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Bridge to Equity: Q&A with John M. Wallace, University of Pittsburgh

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University of Pittsburgh

John M. Wallace Jr., vice provost and David E. Epperson endowed chair, University of Pittsburgh

While economic and social disparities have existed for Pittsburgh's communities of color for the entirety of the city's history, the Covid-19 pandemic not only pulled back the veil, but also exasperated the existing inequities. These inequities jeopardize the future of these communities and various aspects of the region's economy.

On July 13, the Pittsburgh Business Times will host the first of its Bridge to Equity series of discussions centered on several areas in which these disparities exist for Pittsburgh's communities of color. The event will focus on the social determinants of health, with other topics to be explored in the future, including affordable housing.

The panel will be moderated by Kathy Humphrey, president of Carlow University.

Panelists for the social determinants of health discussion will include:

The Rev. Paul Abernathy, CEO, Neighborhood Resilience Project
Dan LaVallee, senior director, UPMC Center for Social Impact at UPMC Health Plan

Amy Shannon, director of social determinants of health programs and products, Highmark Health

Also at the event will be a keynote address delivered by John M. Wallace Jr., vice provost and David E. Epperson endowed chair at the University of Pittsburgh. Wallace, whose work over the past 30 years has been focused on the well-being of African-American children, youth and communities, will provide an overview to the Bridge to Equity series and how Pittsburgh can work to overcome disparities in underserved communities. Below, Wallace spoke with the Business Times in advance of the event.

To register for the event, go to the Business Times' event page.

What areas of opportunity exist for us to improve wellness and outcomes in communities of color?

The key rungs on the ladder of economic mobility is education, employment and entrepreneurship. And we see those as the most important, and related to that of course, there's homeownership, which, again, is kind of an outcome in some way of the other three.

What are some things we can do to try and improve homeownership rates for people of color and make pathways to homeownership easier?

We know that Pittsburgh has an old population relative to other cities and regions, so one thing is ensuring that our existing homeowners are fully apprised of how to transfer wealth to their children and grandchildren. When we see older folks who don't have wills and don't have very clear plans to transfer the wealth, it can set their families back significantly. That said, a neighborhood's real estate has very different values depending upon the race, often, of the residents. And so we have to think about the adverse impact of race with regard to the availability of loans and the perceived value of real estate based on the racial composition of the neighborhood. ... When African-Americans sell their homes, the return on that investment is not the same as it is for white Americans. And similarly, we know that there have been challenges with regard to the loans that people receive, with subprime loans being given to people of color more so than white people. ... People of color and African-Americans in particular are less likely to receive mortgages. And so there's still discriminatory practices in the industries related to homeownership.

What are some strategies the Pittsburgh business community can utilize to try and find solutions to these disparities?

Employment, hiring applicants who bring experience and expertise to their businesses, I think is hugely important. Then, of course,

promoting people into leadership roles and decision-making, especially in small- to mid-sized business, but large businesses as well. I think the work of The Advanced Leadership Institute is exemplary of the kinds of things that we should be doing.

What has the city's progress looked like in the past 20 years or so to address some of these inequities?

The data suggests we haven't made as much progress as perhaps we would like. There was the Gender Equity Commission report in 2019, and that suggests that we have a significant way to go. Unfortunately Pittsburgh has one of the lowest rates of entrepreneurship in the country as I understand, and similarly in homeownership we lag in key metrics, even relative to other cities, both medium and large cities and our peer cities.

One of the issues unique to Pittsburgh is, in many ways, Pittsburgh's 90 neighborhoods are largely segregated. How can the city address this issue?

We have to focus on our commonalities in the fact that despite having 90 different neighborhoods, we're still one city and one region, and if the city and the region do well, we can all benefit. And as we continue to lag, we all experience the negative results, and so the more we recognize that we have a shared future, which we can all positively contribute to, we will all benefit if things move forward in a positive direction.

In terms of education and providing more opportunities for young people of color, what role do you see the region's colleges and universities playing?

Education is, in many ways, the great equalizer. The Supreme Court did just rule that race can no longer be considered in admissions, but the question still becomes how do we leverage the benefit of education? How do all of our educational institutions, regardless of the race of the young people they serve, how can we ensure that access to education remains strong, that our K-12 system is effectively and efficiently preparing young people? Because our competition is the globe. And again, we will all suffer together or we'll all be successful together. And unfortunately, the level of divisiveness and the lack of understanding that we have a shared future is very short-sighted and has huge implications.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.




Jordyn Hronec

Associate Editor - *Pittsburgh Business Times*

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