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Obama Era Offers Opportunity for Philanthropy to Push for Racial Equity

By Sterling K. Speirn

The election of our first African-American president gave many Americans hope that the United States was ready to make significant and genuine progress in the area of racial equity. Some commentators even suggested that this milestone meant we now live in a “post-racial society,” with a public and leaders who have finally learned to approach racial issues with more maturity and less fear than ever before.

Unfortunately, the regrettable Shirley Sherrod controversy and other recent national headlines illustrate how far we are from being a post-racial society and how desperately we need better ways to confront racism and promote racial healing.

Yet as grant makers, nonprofit leaders, and citizens, these troubling incidents also provide us a fresh opportunity to lead the way in tackling race issues and the legacy of racism head on nationally and in our communities.

Our efforts to promote genuine racial healing must start with an acknowledgment of our collective racial heritage and its stark consequences. We must recognize the immense economic, emotional, psychosocial, and cultural legacy from centuries of living in a racialized society, one in which we still live today.

Evidence of structural racism is pervasive, with its most severe and devastating impact falling on minority children.

According to the most recent figures available from the National Center for Children in Poverty, 61 percent of African-American, 62 percent of Latino, and 57 percent of Native American children live in low-income families, compared with 27 percent of white children. Meanwhile, some 60 percent of children with immigrant parents live in low-income families,

The data clearly show that nonwhite children are more vulnerable in virtually every area we can measure, including education, housing, employment, and health care. Events of the past year portray the symptoms of what might be called a “post-racial stress syndrome.”

This is where misguided beliefs (or earnest hopes) that a post-racial

utopia now exists require, on the one hand, a constant denial of the burdensome facts and conditions that unresolved racial issues bequeath each new generation and, on the other hand, a hypersensitivity to any issues and discussions of race, let alone racism. As Eric Holder, the U.S. attorney general observed:

“We average Americans simply do not talk enough with each other about race. It is an issue we have never been at ease with, and given our nation’s history, this is in some ways understandable. And yet if we are to make progress in this area, we must feel comfortable enough with one another, and tolerant enough of each other, to have frank conversations about the racial matters that continue to divide us.”

Foundations can play a leading role by acknowledging these disparities publicly and inviting people to participate in open and honest dialogue. We can equip them with the experience, tools, and skills they need to tackle the racial issues of the past and present and work together in constructive and innovative ways to build a better future.

Some foundations have made significant investments in this area. The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation has been joined by the Akonadi Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Marguerite Casey Foundation, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in support of the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity. This multiyear effort is designed to combat institutional and structural racism in communities through education, training, and the sharing of ideas among grant makers and grant seekers. Atlantic Philanthropies, the Ford Foundation, and the Open Society Institute, among others, have also provided leadership in taking on this type of meaningful and critically important work at the local, national, and international levels.

At the Kellogg foundation, our commitment to promoting racial equity is based on our longstanding mission to create the conditions vulnerable children and their families need to succeed, regardless of their race or ethnicity. We direct our grants and resources to community-based and national organizations whose innovative and effective programs foster racial healing and remove systemic barriers that hold back vulnerable children. All of the work financed by the foundation—more than \$300 million each year—attempts to close the gaps structural racism creates in education and learning, health and well-being, and family economic security.

And in May, we started America Healing, a \$75-million effort to promote racial equity. This five-year commitment attracted nearly 1,000 grant applications and resulted in 119 grantees receiving support just in the first year. The fact that we received so many applications speaks to both the unmet need and the number of

courageous individuals and groups that are ready to engage in this work.

Barack Obama's election was a moving, historic event, and it's an understandable impulse to want to wish away depressing racial disparities and cling to the belief that we have truly achieved a post-racial society. But wishing won't make it so—hard work, commitment, and courage are required.

Instead of succumbing to the denial and hypersensitivity about racial issues, foundations, charities, and others involved in philanthropy should take advantage of this window of opportunity to help our communities, and indeed our entire nation, overcome this syndrome and make genuine progress. We can use our investments, efforts, and partnerships to build an understanding of and willingness to confront legacies that we did not create but will surely perpetuate if we deny their existence.

Sterling K. Speirn is chief executive of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in Battle Creek, Mich.

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