

# MINNESOTA TRUST BLACK WOMEN & GIRLS

A Minneapolis/St. Paul Town Hall Hearing

## REPORT

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*Don't meet me where I am, meet me where my dreams are.*

— Sondra Samuels, Education Panel Contextualizer

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*I know we are all well versed in equity-based language,  
but we are not well versed in equity-based action.*

— Dr. Brittany Lewis, Housing Panel Contextualizer

## MINNESOTA TRUST BLACK WOMEN AND GIRLS TOWN HALL OVERVIEW

The Minnesota Trust Black Women and Girls Town Hall was established in 2018 when Dr. Brittany Lewis, the Women’s Foundation of Minnesota, the African American Leadership Forum, and Hope Community, Inc., partnered with the national African American Policy Forum (AAPF) to bring the Breaking the Silence Town Hall Series to Minneapolis and St. Paul.

Held at the Walker Art Center on Saturday, April 13, 2019, this first of its kind event engaged over 200 community participants on four issue-focused panels that amplified the voices of Black women and girls in the areas of housing, education, criminal justice, and health and wellness to highlight policy solutions for and with Black women and girls.

The structure of the town hall was designed to give local decisionmakers a chance to listen to women and girls directly as they shared the challenges they experience on a daily basis—in their homes, schools, and communities—in order to identify opportunities for intervention. Black women vendors, performing artists, and wellness services added to the experience of the day and ensured a dynamic and safe space. The MN Trust Black Women and Girls Town Hall Committee worked with over 25 Black women leaders from across the Twin Cities to plan and execute this innovative one-day summit, which aimed to move from public testimony to policy change for Black women and girls.

Unlike any other city that has co-sponsored a town hall event with the African American Policy Forum, the MN Trust Black Women and Girls Town Hall ensured it would:

- ▶ **Partner with youth leadership:** The Hope Community, Inc. Youth Action Research Team, a group of high school age Black girls that led the social media and community education campaign and presented their own research findings on colorism at the town hall event.
- ▶ **Develop action plans for policy change:** The 16 commissioners (elected/appointed officials) who participated in the town hall developed thoughtful plans of action and presented those plans to the community 60 days after the town hall. On June 17, 2019, the MN Trust Black Women and Girls Town Hall committee and its community partners convened the policy action roundtable to hear the commissioners’ plans of action and to establish a continued partnership to support policy change on behalf of Black women and girls in Minneapolis and St. Paul.

## NATIONAL PARTNER OVERVIEW

The African American Policy Forum (AAPF) is an innovative think tank under the leadership of acclaimed legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw that connects academics, activists, and policymakers to dismantle structural inequality in relation to the intersections of race, gender, and class. Founded in 1996 to promote women's rights in the context of struggles for racial justice, the African American Policy Forum works to advance racial justice, gender equality, and human rights, both in the United States and internationally. In 2014, AAPF launched the Breaking the Silence Town Hall Series on women and girls of color in cities throughout the country.

AAPF is committed to hosting these hearings to bring the issues and solutions of women of color and Native women out of the shadows and squarely into public policy debates. Women and girls of color and Native women are invited to provide testimony across a range of areas, including school push-out, incarceration, public and private violence, trafficking, foster care, economic well-being, and homelessness. Key decisionmakers participate as commissioners to suggest and advance tangible interventions.



*The education system placed me in a box as a young Black girl because the system made assumptions about me and my future.*

— Shadow Roland, Education Panel Testifier

## WHY BLACK WOMEN AND GIRLS?

While Black women and girls continue to lead the nation by influencing critical elections, leading social movements, and ensuring the well-being of their communities, they are still left behind. Black women and girls in Minnesota have been speaking up, but local and state level policymakers have not yet taken that information to frame their public policy agenda.

Despite dominant narratives that center men and boys as the primary targets of racial injustice in this country, it is a myth that women and girls of color aren't suffering alongside them. Women and girls live in the same impoverished communities and attend the same

failing schools as their male counterparts. They also suffer from distinctive intersectional racial disparities based on their identity as women of color.

