

Ellison urges significant expansion for Summit Academy

Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.

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The unemployment rate dipped to 4.6 percent in Minnesota this past December – more than 2 percent lower than the national average – yet unemployment for African-Americans in the Twin Cities is nearly four times that state average.

While the current rate of unemployment rate for area African-Americans is staggering at somewhere near 18 percent, that rate was as high as 27.4 percent – the highest in the nation – as cited in a 2012 study by the Economic Policy Institute. The rates of unemployment are similarly high for Native-Americans and Latinos. With such daunting numbers, and with recent cuts to unemployment benefits, the question becomes what can be done to reduce the rate of unemployment in communities of color.

One program working on reducing the rate of unemployment in the area is Summit OIC, 935 Olsen Memorial Hwy., Minneapolis. Summit OIC provides training in specialized areas of technology, construction and healthcare to adults with a minimum of a GED and 7th grade math and 9th grade reading proficiency. The academy is currently providing training to more than 300 students at no cost to the student.

"It's a free education, so why not take the opportunity," asked 21-year-old Jasmine Whitaker.

Summit prides itself as being a place where everyone can be given an opportunity to learn and hopefully gain meaningful employment.

"I haven't always led a law abiding life," said Tony Winslow, a 34-year-old learning construction at Summit OIC. "I made a lot of mistakes and I did time in prison. But I'm a different person. I actually just got hired with a construction company in St. Paul. Summit gave me the courage to change."

Though unemployment numbers are far worse for people of color, Nora Strand serves as an example that hard times can fall on anyone. A former 25-year x-ray technician, Strand, who is white, found herself looking for work following bouts of depression and substance addiction. Two years sober, Strand is a week from graduating Summit's carpentry program. About 20 percent of Summit's enrollees are female.

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"I knew I needed to do something different so I came to Summit," said Strand. "I was skeptical at first because I heard of a lot of schools that were iffy, but I came here and I loved it."

Rep. Keith Ellison (D-MN) recently toured the facilities of Summit OIC and praised the efforts of the academy's leaders and held the school as a model for the nation.

"I think Summit needs to be significantly expanded," said Ellison, after speaking with several current Summit enrollees. "There's not enough parking as it is because so many people want to be a part of the program. Workforce investment is key."

Ellison said graduates of Summit should be able to gain meaningful employment if investment dollars were spent in north Minneapolis.

"North Minneapolis is one of the least invested parts of our metropolitan area," said Ellison. "There's a whole lot of that needs to be done over here, everything from drainage, to sewage to housing construction. There's a ton of things to be built and if there's more work, then there are more workers earning a good living."

Ellison said the lack of investment in north Minneapolis is by design.

"I have a 1937 map from the city zoning department that identifies north Minneapolis as a quote, unquote Negro slum," said the congressman. "So for historical reasons, north Minneapolis has always been the other side of the tracks. It's where Jewish immigrants came, it's where African-Americans came and now Latinos. It's my neighborhood and I love it and I'm proud to be here, but it is long overdue for major investment. We're trying to create a path where people can open their refrigerators and there's actually something in it."