

Organizers are gathering input from a wide variety of stakeholders to identify greatest needs and build trust.

In August 2020, the National Urban League announced the creation of the Indianapolis African American Quality of Life Initiative, a place-based effort to address decades of disparities in education, employment, housing, health outcomes and economic well-being that have affected African Americans in Indianapolis.

Funded by a \$100 million Lilly Endowment grant to the National Urban League, the initiative is designed to encourage collaboration between the National Urban League, the Indianapolis Urban League

“This initiative represents a historic opportunity to build a model for other communities to emulate,” said National Urban League President and CEO Marc H. Morial when the grant was announced. “The economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic has wrought unprecedented destruction on Black urban communities, many of which never recovered from the Great Recession, and it will take an unprecedented approach to rebuild and revitalize them. This initiative will seek to combine the resources, infrastructure, expertise and passion of the Indianapolis public, private and civic institutions in a way that could have a profound effect not only on Indianapolis’ economic future, but also on the national recovery.”

Data about life in Indianapolis reflect inequality experienced by Black residents that can have a cascading effect on educational attainment, employment opportunities and economic security and mobility. According to IUL:

Initiative Focuses on Quality of Life in Indianapolis’ Black Community

(IUL) and the African American Coalition of Indianapolis (the Coalition). Together, the organizations are working to identify areas of greatest need and the programs, policies and other ventures that will make meaningful improvements in the daily lives and future prospects of Black residents in Indianapolis. Through the initiative, the National Urban League will make grants in Indianapolis to support the most promising efforts—including collaborations—designed to lead to lasting change.

- **Twenty-eight percent of Indianapolis’ 250,000 Black residents live in poverty.**
- **Homeownership among Black residents in Indianapolis declined from 46 percent in 2007 (before the start of the Great Recession) to 31 percent in 2020.**
- **An estimated 82,000 Black Indianapolis residents live in food deserts—neighborhoods with low access to healthy, affordable food.**
- **Seventy percent of Black students in Indianapolis fail to pass K-12 standardized tests.**



It is against this backdrop that the initiative is taking shape. During the early months of the five-year grant period, the initiative has been focused on gathering input from a broad cross section of Indianapolis' diverse Black community. The goals of that outreach: refine the priorities IUL and the Coalition have framed for the initiative—education, employment, affordable housing and homeownership, health and wellness and business development and entrepreneurship—and build buy-in and trust.

IUL's president and CEO Anthony Mason and the Coalition's chairman Willis K. Bright Jr. are co-managers of the initiative. Working with two Indianapolis consulting firms—Engaging Solutions LLC and Karlin J & Associates—initiative leaders have connected with approximately 700 people during community conversations and one-on-one interviews with stakeholders. They include leaders in education, employment, community development, neighborhood revitalization, public health and religious life. Also part of the process was the dispatch of 'community ambassadors' who have reached out to individuals, families and organizations from neighborhoods that were underrepresented in community meetings and stakeholder conversations. For this initiative to be successful, according to Mason, people from diverse generations, economic backgrounds and geographic locations across the city need to be heard.

"At this moment in time, the reach has to be more than the usual suspects. Because if you talk to emerging leaders or individuals who have felt like they have been excluded in the past, they will tell you their concerns have not been represented," he says. "They have not been heard."

Participants span five generations, from the young adults of Generation Z to the so-called Silent Generation in their 70s and 80s. They come from different parts of the city, spanning high-poverty neighborhoods to affluent suburbs. And those who are connected with civic and community organizations represent a spectrum of groups: long-established ones such as Indiana Black Expo and the Indianapolis NAACP and newer grassroots organizations, including Purpose 4 My Pain, which supports individuals affected by gun violence, and Circle Up Indy, an economic empowerment organization based in the Martindale-Brightwood neighborhood.

Participants are bringing different perspectives about what life is like in this city. "This initiative needs all of their perspectives—and more—to be successful," Mason says.

Bright adds that if the initiative improves opportunities for Black residents, the whole city will benefit. For example, he suggests that efforts to support greater academic achievement among Black students can lead to educational improvements in Indianapolis that will make a difference in the lives of all students.

"Improving the condition of any sector that has been marginalized in the community will have positive ripple effects," Bright says. "As people's lives become better, they have far better opportunities and are more inclined to contribute to the greater community."

By the end of summer 2021, initiative leaders plan to issue the initiative's first round of requests for proposals. They anticipate that initial grants will be made by year's end.

As important as grants will be to help improve lives in Indianapolis, Mason believes that the initiative has another objective: developing a culture of trust so that hope can flourish.

"We want this initiative to foster a sense of hope and aspiration so that people can be prepared to take advantage of the opportunities that are to come," Mason says. "I believe this process we're embarking on can go a long way in creating that sense of trust. Trust leads to hope and a good faith belief that something better is on the horizon, something better than what people have experienced to date."

AT A GLANCE

National Urban League: Founded in 1910 and headquartered in New York City, the National Urban League is a civil rights organization whose mission is to help African Americans and others in underserved communities achieve social parity, economic self-reliance and civil rights. It promotes economic empowerment through education, improving access to housing, community development, workforce development, entrepreneurship, health and quality of life.

Indianapolis Urban League: Established in 1965 as an affiliate of the National Urban League, the Indianapolis Urban League is a non-partisan, community-based social services and civil rights organization with a mission to help African Americans and other disadvantaged people achieve social and economic equality. Lilly Endowment has made grants to the Indianapolis Urban League since 1967, supporting various programs, including those focused on education, workforce development and youth.

African American Coalition of Indianapolis: Founded in 2000, the African American Coalition of Indianapolis is a non-partisan collaboration of African-American civic, social, professional, service and community organizations working to strengthen the engagement of African Americans in civic life and in the local, state and national political process.

● Anthony Mason (left) and Willis K. Bright Jr. are co-managers of the Indianapolis African American Quality of Life Initiative.