Historically, government hearings were held on men and boys of color, creating a deeper understanding among stakeholders of their specific needs. These hearings led to increased public will and, ultimately, the development of the black male achievement landscape we see today. Through hosting similar hearings on women and girls of color, we hope to increase our nation's collective understanding of the disparities they experience, both those that are common with and different from their male counterparts.

## THE PROCESS

In 2016, AAPF, the office of former U.S. Representative Keith Ellison, Dr. Brittany Lewis, and the Women's Foundation of Minnesota began developing plans to co-host a Town Hall in Minnesota for Women and Girls of Color in line with goals and frameworks rooted in AAPF's #WhyWeCantWait campaign and #BreakingTheSilence programming series. In 2018, the MN Trust Black Women and Girls Committee was formed under the leadership of Dr. Brittany Lewis, Hope Community Inc., and the African American Leadership Forum joined the Core Team.

First, the MN Trust Black Women and Girls Town Hall Committee worked diligently to raise funds to support the one-day summit, secured its partnership agreement with AAPF, and invited an expansive network of

Black women leaders from Minneapolis and St. Paul to partner with us as members of the core team or advisory council.

Second, the MN Trust Black Women and Girls Town Hall Committee worked to solidify an event venue, kept all partners updated on event planning milestones, often soliciting their input and feedback, and worked collaboratively with Dr. Brittany Lewis as she led the Hope Community Youth Action Research Team. There were 48 high school age Black girls from across the Twin Cities metro who applied for 12 youth positions. In addition, to leading the social media and community education outreach campaign for the town hall event and helping to identify event testifiers, the youth designed and executed their own action research project and presented their findings at the town hall.

Third, the MN Trust Black Women and Girls Town Hall Committee worked with the AAPF to plan a visit to Minneapolis the weekend of February 23 to help the MN Trust Black Women and Girls Town Hall Committee work with all the partners to solidify our collective summit goals, prepare the event testifiers, and further solidify the specifics of the day's schedule while working to secure Black women vendors for the summit.

Fourth, the MN Trust Black Women and Girls Town Hall Committee worked collaboratively with the Youth Action Research Team to design the event flyer, logo, and create a series of promotional videos, which were strategically released each week a month before the event. These promotional videos aimed to both educate the community on the statistical disparities impacting Black women and girls lives while inviting them to attend and participate in the summit.

Lastly, on Saturday, April 13, from 8 a.m.-5 p.m. at the Walker Art Center, the MN Trust Black Women and Girls Town Hall Committee, in partnership with the AAPF and over 25 Black women leaders from Minneapolis and St. Paul, executed a historic event that invited elected and appointed officials to a policymaking table that Black women and girls created themselves. Each Black woman and girl testifier and contextualizer shared a precious gift with everyone by having the courage to speak up. We laughed, we cried, we danced, and we created a space for Black women and girls never seen before in the Twin Cities.

## THE MN TRUST BLACK WOMEN AND GIRLS TOWN HALL HEARING

From start to finish, the MN Trust Black Women Town Hall amplified the triumphant and daunting realities that Black women renters, homeowners, mothers and caregivers, educators, and healers experience in Minnesota. These realities were raised through issue-focused panels that centered (1) Housing, (2) Criminal Justice, (3) Health and Wellness, and (4) Education. Attendees were also gifted with performances from local artists Solo Star, Ashli Henderson, Thandisizwe Jackson, and Helen Mohammad. Every panel, every presentation, every testimony, and every performance given helped to uplift, celebrate, and actualize the power, wisdom, talent, and beauty that exist within Black women.

Furthermore, the panels were among the most powerful aspects of the town hall, yielding both tears and laughter throughout the day. Most importantly, it provided Black women with the space to not only share their personal stories but to also proclaim solutions to the many issues affecting Black women and girls. This report highlights these panels through a summary of key experiences, recommendations, and wisdom from local Black women and leaders.

