

BUILDING A COMMUNITY JUST FOR KIDS

Deaconess Foundation's Commitment to Racial Equity
By Rev. Starsky D. Wilson, President & CEO (April 4, 2017)

In April of 2014, more than 120 advocates, practitioners and academics gathered in St. Louis' Grand Center District to discuss research and their experiences helping children. They quickly realized there wasn't a common vision of the goal they all pursued. Problem solvers that they were, the team set out to craft a clear definition of child well-being.

In the end, they agreed that **child well-being** is when a little one grows and develops as kids their age (and stage) should, has what he or she needs to be a successful adult and is able to enjoy being a kid. The group went further to assert that well-being is the right of every child and it's the community's responsibility to create conditions for children to flourish.

These St. Louisans' audacious claims of children's rights and civic responsibility reach well beyond the commitments of our country: the only member of the United Nations not to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child. They also helpfully bind together the image of a playful, inquisitive child with the healthy function of a community. At Deaconess, we believe a just society is essential to achieve individual and community health.



Of course, **our society is not yet just.**

Fifty years ago today, on April 4, 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his "Beyond Vietnam" speech at the Riverside Church of New York. In it, he prophesied our inability to overcome the "giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism and militarism" as long as things are more important than people. With his "radical revolution of values" still incomplete, calls to place children at the center of public debate and to build public will to invest in their thriving go unanswered. Instead, well-resourced, well-positioned interests skip our children in line accumulating things for themselves by perpetuating King's terrible triplets.

Persistent militarism is reflected by easy access to guns, disproportionate youth contact with police and a system of mass incarceration that King could have never imagined. The extreme materialism of a select few leaves masses of parents with full-time jobs to raise children in poverty without comprehensive health care, holding out the hope of mobility through higher education while cranking up the cost and kicking the legs of public education out from under them. Meanwhile, the internalized impact and physical trauma of structural racism shorten many of their young lives as they struggle to walk through forgotten neighborhoods with shoulders square and heads held high.

Scholarship has advanced since King's speech. We can now speak scientifically - as well as morally - to attest that upstream social determinants, like education, income and racial discrimination, impact

our kids' health. To be clear, there are significant gaps in civic infrastructure, resources and power that *inhibit* the well-being of the 640,000 children in the St. Louis region. This reality, combined with our kids' position at the back of the line for positive public policy causes entrenched racial disparities in nearly every social category.

Today, children are the poorest demographic of people in the nation and our region. Yet, while one in five kids live in poverty, two in five Black children do. Although food insecurity is a rising challenge for everyone, a Hispanic child is twice as likely as to be malnourished than a White one. Black and brown youth are also more likely to be sentenced to out-of-school suspensions, placing them on fast tracks to fill prison cells and the pockets of the privateers who profit from them. These racial disparities put more than our kids in jeopardy. They make our community fragile.

According to Census Bureau data, in 2014 there were more than 20 million children under the age of five years old living in the United States and 50.2 percent of them were people of color. More than half of the nation's children are expected to be a part of a minority race or ethnic group within the next three years.

Under-educated, over-incarcerated and malnourished children of color equate to an ignorant, imprisoned and emaciated America.

Over the last half-century, we've proven our inability to prioritize our children. **Now is the time to build a community that is just for kids.** This is precisely what Deaconess Foundation has committed to accomplish.

Taking direction from that cadre of well-informed child advocates, we're focusing our work on increasing our community's commitment, civic infrastructure and power that can be deployed and leveraged for kids. We are more clear than ever, though, that we can only accomplish a vision of child well-being by taking the journey through racial equity.

We've spent much of the last year learning about ourselves and others, clarifying our vision and refining our strategy. Our first lesson and commitment is that we will be "Just for Kids." Justice has been the first stated value of Deaconess for years and child well-being is not a new focus. But, to be "Just for Kids" means something more.

First, being Just for Kids means being "**only**" for them. The children of metropolitan St. Louis are the moral owners of our mission. As such, we owe them an account for the real, relational and human capital placed in our care. Our real capital includes our investment portfolio, the grants and funding commitments we make from the portfolio and the Deaconess Center for Child Well-being currently under construction.



In 2016, we strengthened our socially responsible investment policy. We've increased investment in firms with healthy records of worker

rights and environmental sustainability, divested from companies that profit from weapons, the prison industrial complex or the subjugation of people in Palestine and set goals for the participation of minority investment managers. Our funding opportunities will support community organizing and non-profit advocacy for children's issues and include mission-related investments to increase access to capital for community development financial institutions that serve their families. The Center for Child Well-being is well on pace to surpass (and in some cases double) local goals for minority and women's participation.



Human and relational capital will follow suit. The deep resources of connection with and knowledge from the faith community (specifically the United Church of Christ), social sector partners, volunteers and staff will be aligned to advocate for our kids' benefit. We will choose them over any other relationships, powers, influencers or interests and reject alignment with any individual, initiative or institution that does not prioritize their health, voice and flourishing.

Ends do not justify means. Good grants can not absolve extreme materialism for us any more than officer outreach can make up for departmental militarism in our communities.

Building a community that is "Just for Kids" also means **assuring situational fairness**. For years, Deaconess Foundation has envisioned a community that values the health and well-being of all children and gives priority attention to the most vulnerable. Today, we add that this community can only exist if the allocation of power and distribution of resources, benefits, opportunities and burdens are not predictable, nor determinable by race. In short, if it is racially equitable.

To accomplish this vision, we pursue child well-being through public policy and racial equity.

In the context of a metropolitan region, getting to fairness in daily life means swimming upstream to disrupt policies that make racial disparities in our classrooms and neighborhoods possible, while offering innovative alternatives. These types of philanthropic investments have a leveraging effect, returning \$115 in public benefit for each dollar provided. Deaconess' policy agenda will result in all children enjoying access to early childhood education, just treatment under the law, comprehensive health care and family economic mobility.

Perhaps our greatest tool on this journey will be the systematic application of a racial equity impact analysis to decision-making and grant making. Our staff, board of trustees and community advisory board have all been trained in the effective use of common language, tools and communications to advance a racial equity agenda.

This will take all of us. And more than us. For our accountability and our children's sake, join us on the journey. The only healthy community is one built **just for kids**.

**RESOURCES INFORMING THE
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Mackinnon, Anne, Julie Quiroz, and Lori Villarosa, "Grantmaking with a Racial Equity Lens," Grantcraft, May 2007, www.grantcraft.org/guides/grantmaking-with-a-racial-equity-lens.

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Ranghelli, Lisa, "Leveraging Limited Dollars: How Grantmakers Achieve Tangible Results by Funding Policy and Community Engagement," National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, January 2012, www.ncrp.org/publication/leveraging-limited-dollars.

Riesman, Jane, Anne Gienapp, and Sarah Stachowiak, "A Guide to Measuring Advocacy and Policy," Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2007, www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/aecf-aguidetomeasuringpolicyandadvocacy-2007.pdf

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"Smarter Philanthropy for Greater Impact: Rethinking How Grantmakers Support Scale," Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, February 2014, www.geofunders.org.

"Systems Grantmaking Resource Guide," Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, February 2016, www.geofunders.org.

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