

Essay: Angela Glover Blackwell, FOUNDER AND CEO, POLICYLINK

# THE ROAD

# TO WE

The idea of “we” animates my life’s work: advancing equity, justice and fair inclusion to create a society in which all can participate, prosper and reach their full potential.

Equity is the antidote to inequality, racial division and the inability to see oneself reflected in the aspirations or anguish of another. Equity recognizes that the future of a city, a region and the nation will be secure only if everyone can fully contribute to it. Equity is an expression of mutual purpose and shared destiny.

Consider the opening sentence of the Equity Manifesto that my organization, PolicyLink, has published: “It begins by joining together, believing in the potency of inclusion, and building from a common bond.”

In this time of sharp political division, these words may sound like a pipe dream. But equity is, in fact, a pragmatic approach to solving the nation’s biggest problems and greatest sources of tension: economic inequality and racial exclusion. Moreover, equity points to clear solutions that work. Decades of successful community-change efforts have demonstrated how to build neighborhoods and cities that tap the talents and skills and serve the hopes and needs of all, particularly low-income people, people of color and other historically marginalized groups.

The road to “a community of we” is equitable development.

Resurgent cities, including Pittsburgh, are beginning to walk this road, and it’s one of the most promising trends in America today. As the nation struggles to achieve robust, broadly shared prosperity amid historic demographic and economic shifts, cities are the crucibles where ambitious strategies can and must be forged to grow an economy and a society that work for all.

Cities showcase not only the nation’s greatest problems but also its greatest strengths. Cities drive economic innovation and incubate new forms of democratic engagement. They lead the demographic transition that will produce a people-of-color majority in the United States by 2044. According to the Brookings Institution’s Metropolitan Policy Program, 98 percent of the population growth in the 100 largest metropolitan areas in the past 17 years has been fueled by people of color. And cities stand at the cutting edge of policy change that fosters justice and inclusion. This change is not only the right thing to do, but also an economic imperative.

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Joshua Francis

After a half-century of policies that stripped inner cities of jobs, investment and white populations, cities large and small are rebounding. But their leaders increasingly recognize that this remarkable urban renaissance will be short-lived and contained to a few of their cities' more walkable neighborhoods if they only court a young, highly educated, mobile workforce and neglect longtime residents and established communities.

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Vibrant, equitable cities anchoring strong regions are key to sustained growth and prosperity.

That is why places like Pittsburgh must embrace equitable development, implementing policies and practices that connect the most vulnerable residents to opportunities in the evolving urban economy and ensure that these individuals are able to stay in their neighborhoods as they improve.

The building blocks of such cities also include accessible jobs that offer pathways to the middle class; cradle-to-career pipelines that nurture homegrown talent; high-quality affordable housing connected

to transportation, good schools and other essential infrastructure; just policing and court systems; and expanded opportunities for democratic engagement and civic leadership. Above all, these cities need policies, planning and investments designed to ensure that no one, or no group, is left behind or pushed out.

PolicyLink's All-In Cities initiative works to accelerate and amplify these efforts and spread best practices. The initiative supports local leaders and residents in collaboratively developing a vision of an equitable, prosperous future for their cities and establishing comprehensive strategies, based on local assets and circumstances, to create and sustain that future.

Our All-In Cities engagement in Pittsburgh has been particularly illuminating and inspiring.

As technology-driven companies, investment capital and young college graduates flocked to a city once shaken economically by the loss of its steel industry base, a stark question arose: A comeback for whom? Many people felt there were two Pittsburghs—one on the rise, the other shut out of opportunity by poverty, structural racism and discrimination. Data supported the concern. Racial gaps in wages, employment and poverty widened rather than narrowed, and the entire city bore the cost. Statistics from the National Equity Atlas show that Pittsburgh's economic output would be more than \$5 billion higher every year absent racial inequities in income.

Community, business, government and philanthropic leaders realized that targeted strategies were needed to reverse these inequities, grow the economy and make sure the city's rebirth benefits all, especially the communities of color that had lived through the years of decline after the steel industry collapsed. When PolicyLink was invited to Pittsburgh to help facilitate an equitable development strategy, we discovered a hunger to address the fragmentation across the city's 90 neighborhoods, tackle persistent structural and institutional racism, and prepare a homegrown workforce for the jobs employers will need to fill.

PolicyLink, Neighborhood Allies and Urban Innovation21 convened dozens of community leaders to create a shared definition of equitable development. The result embodies the spirit of "a community of we," saying in part: "Equitable development is a positive development strategy that ensures everyone participates in and benefits from the region's transformation." The definition calls for a focus on eliminating racial inequities and making accountable, catalytic

investments to ensure that lower-wealth residents live in safe, opportunity-rich neighborhoods that reflect their culture, connect to economic and ownership opportunities, and have influence in the decisions that shape their neighborhoods.

Three multi-sector working groups then developed recommendations for strategies and policies to create strong, equitable neighborhoods, expand economic opportunity, and build community voice and power. About 200 people from all walks of life provided input on the recommendations and the equitable development policy agenda, which was released in 2016. Our work complemented and informed efforts already underway to increase affordable housing in Pittsburgh while buttressing stances taken by Mayor Bill Peduto and other leaders that disregarding residents is not the way the city will do development.

Across the city, exciting models of equitable development point the way forward. In Homewood, a 100,000-square-foot former Westinghouse factory has been redeveloped into a business incubator, with 85 percent of the construction contracts going to minority-owned businesses and much of the labor done by youth who faced barriers to employment. On the North Side, thousands of residents across 18 neighborhoods are developing a community-driven revitalization plan for improving the quality of local education, employment and place. And a community land trust is being developed in Lawrenceville to enable those with modest incomes to purchase homes in the fast-gentrifying neighborhood. Plans are in the works to expand this community-ownership model.

These initiatives and others in the region underscore a valuable lesson: A newly booming city must not only think about itself differently, it also must operate differently. By seizing this comeback moment to embrace inclusion and advance the creativity and contributions of groups that have long been left behind, Pittsburgh is showing the nation how to create a better tomorrow for all. [h](#)

Angela Glover Blackwell is founder and CEO of PolicyLink, a national research and advocacy organization focused on economic and social equity. To learn about cities that Ms. Blackwell identifies as demonstrating success in promoting equity and experiencing its benefits, read her article "Three Ways to Make Equitable Development Work" at [www.heinz.org](http://www.heinz.org).