

Claiming Our Power, Shaping Our Destiny

A Message from Angela Glover Blackwell

Equity Summit 2018
Our Power. Our Future. Our Nation.
April 11–13, Chicago

A portrait of Angela Glover Blackwell, an older woman with short, curly grey hair, smiling gently. She is wearing a black turtleneck sweater, a necklace with a single pearl pendant, and large gold hoop earrings. Her hands are clasped in her lap. She is seated in a wooden chair with a blue fabric seat. The background consists of horizontal wooden slats.

Angela Glover Blackwell
CEO, PolicyLink

If ever there were questions about whether the fates of all in America are intertwined, or about the power of united action, this political hour has laid them to rest. Millions of people, young activists of color and women especially, have stepped forward to defend laws, fundamental rights, and foundational values. An intersectional movement—of immigrants, grassroots activists, movement veterans, outraged civic leaders, and more—has awakened people across the nation to state-sanctioned racial, religious, and gender persecution in all its guises, from immigrant deportations to mass incarceration of Black people, low-income men, especially. An exhilarating display of solidarity sent thousands of people racing to airports on a moment’s notice to stand with refugees, immigrants, and visitors from Muslim-majority countries who were abruptly and unconstitutionally barred from entering this country. The action spurred sustained protest, successful legal advocacy, and principled, courageous judicial rulings.

In 40 years of professional work for change, I have never seen so many people, across every line of identity, coalesce around a vision of inclusion, fairness, and dignity.

The challenge animating Equity Summit 2018 is how to seize and shape this hour. How can leaders channel the rage and passion of activists and a newly energized populace into an enduring movement for racial and economic equity? How can advocates continue to respond fiercely, in real time, to relentless right-wing assaults on progress, without diverting our attention, heart, soul, and best thinking from the big task of building a society that works for all? In a political and media culture that lurches

daily from crisis to manufactured crisis, how do organizers, advocates, and equity leaders stick to the long game: changing policies, systems, politics, and possibilities for millions who have been left behind?

The forces molding the future—demographic shifts, staggering inequality, economic and technological change, climate threats—are intensifying. The need is growing for action that fosters opportunity, shared prosperity, environmental sustainability, and resilience. As the challenges mount and the political opposition stiffens, the ambitions of the equity movement must soar, not shrink. Now is the time to articulate bold intentions, set far-reaching goals, formulate transformational ideas, and build alliances—including unlikely ones—to push those ideas forward. It is the moment to reclaim control of our agenda and our future.

Seizing this moment requires radical imagination, a term you will hear at the Summit. Radical imagination fuels the will and strengthens the ability of activists to upend old assumptions and topple the economic, social, and civic structures that hold millions of people back. Radical imagination can spark the creation of equitable economies, a new social order, and sweeping public policies that build and sustain a truly inclusive society. Radical imagination means thinking big, demanding better, and redefining the terms of the struggle to get there.

An inspiring example is the burgeoning campaign for a permanent federal job guarantee. This public option for employing all adults who want to work would address fundamental flaws in the labor

market such as structural unemployment, racial disparities, wage stagnation, increasing automation, and the replacement of stable work with “gigs.” The question isn’t whether such an option is needed—it is—but how to plan one, from this formative stage, to achieve equitable results. Imagine how families and communities would flourish if a job guarantee set wages high enough to eliminate poverty and included full benefits, training, and career ladders. Think of the potential that would be unleashed if people who struggle with chronic or cyclical unemployment had jobs building the physical and human infrastructure this country desperately needs, from green retrofits and clean water systems to modern and accessible transit to high-quality universal pre-kindergarten, childcare, eldercare, and other projects prioritized by communities.

Radical imagination is also embedded in the vibrant movement for housing justice. Activists are changing the very notion of housing: more than a dwelling or a commodity to be bought and sold on whim or for excessive profit, housing is a human right and an essential public good to be protected. The majority of residents in the 100 largest U.S. cities are now renters, and the majority of them spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing. The nation cannot build its way out of the crisis of housing insecurity. By redefining housing, the movement is spearheading innovations in tenant empowerment, community land trusts, and regulatory oversight. It’s a visionary, adaptive response to the dramatic shift away from homeownership and the rise of the renter nation.