## Housing: The Fight for Equitable Housing & Access to Homeownership

For more than a decade, Minnesota's housing market has become increasingly unaffordable and inaccessible and has rendered devastating and disproportionate effects on Black women, their families, and communities. More specifically, in a recent study entitled *The Illusion of Choice* authored by Dr. Brittany Lewis, nearly 50% of every renter household in North Minneapolis has experienced an eviction — most of those evicted are Black women (62%). In order to illustrate the grave and desperate housing conditions that Black women renters and homeowners encounter, the following women were invited to share their experiences and expertise: Ethrophic Burnett, Stayci Bell, Angela Williams, Aarica Coleman, and Dr. Brittany Lewis.

“ Seeking housing was unaffordable, let alone trying to maintain housing from landlords that will nickel-and-dime you every chance they can get ... I now live in a house that I have rented since 2009, with my mama and my kids. But at what cost? \$2,025 a month. How much does your right to live a stable, affordable life cost?... I just have had this feeling lately that I have experienced what it means to be RENTING WHILE BLACK.”

— Stayci Bell, Housing Panel Testifier

The stories and experiences shared by the testifiers and contextualizers were both disheartening and inspiring. Housing displacement and instability had forced many of the testifiers and their families to seek refuge at local “pay-to-stay” shelters or in dilapidated apartments and homes managed by slumlords. For some testifiers, including Ethrophic, acquiring affordable, stable, and safe housing meant abandoning her “village” and community for the suburbs, and consequently enduring years of racist behaviors and remarks from her predominantly white neighbors, teachers, and colleagues. Many of the testifiers, all of whom are mothers, have lived in constant fear that their housing troubles would result in child protection services removing their children from their care. Additionally, all of the testifiers had experienced mental health crises, such as depression, as a result of their housing troubles, and some even used drugs and alcohol to

cope. Lastly, all of the panelists remarked that public housing agencies and agents were not helpful in their journey to find safe and affordable housing.

Despite these various challenges, all of the panelists were able to provide stable housing for their families and have even extended help to other Black women experiencing housing instability. Pulling from their personal experiences and expertise, the panelists provided an array of solutions to increase access to equitable housing options. A goal of the town hall is that the commissioners present use the lived experiences and solutions of Black women to make Minnesota's housing market more affordable, accessible, and equitable.

## Criminal Justice: The Long-Term Impact & Trauma of Criminal Records

The criminal justice system, borne from the system of chattel slavery and the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, has policed, imprisoned, traumatized, and murdered millions of Black men, women, and youth for hundreds of years. While Black men have and continue to be overrepresented and over-victimized by and within the criminal justice system, Black women's “interaction[s] with police and the criminal justice system exposes them to distinct stressors that undermine their health and the health of their children,” said Leslie Redmond. Evidence of these stressors was shared by the criminal justice panelists: Valerie Castile, Leslie Redmond, Kandace Montgomery, and Olivia Miller.

“ Policing and prisons come from a system of slavery, directly. When we start to get real with that reality, then we can start to let go of the belief that these are systems that were meant to keep us safe or have any ability to keep Black people or any people safe.”

— Kandace Montgomery, Criminal Justice Panel Testifier

Collectively, these powerful women communicated a truth that is deeply held among Black people: the criminal justice system was not designed to keep Black women and people safe, nor was it created to meet their basic needs. Therefore, reforms to this system must entail the redirection of funds and resources into systems and practices that ensure Black people's safety and well-being. For Valerie Castile and Kandace Montgomery, such systems include education, housing, and mental health. By investing in



these particular public institutions instead of expanding the prison industrial complex, commissioners can begin to adequately address the racialized harms caused by the criminal justice system. Furthermore, testifiers challenged commissioners to expand their understanding of criminalization and the ways it intersects with other institutions of power, such as the child protection services system. Black mothers, with or without criminal records, face heightened rates of discrimination and policing by child protection case managers and staffers, which result in the disproportionate rates of familial separation in Black female-headed households.

While abolition of our racist criminal justice system seems unfathomable and/or unachievable, testifier Kandance Montgomery reiterated that dismantling this broken system must become the ultimate goal, because no system created to enslave and re-enslave Black people can ever be redeemed.

