Boys and Men of Color Thought Leadership Convening: Report & Call to Action

I. Convening Objectives

On December 7, 2016, thirty-two leaders from a range of human service organizations convened to reflect on the sector's existing and emerging role in increasing well-being of boys and men of color in the United States. Participants included direct service providers, research and advocacy groups, national membership organizations, and philanthropic foundations. The group set out to share the unique perspectives of the participating organizations, identify the challenges and opportunities for strategic action, and develop the building blocks for value-added strategies for the future. A complete roster of participants is enclosed.

II. Keynote Address: *"For a Time Such as Now"*

Blair Taylor, CEO of My Brother's Keeper Alliance, provided a keynote address which stressed the importance of this moment in time while reminding us that, despite the often discouraging news headlines, significant progress has been made, and the foundation laid by the leaders of the civil rights movement of the 1960s provides hope for the future. However, as partisan division grows deeper, "we, as a nation, must engage one another differently."

To achieve this engagement, Mr. Taylor stressed three important themes that would continue to emerge throughout the day's dialogue. First, we must act with urgency while maintaining our focus. To begin, human service leaders must engage the new Administration and Congress as soon as possible to raise the profile of "opportunity youth" in our country. Second, we must galvanize around the concept of recapturing our human potential. Of the 5.4 million opportunity youth in our country, more than fifteen percent already have the skills and motivation to be either in school or employed. We simply have to find ways to tap into the value of that talent. Finally, we must "collaborate until it hurts." The nonprofit sector must work together to engage employers, particularly corporate America, to join our conversation.

Mr. Taylor detailed one of the ways that My Brother's Keeper Alliance currently engages with youth of color throughout the country. More than 1,100 young people attended the *Pathways to Success: Boys and Young Men of Color Opportunity Summit* in Detroit on November 14, 2016. Forty-two employers conducted almost 700 interviews resulting in 350 job offers. The success of events like this can help corporations recognize how the talent present within our country's urban populations can be a driving force for corporate America in the coming decades.

The human service sector possesses the expertise, willingness, and access to the youth talent pipeline to elevate the profile of boys and men of color. In collaboration with public and private employers we can influence large-scale systems change.

III.   Shared Discussion

The bulk of the day involved two shared discussion sessions, each beginning with short presentations from selected panelists to address key questions and propose potential solutions. These concepts were then further developed by all participants who were divided into four small groups. The sections that follow identify the common themes that emerged during each session and the starting points for collective action moving forward.

a.   "Community, Common Ground, Context"

The morning session focused on community, common ground, and the current cultural, economic, and political context for advancing well-being for boys and men of color. The panelists shared their unique perspectives about: (i) what they are learning from their work, (ii) how their strategies and priorities are changing, and (iii) what role the human service sector can play with respect to boys and men of color moving forward.

Young men of color continue to face historical and generational trauma that requires a collective understanding and compassion to resolve. One obstacle slowing progress toward equity is the current state of the criminal and juvenile justice system in our country. Collective resources should flow to community-based services aimed at rehabilitation and preventing incarceration. While several models have shown success, the emerging question is how to scale programs to create systems-wide change.

For example, the report *Beyond Bars: Keeping Young People Safe at Home and Out of Youth Prisons* provides a blueprint for communities to improve outcomes for justice-involved youth through evidence-informed, community-based alternatives to the outdated youth prison model.[1] The services identified in the report can be tailored to the assets of a particular community and have been shown to decrease the likelihood of re-arrest and reduce racial disparities in the juvenile justice system. Similarly, Urban Alliance has built a strong evidence-based program that provides job skills training and internships for urban youth.[2] The program serves the dual purpose of increasing the likelihood that participants will go on to attend college and illustrating to employers that a driving force behind the underrepresentation of men of color in the corporate world is often as straightforward as the lack of access to opportunity.

Human service organizations can work together to empower the youth we serve and develop a narrative that emphasizes rehabilitation and restoration rather than retribution through incarceration. At the same time, the human services sector should position itself as a model of equity to the government and corporate sector stakeholders we seek to engage. To ensure success, the sector also must be willing to take a strong point of view on certain issues where consensus within our coalition has developed.

Following the panelists' presentations, each table facilitator asked the members of the small discussion groups what issues identified by the panel resonated most and what strategies might be employed to mobilize around them.

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[1] National Human Services Assembly. (2016). *National Collaboration for Youth Releases Roadmap, Calls on Policymakers to Invest in Community-Based Alternatives to Youth Incarceration* [Press release]. Retrieved from http://www.nationalassembly.org/uploads/documents/BeyondBarsPressRelease.pdf

[2] Urban Alliance. High School Internship. Retrieved January 18, 2017, from https://theurbanalliance.org/our-programs/high-school-internship/

i. Reform Criminal Justice

The criminal justice system was frequently cited as the most salient example of how certain structures are "rigged against" boys and men of color in the United States. As Dr. W. Wilson Goode noted, we call our structure for dealing with crime "a correctional system, but is has evolved into a punishment system."

