

# Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION<sup>Review</sup>

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***Sponsored Supplement***  
**Philanthropy on the Frontlines of Ferguson**  
By Rev. Starsky D. Wilson

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# Philanthropy on the Frontlines of Ferguson

The Deaconess Foundation seeks to shift public policy, mobilize community members, and strengthen advocacy efforts related to children and youth.

BY REV. STARSKY D. WILSON

Few moments in life are filled with the hope and promise of a high school graduation. Marked by celebration and anticipation of the future, commencement is one of the most important milestones in a young person's life. For students in Normandy High School's class of 2014, though, graduation was also a stark reminder of the deep inequities facing many of America's young people. The district, in a suburb of St. Louis, had lost its accreditation in 2012, and in 2013 it found itself at the center of a school transfer debacle that at one point saw dozens of white parents from nearby suburbs yelling for Normandy's predominantly black young people to leave the schools in their communities and "go home." Shortly after graduation in 2014, the Missouri State Board of Education announced that the Normandy School District would close that same year.

Then Michael Brown Jr. was shot. Brown was one of the last students to fulfill the requirements for graduation in the Normandy School District. The events in Ferguson since his death have underscored the health impact and trauma of racism, from incidents experienced on the street to the implicit bias found in institutions. In brief, the summer of 2014 marked the very public diagnosis of an unhealthy community with suffering youth and racial inequity as the most prominent symptoms.

Brown's death at the hands of former Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson sparked a national dialogue about racial inequality. It brought home the point that, just as place and poverty are social determinants of health, racial equity is an important indica-

tor of our communities' health. This dialogue has been a critically important step toward addressing the complex challenges and deep fissures that exist in communities plagued by racial tension and economic instability. But we at Deaconess Foundation strongly believe that in order to overcome these challenges and heal the fissures, the dialogue must be followed by action on a systemic level.

## BEYOND GRANTMAKING

At Deaconess, we came to the conclusion that a systemic approach to change was the best course of action—for us, and for other foundations seeking to effect lasting change—a few years ago. Deaconess is the successor of the Evangelical Deaconess Society of St. Louis; it began its grantmaking in 1998 with proceeds from the sale of the Deaconess Incarnate Word Health System.

In the spirit of its United Church of Christ faith heritage, our mission is to improve the health of the St. Louis metropolitan community and its residents. The foundation envisions a community that values the health and well-being of all children and gives priority attention to the most vulnerable. The first of our five core values is justice, as we believe that "a just society is essential for the full achievement of individual and community health."

In November 2013, Deaconess decided to build on a decade of knowledge and deep relationships with child-serving agencies and congregational partners to expand impact through a community capacity-building plan. The plan aims to shift public policy, mobilize community members, and strengthen advocacy efforts related to children and young people. The plan also seeks to expand the role of the foundation by providing the community with resources in addition to funding—specifically, by investing

reputational and relational capital as an influencer, convener, and broker.

Those efforts set the stage for our response after the shooting. Ten days into the uprising and widespread civil unrest in Ferguson, Deaconess made a flexible funding commitment of \$100,000 to support youth organizing. In 2015, Deaconess followed up by establishing the Ferguson Youth Organizing Fund, which allows other donors to invest through Deaconess. We also launched a new grant opportunity that provides dedicated annual funding for youth organizing. Deaconess's response to the uprising attracted the interest of funders outside the region. To date, outside funding partners have been as diverse as the Public Welfare Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the NBA Players' Association Foundation, Casey Family Programs, and Anheuser Busch InBev.

To advance racial and socioeconomic equity post-Ferguson, the foundation's ability to build and sustain relationships at both grassroots and grassroots levels is even more important than the dollars invested. From nonviolent direct actions (including being arrested with clergy leaders attempting to enter the US Attorney's office on the anniversary of Michael Brown's death) to closed-door strategy meetings, Deaconess staff members have engaged directly, taking on coordinating roles with community organizers, elected officials, law enforcement, local clergy, civil rights activists, and national funders.

