

Black Male Achievement Takes Center Stage in Milwaukee

By Jeffery Roman, Community Advocates Public Policy Institute, Milwaukee, WI

Number 50. Dead last. Worst in the nation.

Phrases like this, coupled with the word “CRISIS,” appear when the state of black men and boys is discussed in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, which the Casey Foundation found to have the worst child racial disparities in the U.S. The economic center of Wisconsin, the city is home to the highest concentration of black males in the state. The area has the fourth-highest black child poverty rate and the highest black male incarceration rate in the U.S. Black males in Milwaukee, at least by the numbers, are at the bottom of the nation’s totem pole.

Though the statistics seem bleak, they are not the rallying cries of the city.

City leaders along with grassroots and community organizations are actively responding to crisis with strategy, hope and action. There is hard work being done from the big corner offices at City Hall to the corner blocks in neighborhoods hardest hit by poverty, crime, violence and disinvestment. Together Milwaukee is working to achieve a shared vision – ***a Milwaukee where all black men and boys are healthy, productive and empowered to live their lives to the fullest potential, with dignity.***

Two years ago city leaders began taking advantage of technical support from the National League of Cities and the Campaign for Black Male Achievement’s *City Leadership to Promote Black Male Achievement* initiative to develop a systemic approach to reducing disparities between Black males and their peers across the city.

The targeted support along with the full commitment of Milwaukee [Mayor Tom Barrett](#) and the city’s Common Council prompted the creation of the [Milwaukee Black Male Achievement Advisory Council](#), established to offer counsel and recommendations to the Mayor and city leadership on issues impacting Black males within the city and region.

The BMA Advisory Council was formally established by Common Council ordinance in August of 2013 and was given oversight of a modest allocation of \$300,000 in community development block grant dollars to identify and support innovative strategies to address disparities in education, health and employment, and leverage additional investment.

The 16 member Council, appointed by the Mayor and Common Council, is co-chaired by a City Alderman and State Senator, and includes appointed city staff, the City Treasurer,

representatives of the local public school district and County Board of Supervisors, business, faith and community members, the area’s U.S. Attorney, and key local philanthropic leaders, namely [United Way of Greater Milwaukee](#) and the [Greater Milwaukee Foundation](#).



The White House My Brother’s Keeper (MBK) Initiative has provided Milwaukee with an additional impetus to drive the City’s Black Male Achievement Advisory Council further in strengthening the field.

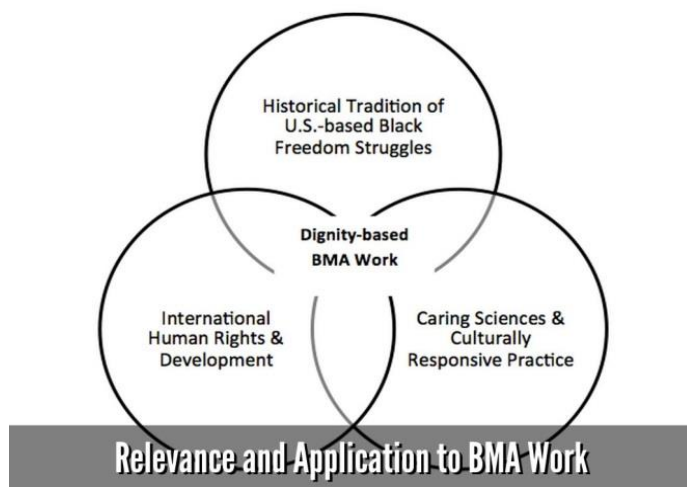
Working with the community, local MBK efforts are being organized under five key impact areas identified by the BMA Advisory Council to intentionally lift up Black men and boys within the broader scope of the MBK Community Challenge.

BMA Impact Areas Aligned to MBK Goals

Family	Education	Employment	Health and Wellness	Criminal Justice
Strengthening Black families and increasing involvement of Black fathers	Improving access to quality education and learning opportunities pre-k through higher ed	Improving access to quality, supportive wage employment, job training and pathways to wealth creation	Improving the social, emotional, mental and physical well-being of Black men and boys and addressing the culture of violence and trauma	Strengthening reentry supports and addressing disproportionate law enforcement contact and confinement of Black men
Aligning MBK Community Challenge Milestone Goals				
Goal 1 Goal 6	Goal 2 Goal 3 Goal 4 Goal 5	Goal 3 Goal 4 Goal 5	Goal 1 Goal 6	Goal 2 Goal 3 Goal 4 Goal 5 Goal 6

To cement the commitment of the Mayor and city leadership, dedicated staff positions have been approved in the city’s biennial budget and key personnel will soon be onboarded to help analyze data, align synergies across city departments, and further engage the community in BMA related activity.