Reforming criminal justice is often viewed as a daunting challenge because systems have relied on incarceration as a response to delinquency, especially for boys of color. Reforming the criminal and youth justice systems means ending this practice, closing youth prisons and redirecting those dollars to community-based interventions that demonstrate more evidence of success than the prison model. As a result, systemic change will require not only a change in philosophy, but also a commitment to changing how systems spend their dollars. Specifically, the systemic change will have the greatest affect on young boys of color, requires redirecting dollars away from youth prison and towards prevention, rehabilitation, and re-entry programs. To increase the odds of success, these community-based programs should be a combination of grassroots community groups and those designed with scalability and sustainability as top priorities, so that young people with an array of needs and risk levels can be safely served in the community.

Further, systemic change will not work unless we reach the right stakeholders with the right message. Funding for the prison system in the United States comes from a variety of sources, public and private, as well as state and federal. As a result, the argument to "defund prisons" might lack the sophistication necessary to persuade lawmakers from a district where the top employer might be a federal block grant-funded prison. One option might be to focus instead on evidence showing how redirecting dollars to programs that increase job opportunities, promote community safety, and revitalize neighborhoods, can increase well-being for everyone in the community. We also should work to redefine the public's understanding of "public safety" to include all the characteristics of a safe neighborhood, like good schools and green spaces, not just "law enforcement."

ii. Increase Employment Opportunity

Increasing employment opportunity for boys and men of color also resonated with the small groups. Initially, the human service sector should continue to define the desired outcomes and meaning of terms like "access to opportunity." For example, a job, itself, is access to an opportunity, but also an intervention that can ultimately lead to better long-term outcomes for members of the community. The sector also must creatively engage employers to increase equity for boys and men of color while appealing to those employers' bottom lines. Social enterprise investors should consider funding full-scale neighborhood revitalization projects, "minority-owned" small businesses, and programs that connect youth with older adults.

Finally, increasing access to opportunity for the most "vulnerable" and "at-risk" should be in concert with maintaining, or improving, access to opportunity for young people who are already succeeding. Boys and young men of color who are currently achieving also should have access to tailored supports that will help them maximize their individual strengths and reach their full potential.

iii. Change the Narrative

All four groups identified changing the narrative surrounding boys and men of color as a primary tactic to achieve the outcomes we seek. Despite incremental progress, there are still fundamental assumptions that a new narrative should aim to correct. For example, the sector should promote preventive and rehabilitative alternatives to the current juvenile and criminal justice system that is premised on addressing crime through punishment. Further, the narrative surrounding boys and men of color should focus on inclusiveness and avoid paternalistic assumptions that members of the community lack the expertise and skills to be integral partners in fostering systemic change.

Many also felt that the emotional appeal of the "untapped potential" of boys and men of color is often overlooked due to an over-emphasis on data and statistics. At the same time, overreliance on individual success stories can shift the focus away from the importance of systemic change. Participants shared a consensus that evidence-based arguments, and data, must be woven together with a thematic story that emphasizes the human potential that is waiting to be tapped. Advocates also must strike a balance between "the promise and the peril" confronting boys and men of color. That is, championing progress made by the sector will ring hollow without also acknowledging that boys and men of color still face ongoing and inherent inequities, even as systems begin to improve.

Decisions about which narrative approach we take should be rooted in prevailing cognitive research on public perceptions about race, equity, and social justice. Changing the narrative is more than a mere "rebranding campaign," it should aim to broaden the public's understanding about the systemic challenges facing boys and men of color today. Human service experts also can help bridge the gap in understanding that often causes policymakers to perpetuate false choices. For example, when we advocate to fund programs that increase diversity in our communities and workforce, we should explain how the return on those investments outweighs the costs of maintaining the inequitable status quo. Related social movements can provide lessons for how a new narrative can inspire cultural and systemic change. What tactics have been successful for the LGBTQ community? What are activists in the Black Lives Matter movement learning?

iv. Collaborate

In light of the shared sense of urgency within the group, increased collaboration among our network of organizations supporting the interests of boys and men of color is imperative. We must be willing to "broaden the tent" by bringing new stakeholders such as corporations, public employers, seniors, young people and rural communities to the table. A fundamental premise for all collaborative efforts should include input directly from the community.

