

# Welcome

**Angela Glover Blackwell**

**EQUITY  
SUMMIT  
2015**

All in for inclusion, justice, and prosperity  
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# **Achieving Equity:** Just and Fair Inclusion for All

**Dear Friends,**

Welcome to Equity Summit 2015!

We gather at a thrilling time. Equity leaders are poised to realize significant results during this pivotal moment in the nation's history. As the country continues to focus on growing inequality and bolts toward becoming majority people of color, issues of race, inclusion, and equity have leapt to the forefront of public and political discourse. Dynamic grassroots movements—including Black Lives Matter, the Dreamers, Fight for \$15, and We The Protesters—have mobilized thousands of people to action and advocacy, youth of color and immigrants especially. The movements have galvanized millions more to educate themselves about issues of longstanding anguish to communities of color, such as the destructive forces of concentrated poverty, police brutality, and mass incarceration. There is growing consensus that equity is a win for everyone, not a zero-sum game, and it is essential for a prosperous future.

The question is how to seize and stretch this moment. How can we ignite the moral imagination of the nation with a vision of a society in which all residents, including low-income people of color, prosper and reach their full potential? How should equity leaders translate the possibilities of this moment into political power, policy change, and economic transformation that expand participation and ownership for communities that have been left behind? How will advocates and activists unite across issues, causes, constituencies, and lines of identity, marshaling our collective strength to knock down the structures that block opportunity and build pathways to success for all communities?

Change is within reach. The nation has elected the most diverse crop of political leaders in history, at all levels of government. Progressive mayors have swept into office in cities across the country. These victories reflect the growing political power of the emerging of-color majority. They also are a testament to the pervasive desire in America—across race, ethnicity, gender, age, faith, sexual orientation, geography, and class—to address the staggering inequality that threatens our economy and our democracy. The nation needs even more elected officials who represent the face of the future and the aspirations of all.

But these promising shifts hold two cautionary lessons. First, demography is not destiny; diverse representation in politics is critical but not sufficient to achieve the right policies to lead the nation to a robust, equitable future. Second, progressive policymakers will take America in the right direction only if they address racial dynamics head-on, target resources and investments at communities with the greatest needs, and engage those communities in crafting solutions.

These realities should not discourage equity leaders but instead set the agenda for action. They must propel us to be specific about goals and results, redouble efforts, strengthen collaborations, enlarge our tent, and reaffirm our commitment to the long, hard work of societal transformation. Equity leaders can make sure that policymakers at all levels, everywhere, embrace an agenda aimed explicitly and intentionally at achieving racial equity and economic inclusion, by joining together and building upon our successes.

And there are many.

At the last national equity summit, in 2011, PolicyLink presented a new framework that described equity as an economic imperative. We argued that in an increasingly diverse nation, one challenged to find new avenues to prosperity in a hyper-competitive globalized landscape, equity is a superior model for growth. Many people were uncertain about extending the rationale for equity, which has always been framed as a matter of social justice and morality, to the cold, utilitarian demands of the market. But in just four years, the idea that inequality hampers growth and conversely that equity accelerates it, has gained wide acceptance in policy circles, academia, the business community, and the equity movement.

The idea is inspiring fresh thinking, new collaborations, innovative strategies, and important policy changes. For example, private-public partnerships around the country are leveraging investments in affordable housing, grocery stores, green infrastructure, and other resources for health and opportunity in disinvested neighborhoods. Philanthropy is joining as partners to address

racial inequality. These efforts reflect smart, holistic approaches to advance and support economic resilience, environmental sustainability, a culture of health, and meaningful community engagement—the pillars of thriving communities. The Obama Administration’s groundbreaking fair housing rule gives local residents and advocates a powerful new tool to fight persistent housing segregation, reverse inequities in neighborhood investment, and build communities of opportunity for all.

There also is new thinking about how to harness the skills and talents of all in a restructured economy that puts a premium on knowledge, creativity, and entrepreneurship. As people of color, youth especially, drive population growth, visionary initiatives such as #YesWeCode are preparing them to drive economic growth as well, as highly skilled technology innovators, workers, and leaders. Targeted business accelerators are helping entrepreneurs of color and women tap into the networks and investment circles that are critical to launch and grow a new generation of diverse startups.