### **Health & Wellness: The Impact of Mental Health on Black Women & Girls**

Surviving, navigating, and fighting white America is a daily battle for Black women; therefore, Black women's mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional well-being is always under attack. "Systemic racial oppression has directly resulted in significant disparities in access to healthy foods and access to high-quality healthcare," said Dr. Joi Lewis. Subsequently, there are millions of Black women, girls, mothers, and caregivers who are forced to work, attend school, and/or care for their families and homes all while suffering, mentally,

“ Racism and sexism produce the kind of emotional violence that limits our access to high-quality health care. There's no post-traumatic stress disorder (for us) because there's no post. The trauma continues.

— Dr. Joi Lewis,  
Health & Wellness Panel Contextualizer

physically, emotionally, and spiritually. To contextualize how this issue manifests in the lives of Black women and girls in Minnesota, Jasmine Boudah, Shimarrion Daily, Marie Flowers, and Dr. Joi Lewis were invited to share their personal experiences and expertise as panelists.

From the panelists' personal and professional accounts, it is clear that Minnesota's health care system and health care providers typically overmedicate, mis/un-diagnose, or directly deny Black women and girls the culturally responsive treatment(s) and care they deserve. Black women and girls are thus forced to address their health-related issues and crises often in isolation. As Marie Flowers highlighted in her testimony, Black women and people will sometimes self-medicate, with drugs, alcohol, food, and other unhealthy practices; or, most Black women will simply "mask over [their] emotional health and wellness ... [because they are] taught to be strong [and] keep going." Black mothers can be particularly fearful of seeking mental health support as they worry that child protection services will be alerted, and their families will be separated.

Ultimately, the panelists charged commissioners to look beyond the "Strong Black Woman" trope, and recognize the humanity and needs of Black women and girls. To start supporting Black women in their pathways towards healing, panelists recommended that commissioners invest in culturally responsive care programs and treatments that will increase the number of Black therapists covered by public and private health insurance providers.

### **Education: Beyond the Books: Creating Spaces of Belonging for Black Girls**

Millions of Black children go to school every day and are repeatedly denied access to a quality education. Rather than be challenged academically, they are met with low expectations. Instead of being forgiven and provided second chances, they are harshly disciplined, suspended, or expelled. Their teachers do not look like them and they are only taught the history of their oppressors. This is the harsh reality that so many Black children endure, according to town hall panelists Laura and Mimi Balfour, Sabrina Mohamed, Shadow Roland, and Sondra Samuels.

Hardworking families are often forced to bear the brunt of our educational system's shortcomings. For example, when Laura's Balfour daughter, Mimi, was denied access to college preparatory courses, her family had to find and pay for a college counselor, a privilege they acknowledged that not all their peers had. This inequity proves especially true for immigrant parents and families, who not only lack resources to cover these unexpected expenses, but also possess little capacity to continually monitor and contest the wrongdoing of their children's schools. Subsequently, many Black

**“** *We do not have a child problem in this country; we have an adult problem — for we, the adults, have effectively created an educational system that, just like all systems, was designed during slavery to get the results it is currently getting. When it comes to Black girls and other students of color and Indigenous students, the results are persistently cataclysmic and life threatening!*

—Sondra Samuels, Education Panel Contextualizer

immigrant youth have to become their own educational advocates. For testifier Sabrina, she felt compelled to "go above and beyond" her teachers' and classmates' expectations to become her own academic champion while her mother worked three jobs and managed the family and household.

White parents and students are less likely to suffer the same challenges. Unreconciled racial segregation has resulted in Black and white children receiving a segregated education. Racial divisions have also resulted in the excessive policing and criminalization of Black youth. Shadow, a panel testifier, shared that her school day begins by walking through metal detectors and having her bags searched. Furthermore, Black students are disciplined more for experiencing and acting out their internal and external traumas. As illustrated by Shadow's testimony, many children come to school hungry, homeless, and/or abused. Rather than receive support and encouragement from their teachers and administrations, they are given detention, expelled, or demoted to less challenging academic courses.