## THE FERGUSON COMMISSION

The various roles Deaconess played in the wake of the unrest led to an invitation from Missouri Governor Jeremiah Nixon for me to co-chair the Ferguson Commission. Created by executive order in November 2014, the Ferguson Commission has been

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called an experiment in inclusive democracy. It has engaged more than 2,200 citizens and 100 subject matter experts in more than 60 public meetings, and it has marshalled nearly 20,000 volunteer hours to explore issues such as citizen-law enforcement relations, municipal courts and governance, racial and ethnic relations, regional disparities in health, education, housing, transportation, child care, and family and community stability.

The commission's nearly \$1 million budget was funded primarily by the State of Missouri through economic development, community service, and community development block grant dollars. Funding was also provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Missouri Foundation for Health, and Deaconess Foundation. The United Way of Greater St. Louis served as the commission's fiscal agent.

The Ferguson Commission report, *Forward Through Ferguson: A Path Toward Racial Equity*, was released on September 14, 2015. It includes 189 calls to action for regional and statewide policymakers. Priority recommendations are organized into four categories: racial equity, justice for all, youth at the center, and opportunities to thrive. The life expectancy gap among citizens in this region differs by almost 40 years depending

on ZIP code, with residents of majority white municipalities outliving majority black ones by decades.<sup>1</sup> The state of Missouri ranked 50th in the racial discipline gap among primary-school-aged children and 47th among secondary school students.<sup>2</sup> According to the University of Missouri-St. Louis Public Policy Research Center, the 2012 gross domestic product for the St. Louis region would have been \$13.56 billion greater (at \$151.3 billion) if there had been no racial income gap.<sup>3</sup>

The commission's findings and recommendations were telling, but the report's frame is vital. The report is about race, regionalism, and responsiveness to community outcries. The very first page states, "We know that talking about race makes a lot of people uncomfortable. But make no mistake: this is about race." With the numerous studies and increased attention focused on the area—from US Department of Justice reports to President Obama's Task Force on 21st Century Policing—it was important that the Ferguson Commission produced a "People's Report," informed and owned by citizens rather than elected officials or policy wonks.

Leading the commission gave Deaconess the opportunity to influence the prioritizing of policy recommendations, and we emphasized the need to advance racial and health equity, as well as to create policies that are

supported by research and that will have generational impact. As the commission moved toward implementation and evaluation, the foundation's experience supporting collective impact further informed the discussion. Since the recommendations became public, Deaconess has convened a group of community organizing and advocacy organizations to coordinate campaigns and public actions to assure accountability for civic leaders. In November 2015, we worked with activists to host two public accountability meetings where civic leaders—including the attorney general, the city mayor, legislators, the Chamber of Commerce president, and school superintendents—pledged support for Ferguson Commission calls to action.

In many ways, the Ferguson Commission gave Deaconess an opportunity to learn and explore its emerging approach to social change in real time. Public testimony from people directly affected assured robust community engagement in policy development. Foundation leaders advocated with partner organizations within work groups and with elected officials. Foundation funding undergirded each element of the process. This experiment in inclusive democracy has accelerated staff learning and validated relatively new governance platforms, including a policy and community advisory board that includes youth voices and elected officials informing our long-term program.

## LOOKING AHEAD

Michael Brown Jr.'s death was singular in its impact on raising national awareness about racial inequities, but his experience in the St. Louis region was not uncommon. His classmates effectively started their adult lives through the haze of tear gas. They still face barriers that limit their quality of life and life expectancy. The disparities are vast and the need is pressing. If philanthropy wants to continue to be venture capital for social change, health foundations and others must recognize the root causes of the problems they are trying to solve. They must invest in our most vulnerable young people's future by supporting systemic change. ❀

## Notes

- 1 St. Louis County, Comprehensive Planning Division, "Aging Successfully in St. Louis County," 2014.
- 2 Daniel Losen, Cheri Hodson, Michael A. Keith II, et al., "Are We Closing the School Discipline Gap?" The Center for Civil Rights Remedies, February 2015.
- 3 Public Policy Research Center, "An Equity Assessment of the St. Louis Region," University of Missouri-St. Louis, 2015.