

MLK Had a Dream of Guaranteed Income. As Mayors of 11 U.S. Cities, We Are Bringing That Dream to Life

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JUNE 29, 2020 5:00 AM EDT

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In 1967, against a backdrop of massive civil unrest, Dr. Martin Luther King wrote *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* and called for the immediate abolition of poverty. In the richest nation in the world, King saw no justification for the evil of rampant poverty and chastised the government's efforts against the ill as "[piecemeal and pygmy.](#)" Housing efforts were subject to the whims of the legislature, educational reforms were sluggish, and family assistance programs were neglected; all failed to reach the most profound needs of the poor. King's economic dream was the most direct – a guaranteed income for all Americans. This week, more than 50 years later and against a similar backdrop of racial and economic unrest, we mayors are bringing that dream to life.

Economic insecurity isn't new and poverty itself is violent. We need a policy solution that is as bold as it is innovative and as simple as it is ambitious. We must fight every day for a more just economy, because what happens to one of us happens indirectly to all of us and we are in this fight together. That's why, as mayors of 11 American cities with a collective population of about 7 million, we are launching [Mayors for a Guaranteed Income](#). This coalition will invest in additional guaranteed-income pilots and advocate for state and federal cash-based policies.

As leaders of our respective cities, we see firsthand how poverty and economic insecurity afflict our neighborhoods and families. Nearly 40% of Americans cannot afford a \$400 emergency, and rising income inequality is compounded by a growing [racial wealth gap](#). The median net worth of white households is 10 times that of Black households and about [eight](#) times that of Latinx households, and the wealthiest 0.1% in America own about the same amount of wealth as the bottom 90%.

For women, the stats paint an even bleaker image: women, particularly women of color, are the most likely to live in poverty and work in low-paying jobs, and are far more likely to lack access to sick leave and health care benefits. Black women are [paid 62 cents](#) for every dollar that a white male earns, and Latinx women make even less at [54 cents](#) for every dollar a white male earns.

Now, it's these same Americans — already working harder and harder, yet being left further and further behind — who bear the brunt of COVID-19. According to the [COVID Racial Data Tracker](#), Black people make up 13% of the U.S. population but account for 23% of deaths where race is known.

Black and brown Americans are caught in a double bind, overrepresented both in the low-wage jobs most vulnerable to layoffs and in the jobs deemed most essential: [Latinx folks constitute 54% of agricultural workers, while Black folks account for 27% of licensed practical and licensed vocational nurses.](#) Those who haven't been laid off are taking risks for the rest of us. Front-line workers keeping communities running at grocery stores, farms and warehouses are barely being paid a living wage.

We should not be surprised by this current reality – racial and gender disparities are what our society was structured to produce, and it's working accordingly. But we do have the power to reverse course. How? By implementing a guaranteed income.

A guaranteed income is a monthly cash payment given directly to individuals. It is unconditional, with no strings attached and no work requirements. A guaranteed income is meant to supplement, rather than replace, the existing social safety net and can be a tool for racial and gender equity. Direct, unconditional cash gives people the freedom to spend money on their most immediate needs – be it food for their household, repairing a car to get to work, medicine to treat a loved one or simply rent.

One city has already put this idea into action. In 2019, Stockton, Calif., launched the nation's first mayor-led guaranteed-income demonstration, with the [Stockton Economic Empowerment Demonstration \(SEED\)](#) giving 125 randomly selected recipients \$500 a month for 24 months. The cash is unconditional, with no strings attached and no work requirements. Early data from the program proves what we've intuitively known to be true: that people are working but the economy isn't. And because SEED's recipients are people like you and us, they're spending the money like you and we would: on basic needs like food, transportation, utilities and rent.

Following in SEED's footsteps, Mayor Baraka (Newark, N.J.) launched a task force and released a [report](#) calling for a pilot and a federal guaranteed-income policy. Mayor Lumumba (Jackson, Miss.) is [supportive](#) of the Magnolia Mother's Trust, a non-government program that gives \$1,000 a month to Black mothers living in extreme poverty. Mayor Carter (St. Paul, Minn.) issued a one-time cash infusion of \$1,000 to about 1,250 families with children in response to COVID-19. Mayor Garcetti's (Los Angeles) Angeleno Campaign [provided prepaid debit cards](#) of \$700 to \$1,500 to residents whose total household income fell below the poverty line before COVID-19. And Mayor Brown (Compton, Calif.) announced a [partnership with the nonprofit Give Directly](#), which gives cash directly to people living in poverty, to distribute \$1,000 to families that receive food stamps benefits.

Today, we mayors are uniting to send a clear message: our residents deserve economic security through a guaranteed income. We are calling on legislators to wake up to Dr. King's dream for a federal guaranteed income that will put cash back into the hands of everyday Americans. Faced again with the question of chaos or community, we're choosing the latter – it's time to invest directly in our communities and our people.

We welcome all U.S. mayors to join our coalition to strengthen all our communities by supplementing the existing social safety net and driving forward this powerful tool for racial and gender equity.

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