To address these failings, panelists recommended that commissioners support policies and initiatives that will increase the number of teachers of color, mandate cultural training for all teachers and school staff, and reinstate ethnic studies as a core requirement. Additionally, decision-makers and school administrators should increase the number of counselors within schools and eliminate racialized barriers that prevent Black students from accessing advanced classes and academic enrichment opportunities.



# THE MN TRUST BLACK WOMEN AND GIRLS POLICY ACTION ROUNDTABLE

Unlike any other city that has cosponsored a town hall event with the African American Policy Forum, the MN Trust Black Women and Girls Town Hall created a model for change that ensured our efforts would go beyond a one-day summit. The MN Trust Black Women and Girls Town Hall asked all 16 commissioners that attended the town hall to agree to reconvene with the MN Trust Black Women and Girls Town Hall Committee for an intentional policy action roundtable 60 days after the summit.

During that time, commissioners were asked to exchange notes, discuss, and analyze their current policies and spheres of influence in order to share a one-page outline, of the action steps they are willing to take to support systemic solutions that address the most critical issues impacting Black women and girls. Nine of the 16 commissioners were able to attend the convening on June 17 to present their action plans.

## Housing

- ▶ **Kayla Schuchman**, City of St. Paul Housing Director
- ▶ **Debra Huskins**, Director of Hennepin County Emergency Assistance
- ▶ **Roxanne Kimball**, Community Planning and Economic Development Project Coordination Supervisor
- ▶ **Jennifer Ho**, MN Commissioner of Housing

The policy recommendations made by housing commissioners fell into two categories: wealth-building and systems. To expand the capacity for Black residents to build wealth, commissioners stated that they would try to diversify property ownership options for renters by partnering with other housing organizations and financial companies, such as local community land trust organizations. Through these partnerships, the housing commissioners hope to extend affordable and equitable funding and financing to renters of color. Additionally, Minneapolis and St. Paul's housing directors, Kayla Schuchman and Andrea Brennan, articulated that their elected leaders and respective housing departments will continue exploring how they can best partner with and financially support developers of color. As for systems-related recommendations, the commissioners stated that their departments and city officials will be reexamining current housing policies to identify the barriers, such as credit history check application fees, that prevent renters of color from accessing their housing resources. Furthermore, Minneapolis housing director, Andrea

Brennan, shared that the city is not only implementing a Tenant's Rights ordinance to protect renters from retaliation and exploitation, but also will strengthen its department's diversity and inclusion efforts by hiring more staff of color and hosting additional diversity training for staff. All commissioners noted that more research is needed to explore the intricacies of their city's housing and eviction crises. They intend to partner with the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA) to learn how best to ensure affordable and equitable housing for residents, especially those of color.

## Criminal Justice

- ▶ **Erica Schumacher**, Office of Ramsey County Attorney John J. Choi Strategic Initiatives and Community Relations
- ▶ **Sarah Walker**, Deputy Commissioner of Public Safety
- ▶ **John Harrington**, Commissioner of Public Safety
- ▶ **Mike Freeman**, Hennepin County City Attorney
- ▶ **Keith Ellison**, Minnesota Attorney General

Many of the criminal justice commissioners sought to focus on both existing and new efforts to support Black families and youth. For instance, the Ramsey County Attorney's office intends to partner with various community stakeholder groups to learn how they can best enact and improve the Family Reunification Act and the African American Family Preservation Act. The Hennepin County's Attorney office plans to examine the intersection between juvenile cases of youth of color and child protection. Additionally, Hennepin County Attorney Mike Freeman declared that his office will continue to partner with the MN Trust Black Women & Girls Town Hall Committee and other community groups not only to learn more about racial disparities within the local criminal justice system, but to also find pathways to extend contracts to appropriate community groups that can provide diversion services and programs to youth of color who hold juvenile cases. Minnesota Attorney Keith Ellison's commitment centered on legislative and reforms efforts, as well as outreach. Specifically, his office will continue to advocate for the firm enforcement of the Women's Economic Security Act (WESA) and will host community events that focus on a variety of criminal justice issues, such as expungement, and will help foster more representation of Black women at statewide decision-making tables.

