with no supervision, monitoring, or inspection. Other individuals will move house to house, a portion renting with or without approvals, and fear retribution for reporting clear housing violations. The City's current methods for landlord oversight are insufficient to protect residents and preserve homes' livability.

Desired End State: A revised series of policies that address the issues identified above and any other that arise during conversations.

Recommended Actions: Coordinate a team of members from the Housing Authority, City Code Enforcement, reputable landlords, City tenants, and local community groups, such as Catholic Charities and Community Missions. Have the group discuss the specific problems created and unaddressed by the City's current means of landlord oversight. Design solutions, if possible, to the issues raised and publish the crafted recommendations. The suggestions must have action plans attached to them, and the respective departments and stakeholders are responsible for seeing their implementation through.

Time Frame: Organize the team by the end of 2021. Publish a report by the end of 2022.

Assessment: After the report is published, the group should meet every six months to discuss whether the changes have improved the identified problems and if any others have yet to be resolved.

Title: Housing and Neighborhood Supports

Recommendation: To increase residence knowledge of housing resources available to them. Improve and expand the types of programs offered.

Lead: City of Niagara Falls; Niagara University

Observation: More education needs to circulate on what opportunities individuals are eligible for concerning homeownership. Examples of available programs are Neighborworks®, M & T Bank Community Renewal Offices, City's HOME program, and other benefits provided through state and federal agencies. Some residents

are entirely unaware of agencies that exist to help them achieve housing. Existing, effective, and strategic housing initiatives require more support from the local government and community organizations, such as the Highland Clubhouse, Peace Makers, local not-for-profits, The Levesque Institute-NU, etc. This support would lead to more successful housing initiatives, thereby improving the quality of help available to residents.

Desired End State: A resource guide containing information on programs, benefit eligibility, and local initiatives easily accessible and understandable by the community. Increased collaboration with groups leading current initiatives.

Recommended Actions: The City of Niagara Falls has partnered with Niagara University to work in the compilation of a guide containing an exhaustive list of resources available to residents in a manner that is both accessible and digestible. Ideally, the guide will explain what types of local, state, and federal benefits certain residents may be eligible for, programs they can reach out to, and information on how to report their landlord. Once it is completed, the City will add the document to its website and ensure that the public is aware of its creation and how to access it. In addition to this, have local stakeholders and City officials communicate with local housing initiatives to find out the best ways to provide them support aside from a compiled guide. Ensure to engage everyone at all levels, as this is not strictly a City or organizational responsibility. Encourage Block Club participation, Community Development meetings, City Council, etc.

Time Frame: Establish the Committee by the end of 2021. Publish the guide before July of 2022.

Assessment: Once the guide is published and distributed, survey residents to see whether or not they know about it, can decipher it, find it helpful, and if it offers them any new, valuable information.

Title: Housing Valuations

Recommendation: For the Niagara Falls Housing Authority to partner with a third-party Organization to conduct a valuation of City housing.

Lead: Niagara Falls Housing Authority; City of Niagara Falls

Observation: Houses within Niagara Falls have not been appropriately evaluated in decades. Inaccurately valued homes hurt current and new homeowners, as well as the City. Since this negatively impacts most citizens are Black Americans, the issue becomes increasingly socially relevant for the part it plays in perpetuating systemic injustice. Black neighborhoods within WNY are currently devalued by 32.3%.⁵³ This prevents Black homeowners from making the appropriate profit when they sell their homes, receiving significantly less than what the home is worth. On average, that loss is around \$18,000.⁵⁴ A just valuation has the potential to combat the role that inaccurate housing valuations play in perpetuating inequality within the City of Niagara Falls.

Desired end state: A just, fair, and accurate housing valuation of the City of Niagara Falls.

⁵³ The Devaluation of Assets in Black Neighborhoods,” <https://www.brookings.edu/research/devaluation-of-assets-in-black-neighborhoods/>

⁵⁴ *Id.*

Recommended action: For the City to hire a third-party organization to conduct the valuation. This organization must have an outstanding reputation for being fair and just. The City will need significant funding to implement this proposal. This may require an effort to advocate to county, state, and federal officials for more financial resources or wait until the City budget can afford such an expense.

