

# Milwaukee County Exec Abele: Addressing racial inequities in Milwaukee County through workforce development

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The National Urban League's annual "State of Black America" [report](#) is out, and for the second year in a row, the Milwaukee area is ranked dead last in terms of unemployment inequality for white Americans and African Americans.

While Milwaukee's racial issues are complex and interrelated, increasing access to good-paying jobs for all residents is a key component of any successful strategy for addressing racial inequities.

That was the focus of a [panel](#) hosted last week by Wispolitics.com that featured Milwaukee County Executive Chris Abele, Dr. Eve Hall, president and CEO of the Milwaukee Urban League, and Milwaukee Bucks Senior Vice President Alex Lasry.

County Executive Abele has made it a priority to incorporate workforce development opportunities into all County services and provide job programming to residents who utilize County services, whether it's through housing, child support, disability services, corrections, or aging.

To take the County's workforce development efforts to the next level, the county executive in 2016 directed the newly-created Office on African American Affairs (OAAA) to conduct a thorough assessment of the County's workforce programming to identify potential gaps and inform the development of policies and programs that increase access to jobs for unemployed and underemployed residents. The OAAA Workforce Development Programs Mapping & Analysis found that Milwaukee County engages in a significant amount of workforce development annually, serving at least 1,100 individuals with job services that include basic education, work readiness and job search, job training and coaching, work supports, job placement, and program evaluation.

The Mapping & Analysis provided recommendations to County leadership for expanded and more coordinated workforce development efforts in Milwaukee County government and throughout the community. The top recommendation was to develop a comprehensive workforce development strategy with defined goals, long-term objectives, expected outcomes, and an explicit focus on reducing Milwaukee's racial disparities in employment.

The Mapping & Analysis also suggested the implementation of the use of the Online Workforce Readiness Assessment — a nationally-recognized, evidence-based tool — to help Milwaukee County have a stronger understanding of what tools and programs are needed to tailor programs to participant needs, improve program effectiveness, and give policymakers information that can be used in budgetary and policy decision-making. Having more complete data will help the County truly move program participants closer to a family-supporting career.

As well, this exercise helped the County more clearly identify where good-paying jobs are located; growing businesses that offer upward economic mobility are increasingly located outside of the direct area of where the workforce lives.

The county is well-positioned to bridge this divide and connect workers with employers, like we do through the Milwaukee County Transit System's JobLines routes that connect about 1,000 Milwaukee workers with 150 employers in Waukesha and Washington counties every day.

In addition to the Mapping & Analysis, OAAA and the County in 2016 partnered with Employ Milwaukee to begin several new workforce development programs that incorporate wraparound services provided by the County.

UpLift MKE is a unique job training and placement program that began a little more than one year ago. Working with community partners like the Milwaukee Bucks and MATC, Milwaukee County has already placed nearly 200 individuals in jobs averaging \$14 per hour through UpLift MKE. These job training and placement efforts are targeted directly to workers, particularly those in and near the Sherman Park area, who most need support to climb the ladder of opportunity.

This program has been so successful that County Executive Abele expanded it less than a year in. His 2017 budget added an extra \$500,000 in funding for UpLift MKE and \$165,000 for the Boys and Girls Club of Milwaukee to add a Youth Career Development project manager to serve teenagers in Sherman Park and other areas. In 2015, more than 300 teenagers found employment through the efforts of the Boys and Girls Club, and this funding will expand their efforts.

Opportunity Knocks, which launched in fall of 2016, is a novel housing model that utilizes home equity created through home renovation to fund workforce development, reentry services, and first-time home ownership. Opportunity Knocks takes tax-foreclosed homes in Milwaukee County suburban municipalities, renovates the homes while providing job training and reentry services to returning citizens, and sells the house to a first-time homeowner through the County's new Section 8 Homeownership Program paired with HOME funds for down payment assistance.

These efforts alone won't solve Milwaukee's deeply entrenched racial disparities, but combined, they help lay a foundation on which we can build.