The economic imperative of equity also has spurred momentum for policy change on issues that have frustrated and angered low-income people and communities of color for years. Cities and states across the political spectrum have raised the minimum wage in their jurisdictions, in almost all cases with strong support from voters and business leaders, and more states and municipalities have mandated sick leave and family leave. These gains are particularly significant for women of color, who are overrepresented in minimum-wage jobs and often must choose between their health or the needs of a loved one and their livelihood. Determined organizing by coalitions of labor, community, and

faith groups has led to expanded workforce development, higher wages, stronger job protections, and safer working conditions in various industries and locales, including home care workers in Washington State, construction workers in Texas, and school food service workers in Los Angeles. These victories offer new models for reshaping the low-wage sectors driving job creation, especially for people of color and immigrants. They are models based on dignity, respect, decent wages, and opportunity at all rungs of the ladder.

Another set of salient policy examples comes from advocacy around boys and men of color. The work has moved the needle in crucial policy arenas while challenging the nation, from the White House down, to re-imagine the prospects and potential of these, too often marginalized, members of society. For instance, in New Orleans, business and civic leaders have joined with city officials in a far-reaching initiative to connect tens of thousands of African American men to jobs in the region's rapidly growing anchor institutions. Now more businesses are trying to join the effort because they want to do something about the city's glaring racial and economic inequities and they have to address their own workforce needs. In the words of a city official, "they want to be on the right side of history." In California, the Alliance for Boys and Men of Color has achieved important legislative and policy wins in local communities and statewide. Chief among these are reforms in harsh school disciplinary policies, which have pushed appalling numbers of Black and Latino students out of school. The work has engaged hundreds of young leaders, young women and men alike, and focused attention on the needs and potential of all youth of color. Meanwhile, to a degree unimaginable even a few years ago, public

will and bipartisan support are building nationally to reverse the policies of mass incarceration that have 2.4 million people, 60 percent of them people of color, currently locked behind bars, with devastating consequences for families and communities.

While the nation continues to search for ways to make sure all K-12 education is high quality, there is growing consensus that all children should enter school ready to learn and that 21st century education must extend beyond high school. Government leaders are finally addressing college affordability to cultivate the knowledgeable, skilled, diverse workforce that employers demand and that the country needs to compete and grow. The Tennessee Promise is leading by providing tuition-free attendance at all the state's community and technical colleges. The Obama Administration's \$60 billion community college plan would bring such urgently needed assistance to national scale.

Of course there is a long way to go on these fronts and many others. Egregious gerrymandering has given conservatives outsize power in state legislatures and Congress, and their intransigence on Capitol Hill has blocked progress on key equity issues that have broad public support, including immigration reform and raising the federal minimum wage. Voting rights are under assault. It took a series of outrageous high-profile killings of Black men by police—and furious activism on the streets—to wake up the nation to the widespread systemic abuse by law enforcement in communities of color. Drought, extreme storms, and flooding are intensifying with climate change, and the burdens fall heaviest on communities of color, which have crumbling infrastructure and fewer resources for resilience after decades of disinvestment.

And in resurgent cities—places on the cutting edge of economic innovation and demographic change—racial and economic disparities are widening instead of shrinking, derailing efforts to foster inclusion and shared prosperity. To counter this, PolicyLink is presenting a new initiative, All-In Cities. It builds upon our framing around equity and the economy to put forth a vision of equitable cities and develop a comprehensive policy agenda to create, support, and sustain them.

You will hear more about this and so much other exciting work over the next few days. I hope it inspires and challenges you to think deeply about priorities and strategies and perhaps even to step outside your comfort zone to capitalize on the opportunities in the emerging America. Making sure the next big American story is one of equity will require nimble forward-looking leaders able to set the agenda in a rapidly evolving economy and an ever-shifting political landscape. It will take broad, even unlikely alliances to drive the big, urgent work of societal transformation.

This historic juncture presents an exhilarating opportunity to shape the future. Together, we can create a nation that at last delivers on the promise of opportunity for all.

Onward,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Angela Blackwell', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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PolicyLink is a national research and action institute advancing economic and social equity by Lifting Up What Works®.

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