Time Frame: Conduct the housing valuation before the end of 2025.

Assessment: Once the valuation has been completed, determine whether the houses within Niagara Falls are being sold and bought at prices in line with those findings.

Title: Neighborhood Clean Ups

Recommendation: For community leaders and local volunteer organizations to collaborate and clean up the City's neighborhoods.

Lead: Community Leaders; Community Volunteer Groups; Business Associations; Niagara University; City of Niagara Falls

Observations: Many neighborhoods and City streets are overgrown with weeds and trash. This feeds to the negative appearance that often deters people and businesses from moving within the City limits and reduces the quality of life for residents already living within those communities. Using local resources to "clean up" our neighborhoods would strengthen community relationships, improve the quality of living, and encourage businesses and families to move to our City.

Desired end state: Streets and buildings that are clean of trash, overgrown weeds, and that look well kept. A building of our community through the act of volunteering and an increase in the quality of residents' lives. The rise in families and businesses moving into the City.

Recommended action: Formulate a City Clean-Up Commission composed of local community leaders, community volunteer groups, business associations, and members from the Niagara University community that will retain the responsibility of organizing and launching clean-up operations throughout the City. The Niagara University Impact Office has worked with the City to organize previous clean-ups and provide volunteers. They would be an excellent resource for the Commission to utilize.

Time Frame: To have a Commission established and a plan set by the start of Summer 2021 so that operations can take place while the weather is cooperative.

Assessment: After these efforts have been in place for a series of months, survey residents and businesses to see whether they feel as though their neighborhoods have been appropriately cleaned up and positively impacted their lives.

Closing Statement

The findings and recommendations expressed and examined in this report provide the City of Niagara Falls with strategies and initiatives to attack inequity and injustice within our City. Overall, the healthcare, education, housing, employment, and law enforcement subcommittees identified poverty, racial bias, and a lack of education and awareness as the foundational forces of inequity. Their proposed recommendations suggest methods guided by the same principles that founded the Niagara Falls Social Justice Commission: diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The recommendations included in this report are such because the City deems them as practical and feasible means to create social change within the community. Some proposals are already underway, and the plan is to continue to expand those efforts to include the others. Described within each recommendation is a time frame that details when the proposal should start and/or be implemented. Those factors and the availability of City resources will determine the order that they are all addressed.

The work does not stop here. This report does not represent the finalization of the City's efforts toward social change. On the contrary, the findings and recommendations illustrate preliminary steps the City plans to take for our community to Do better and to Be better. All subcommittees stated the need for further conversation and collaboration that includes all City members, from residents to leadership. Inclusive, honest, and transparent discussion after the presentation of this report will ensure that the City continues to progress and be accountable throughout the process.

Change requires a perspective developed from diversity, equity, and inclusion. The continued conversation and City-wide efforts must include all views, especially focusing on Niagara Falls minority communities' voices. The City and community within must continue to fight for social justice and progressive change. Together, we can create a future where all members are valued, respected, included, and equitably treated. This report is only the beginning for the City of Niagara Falls. We hope that the recommendations written herein inspire optimism in our City's potential and a desire for change within the entire Niagara Falls community and more community members to work constructively to accomplish a brighter future for everyone.

Government is not the prime mover in this process. While government needs to recognize, be receptive, and responsive to the need for change, the power behind lasting and sustainable growth is by individuals volunteering in the community to continue constructive conversations that help the evolution move forward.

On behalf of the Niagara Falls Social Justice Commission, we thank all of the residents of the City of Niagara Falls that have voiced their desire for the need to attain social justice within our community and country at large. Know that you are heard. The leaders of this community will continue to listen and work with you to build a future that includes everyone, acknowledges and respects diversity, and exemplifies equity. Together, we can, and we will create a better City of Niagara Falls.

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