In a similar vein, leaders on the cutting edge of criminal justice activism are moving away from incremental reforms and advancing a vision of community-driven public safety. Rather than confine their work to tweaking outdated, oppressive police and prison systems, leaders have set their sights on building institutions that protect residents, uphold justice, support healing, respond well to community needs, and operate fairly and without racial, ethnic, gender, religious, immigrant, or economic bias. Among the creative ideas gaining traction: community-based rapid response networks that protect residents from state violence; arts and culture projects that rewrite harmful narratives about race, power, and incarceration; and resident-led alternatives to hazardous police-community interactions.

Of course, efforts like these face stiff headwinds in today's political climate. Nobody here needs to be reminded of all the moves by the administration and Congress to erase 70 years of progress toward justice, fairness, and inclusion. Another troubling, if quieter, drumbeat comes from some corners of the White liberal establishment, where people who once claimed to be equity champions have wavered after a presidential victory fueled by the anger and frustration of White rural and suburban voters. In hopes of courting the White working class, progressive politicians and strategists are seriously debating whether to stay silent on race, equity, or anything else that may be labeled "identity politics."

In fact, the 2016 election demonstrated why equity is not optional but imperative for the health and vitality of the nation. The election made it clear that the barriers and broken promises that have always harmed people of color—a toxic brew of social and economic exclusion, financial insecurity and exploitation, community disinvestment, and government disregard—now hurt wide swaths of White America too. It demonstrated that all people want what equity leaders have always insisted all should have: good jobs, access to opportunity in the places where they live, decent prospects for their children, and a system that follows fair, transparent rules. The election also illuminated the enormous costs of allowing inequality and exclusion to fester. When institutions and elected officials ignore the needs of the most vulnerable places and people, their suffering is magnified many times over and damages national well-being.

There are two other important takeaways. First, equity advocates must engage wholeheartedly in the electoral process. Elections should not be dismissed as contests between often-flawed candidates. Elections determine how much investment will go to housing, education, health care, transportation, and all the other resources people need to be able to participate and succeed. Elections sway the judiciary in ways that can bolster civil rights or shred them for generations to come. They influence whether officials will be guided by America's highest ideals or its basest prejudices. Encouraging people to vote is not enough. Equity leaders must speak forcefully about why voting matters and the harm that results when communities cede the ballot box to others.

A second takeaway is the need for solidarity, another word you will hear at the Summit. Transformational ideas move forward through collective power. And the full power of the equity movement can be realized only by confronting the barriers, beliefs, and agendas that divide people along race, place, class, gender, ability, nativity, age, religion, orientation, and issues. Solidarity may conjure soothing thoughts of goodwill, a big tent, hands clasped around a circle. But developing the authentic solidarity needed to drive an intersectional movement for societal change is hard work. It challenges everyone to rethink priorities, push beyond comfort zones, break habits, hear and see one another, and embrace the differences within the equity movement as its greatest source of strength. It requires radical imagination and transformational action.

This is the sixth national Equity Summit. Each has been larger, wider ranging, and more dynamic than the one before. I hope this gathering inspires you to think big, forge new bonds, and reaffirm old ones. I am confident it will recharge your energy and renew your hope, but I also know that when you return home and tune in to the news, optimism may recede. So I'd like to offer a reflection.

As a child growing up in a segregated St. Louis, I watched on television as nine Black teenagers walked toward the front door of the all-White Central High School in Little Rock. The crowd spewed hate, and the Arkansas National Guard blocked their entry. Federal troops later came to escort them in. But the picture that stayed with me was the first one, of those students walking alone. This was emblematic of racial isolation in the country for centuries.

Nobody stood with Native Americans when they were slaughtered and enslaved. No public outcry ensued when immigrants from China, Mexico, and other countries were confined to ethnic enclaves, or when everyone of Japanese descent was forced into internment. I contrast that reality with the image of people of all ages and backgrounds descending on airports to say “no” to a Muslim travel ban. A minority of Americans are clinging ferociously to the ugly past. But most in this country are ready to move forward now.

The Dreamers, Black Lives Matter, the high school students in Florida, #MeToo, #TimesUp—millions refuse to turn back the clock or remain on the sidelines. People are stepping up to become the leaders they want to see and create the country they want to live in. Let us seize this extraordinary hour in America to exercise our collective power, claim our future, and build a nation in which all have dignity, respect, agency, and ample opportunity to reach their full potential.

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

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