## Health and Wellness

- ▶ Dr. Courtney Jordan Baechler, Assistant Commissioner of Health
- ▶ KayeAnn Mason, MN Association of Black Psychologists Psychotherapy Member
- ▶ Stella Whitney-West, CEO and President, NorthPoint Health and Wellness

Outreach and insurance recognition were key recommendations that health and wellness commissioners wish to advance. For the Black psychologists network, their efforts focus on outreach within African American communities, and include creating and circulating a mental health manual, offering free consultations, sponsoring mentors and internships, and providing grant writing support so that unlicensed community healers can receive financial support and institutional recognition. The Minnesota Department of Health and NorthPoint Health & Wellness also discussed the importance of collaborating to determine how non-licensed and nontraditional healers can be recognized and compensated by insurance companies.

## Education

Although education commissioners were not present during the policy action table, testifiers and contextualizers did provide key policy recommendations that could help address racial disparities within Minnesota's educational system (see above). Key recommendations are listed below:

- ▶ Develop a coherent system of early care and education that aligns, integrates, and coordinates a child's journey from birth through third grade, so children are ready to take on the learning tasks associated with fourth grade and beyond.
- ▶ Develop a pipeline of teachers of color to effectively teach students of color so that they learn, serve as role models, and hold high expectations for their students' success.
- ▶ Prioritize, support, and invest in results-driven initiatives to transform low-performing schools into high-quality teaching and learning environments in which children, including those from low-income families and high-poverty neighborhoods, are present, engaged, and educated to high standards.
- ▶ Designate funding to engage teachers in professional development connected with executive coaching, using a simulated immersion approach.





*Sometimes, at a young age, I had to convince myself that I was not better than them. I had to convince myself that because I had “good hair” and lighter skin, I was not better than girls with kinkier hair. When society grants you privileges and tells you that you are better than other black girls at a young age, what do you expect them to think?*

— Black woman, age 39

## THE HOPE COMMUNITY GIRLS EMPOWERMENT MOVEMENT YOUTH ACTION RESEARCH TEAM

Hope Community’s Girls Empowerment Movement (GEMS) Youth Action Research Team led by Dr. Brittany Lewis aims to empower young, high-school-age Black girls through purposeful community action informed by research questions that are relevant to their daily lives. This year’s Youth Action Research Team chose to research the topic of colorism. They define colorism as a practice based on skin complexion used within Black communities or behavior by white people that discriminates against dark-skinned Black people and tokenizes light-skinned Black people.

They argued that it is an understudied research area that has grave impacts on the health and well-being of Black women and girls, creating negative experiences with long-term impacts on self-identity. Their central research question asked: how does colorism, in and outside the Black community, impact the health and well-being of Black women and girls? To examine this question, they created a survey to understand how early experiences with colorism shaped a person’s self-identity and relationships.

The Youth Action Research Team revealed that most Black women and girls navigate negative experiences of colorism in their lives. The team was challenged by the wide spectrum of experiences with colorism that differed from their own. For instance, one youth researcher was surprised to learn that a family member of an interviewee used skin bleaching cream. Lastly,

the team did not expect that people would interpret their experiences as positive or neutral even after sharing traumatizing stories. The team hopes that their research will create more awareness and motivate people, including parents and teachers, to challenge the language they use and hear that contributes to colorism. *Insight News* published the Youth Action Research Team’s research findings in the article, “Girl researchers explore colorism” (June 12, 2019).

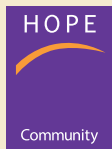




## PLANNING COMMITTEE MEMBERS



Brittany Lewis,  
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Girls Committee &  
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## FISCAL SPONSORS

Thank you, fiscal sponsors, for making the MN Trust Black Women and Girls Town Hall possible:

Women's Foundation of Minnesota  
African American Leadership Forum  
Hope Community Inc.  
McKnight Foundation

Minneapolis Foundation  
Girls In Action  
Center for Urban and Regional Affairs  
The Black Midwest Initiative

## PARTNERS

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### Individuals

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### Organizations

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