Developing a shared agenda is one potential starting point for collaboration, particularly in the area of policy and advocacy. For example, a coalition of organizations could establish a key point of entry, or top priority issue, that all organizations can agree upon. Given the complexity of the issues boys and men of color face, finding this common ground can build momentum. Once a shared agenda has been established, subsequent conversations will begin to reconcile the remaining differences among perspectives and tactics. For instance, what balance should be struck between "evidence-based" versus "community-driven" arguments, and to what extent do those kinds of solutions overlap, or conflict?

v. Evidence-based Programs & Scaling

Most groups highlighted how an increased demand for evidence-based programs acts as a double-edged sword. Service models backed by rigorous evaluation and a measurable correlation to positive outcomes are more likely to generate support from funders and policymakers. However, over-emphasizing evidence incentivizes a one-size-fits-all approach and may limit experimentation and tailoring at the local level.

As many groups noted, the answer to widespread systems change is not monolithic. In many cases, community-centered services are less likely to have a strong evidence base because funding for rigorous evaluation is less readily available. Further, programs designed using the existing strengths and assets of a particular community may not translate well to another geographic location, or from the local to state or national level. This limits the scalability of successful models. To be sure, some programs at the local level that meet rigorous evaluation standards are even intentionally designed *not* to be scaled.

The human service sector's strategy for collaboration should highlight the importance of organizations to provide high-quality service while also finding ways to foster systemic change.

b. "The State of the Possible: Building Blocks and Real Time Opportunities"

The afternoon discussion addressed the tangible actions that participants could take as leaders of their organizations and in collaboration with new and existing stakeholders. In light of the key areas of focus identified during the morning session, the afternoon panel proposed ideas for: (i) the kinds of institutional, cultural, and leadership changes that must take place; (ii) the best practices that are working in the present; and (iii) the actions we can take moving forward.

In the short term, we should look to examples where communities have already laid a strong foundation for systemic change. The Campaign for Black Male Achievement recently released a report ranking the top fifty cities in the U.S. based on engagement with boys and men of color.[3] Follow-up research might include an impact evaluation of a subset of these cities to measure the correlation between active engagement and positive outcomes. Ultimately, one, or a combination, of these cities could serve as a model of service that other urban centers can follow.

For widespread change to occur, we also must focus on reforming the public education system. Preventive services begin with strong leadership and mentoring, which may be delivered through the public school system. Existing institutions, with a strong history of promoting racial and social justice, also provide the infrastructure through which innovation can thrive. Organizations like the YMCA can leverage their affiliate networks to deliver high-quality services at the community level.[4] The first YMCA for people of color in the United States was founded by a freed slave in Washington, DC in 1853. Since

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[3] Grimes, E.K., Morris, J., Dholakia, A. (2016). The Promise of Place: Cities Advancing Black Male Achievement. Retrieved from Campaign for Black Male Achievement Website: http://cityindex.blackmaleachievement.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/CBMA_CityRprt_web_P3.pdf

[4] Building Educated Leaders for Life (BELL). Summer Learning. Retrieved January 17, 2017, from http://www.experiencebell.org/our-programs/summer-learning; Purpose Built Communities, http://purposebuiltcommunities.org/who-we-are/

then, the Y has remained a cornerstone for meeting the social needs of communities regardless of gender, race, religion, or nationality.

The afternoon small group discussions were directed toward further defining the ideal interventions, outputs, and outcomes for each thematic area identified throughout the day, and toward proposing concrete actions that are within the capacity of our network.

i. Historical Context

A prominent theme throughout the discussion was the importance of including historical context in our narrative development and advocacy work. Building "rites of passes" into programs serving boys and men of color is one way to incorporate this history. In contrast to many cultures and religions, the shared history of boys and men of color is often not a positive one. We should strive to promote the stories of successful leaders of color throughout history and acknowledge the importance of those who were the "first" to hold a respective position in their community or the country.

Ultimately, young men of color could participate in rites of passage that provide a sense of personal empowerment and connection with their community that will benefit them as they continue into adulthood. The sector can engage with the faith community to foster this approach and begin to incorporate rites of passage into existing mentoring programs.

ii. Education & Leadership

One identified step toward developing a better pipeline of talent from the boys and men of color community is to counter the prevailing "deficit model."[5] That is, educators often make assumptions rooted in race, culture, socio-economic status, or other arbitrary factors to "explain" the behavior and achievement level of students of color. Evidence suggests that these false assumptions contribute to a disproportionate number of students of color being placed in special education and receiving less rigorous curriculum. At their worst, these assumptions become a self-fulfilling prophecy as students of color become underprepared for the next stage of life.

