

Focus Group Report
African American Perspectives
The Horizon Project
October 23, 2002

Focus for this group

African-American perspectives on Elkhart County: how to work at integrating cultural minorities and open doors for minority persons to have leadership roles in the larger community.

Composition

This group included six African-American leaders from Elkhart County. They represented a wide range of perspectives: business, church, housing, education, and human services.

Vision for the future

- **Health services:** we need health services in our community; make sure it is affordable; not all have insurance.
- **Build up entrepreneurship:** small businesses are doing the most for the economy.
- **Self-development:** strive to do more than just be above broke. Who am I? Do reading; good curriculum; churches and schools would be best settings.
- **Education:** educating minorities is the foundation; educate people on how to buy and manage a house.
- **One integrated vision:** focus on health, home, education, and transportation.

Improvement strategies

- **Entrepreneurship among African Americans.** A facility is being sought: Incubator to Success. You need trainers who have started things and kept them going. Need access to capital; this is at the top of the list. African-Americans are in management positions at several local banks. School systems should offer a course on entrepreneurship.
- **Leadership development for African-Americans:** one-on-one coaching and group sessions – what does it take to be successful, how to develop a team effort.
- **Housing:** mixed-income subdivisions; expand Section 8 home ownership program.
- **Education:** work with Ivy Tech to get career training.
- **Finances:** explore starting an African-American owned credit union.
- **Personal development:** learn how the self works; we want to develop individuals to have inner strength. Churches can do something.
- **Church outreach:** develop a comprehensive ministry vision for social, spiritual, and economic impact; learn from mega churches in Atlanta; all of it is biblical. Find out what the people need. Don't shove programs down people's throats.
- **Resource persons from Indianapolis:** Indianapolis is among the five best cities for African Americans; invite resource persons from Indianapolis to support African American development efforts in Elkhart County. Draw on entrepreneurs from Indy to help in Elkhart County.

- **Reparations for injustice:** need a global approach to reparations; the crimes against persons of African descent have been committed by every culture.

Perceptions of Elkhart County

Strengths

- **Development among Hispanics:** Hispanics are getting a lot of help and they are taking advantage of it. They are hungry for education and attend evening classes. Hispanic leadership is already strong. They are buying businesses and homes. They buy from each other. Their leadership is intact.
- **Educational opportunities:** the career center here is one of the best in the state. The automobile students can earn good incomes. Ivy Tech also has programs.
- **Leadership programs:** Chamber leadership programs are good.

Weaknesses

- **Lack of entrepreneurship:** Elkhart is lacking in African-American entrepreneurship. There is not enough visibility, so people can see that they can be business owners. We are big consumers and yet we are not entrepreneurs.
- **Inferior self-perception:** “If it ain’t white, it ain’t right” – tendency to go to a White doctor rather than a Black doctor.
- **Loss of Black-owned businesses:** there are any less minority owned business today than 25 years ago. Segregation insured that Blacks would serve each other. Today Blacks can go everywhere to shop and do business. People go to Grape Road to spend. We have lost some spirit of being on our own. We are criticized for moving toward segregation when we want to strengthen our own community. We need to support our own.
- **Lack of cultural loyalty:** There is no cultural loyalty within the African-American community. It is hard for a business to build a loyal clientele. We do not support each other. People flock to an Asian beauty shop rather than an African American shop. African American businesses need to establish quality and integrity.
- **Enterprises moving out of the African-American community:** Heart City Health Clinic has left; a lot of businesses are moving out of our community.
- **Youth expelled from schools:** low-income Whites and African Americans are getting expelled at young ages.
- **Lack of career direction:** young people have no clue what they want to do. Some college students don’t know what they want to do.

Opportunities

- **Market to the whole community:** the Black entrepreneurs will have to serve the whole market and not just a Black clientele. We must develop products to the Hispanic market.
- **Education on personal money management:** people need education on how to work with money, save, and invest. Save our people from predatory lending.
- **Strengthen parents:** need to work with the parents of these young people; help people develop skills for home ownership and family life; help them know what their priorities are.
- **Develop new transportation options:** to get people to their jobs.
- **Provide education in jails.**

Threats

- **Predatory lending:** people take on unmanageable debt.
- **Paying too much for a house:** Recent immigrants sometimes buy houses for more than it is worth. They may later try to refinance but the house is not worth enough to refinance. They need to learn to negotiate.

Areas for Action Planning Teams

- **Healthcare**
- **Entrepreneurship**
- **Education**
- **Housing**

Compiled November 2, 2002