Toward a Dignity-based Paradigm for BMA in Milwaukee



Drawing on research being conducted by partners at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee [Research Center of Urban Education Leadership Development](#), Milwaukee is incorporating a dignity-based paradigm into its BMA work. Using the historical traditions of U.S.-based Black freedom struggles, the theories of international human rights development, and models from the caring sciences field, local actors are beginning to integrate dignity as both a guiding principle and measurable indicator of success.

The emphasis on dignity is used to counteract the ways in which institutional practices place a disproportionate burden of personal responsibility on black males while doing little to disrupt long standing structural and institutional racism in the U.S.

By introducing a dignity-based paradigm in approaching BMA work, the city is working to shift the evaluative lens away from strictly noting the behavioral change markers of black and brown boys and men, and toward also including the responsibility of organizations and institutions in recognizing their own roles in creating barriers that prevent positive outcomes for black males.

Connecting the Dots – Advancing the Field Beyond City Hall

While the Mayor and city leaders are doing their part, others in the community are also pulling their weight to support the population of roughly 106,000 Black men and boys who call Milwaukee home.

Two prominent area organizations, among a growing list of others, have been critical in the process.

The [Community Advocates Public Policy Institute](#), a CBMA member, is the largest organization in the region actively promoting Black Male Achievement. In its role as an intermediary organization and convener of direct service providers and coalitions, the Institute in 2013 hired on a full-time staff person to help identify, engage, and support local BMA actors, while facilitating collaborative action city-wide.

Offering technical assistance, cultural competency, and capacity building, the Institute has positioned itself a leader in cross-community efforts that move the needle for black males.

In addition to working with city leadership and the BMA Advisory Council, the Institute has assembled local funders and a local action planning team to help guide the pathway to impact. The Community Advocates Public Policy Institute continues to be a vital thinker and instigator in pushing Milwaukee further in BMA-related work.

With the support of a CBMA facilitator and capacity-building grant, the planning team is developing a comprehensive theory of change to guide collective work and investment, has enacted clear leadership and a shared governance structure, and is working toward securing dedicated funding for coordination.

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee has also stepped up to the plate, last year launching the [UW-Milwaukee African American Male Initiative](#) (AAMI) which serves as a key academic advisor and partner to the budding local field. As the university's link to the city's BMA efforts, AAMI works with faculty and staff across UWM's academic schools and disciplines to conduct research and support evaluation efforts that address and respond to the needs of black men and boys in the Milwaukee region.

AAMI, created to remove obstacles and advance educational pipeline opportunities for young black male students K-16, offers a clearinghouse of resources, information and research, and hosts Milwaukee's annual Summit on Black Male Youth, a one-of-a-kind gathering that serves as a meeting place for over 600 young Black males, teachers, school administrators, support staff, guidance counselors, and parents and guardians from school districts across the area.

There is no one answer to the problems faced by Black boys and men, not in Milwaukee or any place else. But if there is a silver bullet, it's in coordinated action.

Working better together is a solution, and if it can be done in Milwaukee, it can be done everywhere.

Most cities have everything they need to get the job done. Organizing is the first step.

Other Milwaukee highlights:

- Local grassroots initiative [WE GOT THIS](#) engages young black men and community year-round
- Milwaukee hosts first in nation [Boys and Men of Color Week](#), October 26-November 1, 2014
- United Way of Greater Milwaukee releases report on local crisis facing black boys and men ([United Way report](#))
- Milwaukee Nonprofit Center provides BMA specific workshops for local nonprofit sector ([Workshop calendar](#))
- Wisconsin Community Services, state's largest reentry organization creates [Black Male Advisory Council](#)
- Milwaukee hosts Alliance for Black Foundation Executives' [Responsive Philanthropy in Black Communities](#) trainings for local funders (March 2015)