The human service sector should work to correct these assumptions and develop a pipeline of leadership from within the community of boys and men of color. For example, part of our shared agenda could be to develop young men of color for specific positions of leadership and more directly support young men of color to run for local public office to begin shifting the political leadership structure.

IV.   Issue Agenda & Potential Actions:

This report focuses on the issues that comprised the majority of the discussion during the convening. Nonetheless, many issues were raised that time permitted us to touch on only briefly. The following, non-exhaustive, list summarizes the issue areas and potential collective actions that were identified by participants throughout the day, all of which are open for continued discussion:

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[5] Harry B., Klingner J. (2007). Discarding the Deficit Model. Retrieved from Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) Website: http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/feb07/vol64/num05/Discarding-the-Deficit-Model.aspx

Issue Area	Potential Actions
(A) Narrative Development	• Incorporate links across multiple generations into the narrative. • Use cognitive science to develop a narrative that resonates with the wider public audience. • Leverage the National Human Services Assembly's existing Reframing Initiative. • Incorporate organizational "legacy narrative" (*e.g.*, YMCA).
(B) Funding & Support	• Find leaders who are willing to make bold decisions to move dollars into programs that benefit boys and men of color (BMOC). • Seek more flexible funding from foundations for "operational activities." • Create social enterprise opportunities in the BMOC community.
(C) Public Policy & Advocacy	• Be explicit to external partners about the implicit, structural, and systemic factor of race in our society. • Establish separate federal and state advocacy coalitions. • Advocate for more "promising practices" to be included as approved practices for federal block grants. • Pool advocacy resources to serve smaller organizations. • Understand and respond to contrasting partisan perspectives.
(D) Collaboration	• Establish a shared strategic agenda. • Define quantifiable goals for success. • Establish a specific "ask" for allied organizations. • Acknowledge the links between the education, employment, and criminal justice systems.
(E) Evidence-informed Programming	• Map youth development at national level; build toward local mapping. • Develop a tracking system/registry for evidence-based interventions and research that are specific to BMOC. • Implement a "navigator" approach to tailor services at the family level. • Monitor outcomes through consumer surveys that meet national evidence-based standards.
(F) Employment Opportunity	• Pledge to hire BMOC and increase diversity of nonprofit boards. • Provide "implicit bias" and "cultural competence" training for nonprofit sector leadership.
(G) Criminal Justice	• Use narrative to redefine "public safety." • Dismantle the youth prison model and promote community-based prevention and rehabilitation services using existing community assets to reduce the number of youth in prison or out-of-home placements. • Reform state policies to strengthen employability for formerly incarcerated individuals. • End the practice of sending youth to adult court and adult prison.
(H) Education	• Develop "rites of passage" programs. • Challenge "deficit-based" assumptions in the educational system.
(I) Health	• Explore how youth with experiential trauma can suffer from PTSD, and how mental health services can be more accessible.

V. Conclusion & Call to Action:

As the day's discussion made clear, we have much work to do, and as many of the participants remarked, the time is now. The current landscape may prove challenging to maneuver, but that is all the more reason to compel us to action. There is a critical role for the human service sector to take in this work, and we at the National Human Services Assembly are committed to seeking resources and partners to address the following thematic areas of collective action:

a. **Shared Agenda and a New Narrative**–the National Assembly would convene a group of organizations to develop and distribute a shared strategic agenda focusing on two to three key priorities for increasing well-being for boys and men of color. The agenda also could include tangible short and long-term goals for the sector. The National Assembly also will explore how the research supporting the *Building Well-being Narrative*, and potential new research, could be applied toward changing the public's understanding about the challenges facing boys and men of color.

b. **Organizational Excellence on Equity**–the National Assembly would facilitate a campaign to increase the nonprofit sector's internal commitment to race equity. This effort could include pledges to increase diversity in staff, leadership, and boards of directors, as well as, leveraging our combined purchasing power to support enterprises that align with the policies we support.

c. **Mapping the Field**–the National Assembly proposes to lead a research initiative to map the field of programs serving boys and men of color nationally. The initiative could include convening multiple coalitions at the state level, spearheaded by Assembly members, affiliates, and allied organizations (*e.g.*, APHSA, NACo, NGA, NCSL). A phase of this initiative would be to develop a template for communities to follow in establishing their own network of services for boys and men of color.

d. **Evidence-based and Evidence-informed Programs**–the National Assembly would develop a "certification system" for evidence-based services and interventions that specifically target boys and men of color. The National Assembly could serve as a clearinghouse for promising interventions that might not yet meet the standards of existing registries, particularly community-based programs. This initiative also could take the form of an "innovation exchange" for sharing information affecting our work across our networks.

We look forward to working with each of you to ensure that every person has the opportunity to reach his or her full potential.