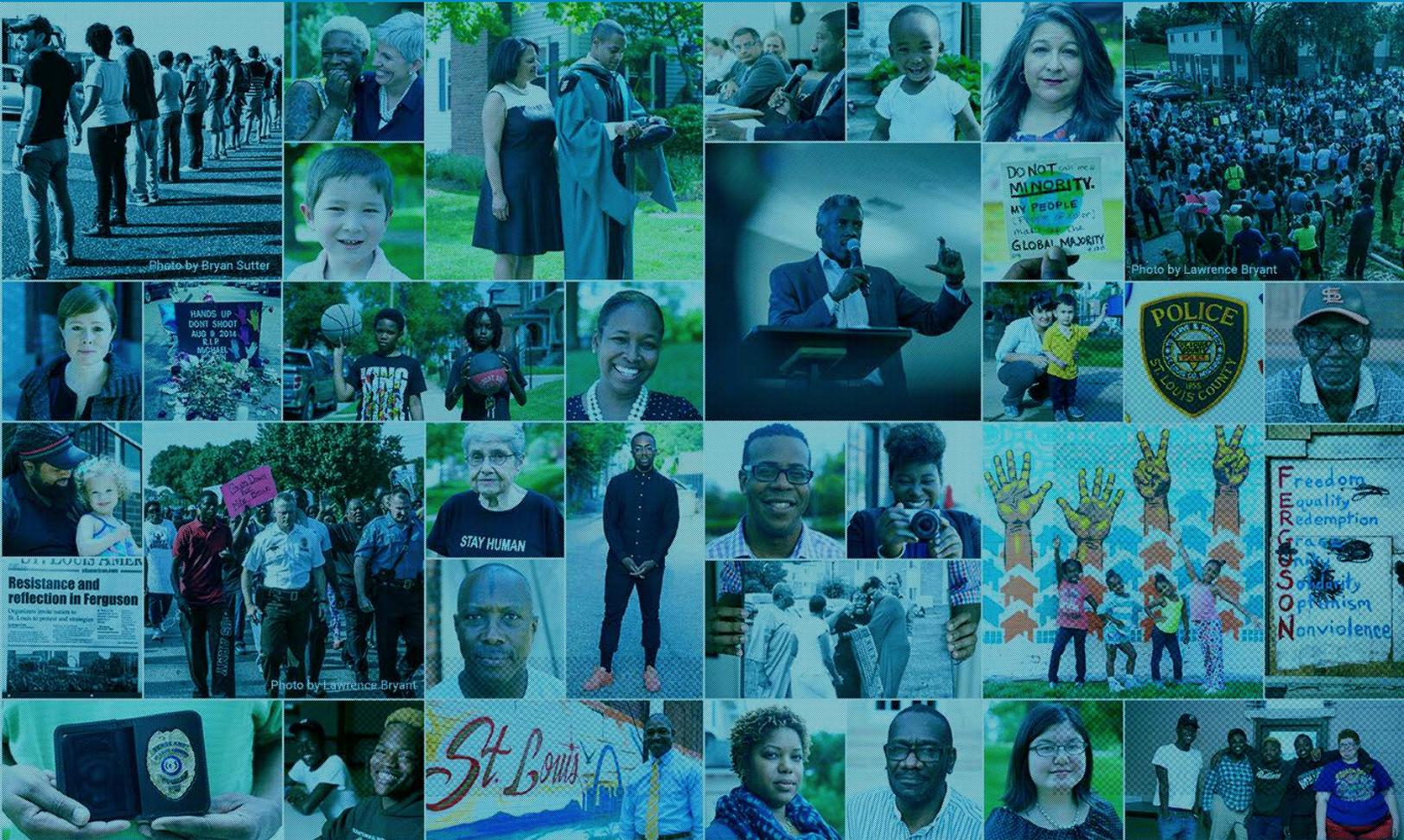


The Only Way Forward Is Through

The Ferguson Commission Playbook



St. Louis 2015 and the New Frontier

St. Louis has long been a frontier city. In 2014, it became a new frontier of civil rights.

The death of Michael Brown Jr. and the response of citizens and police that followed challenged St. Louis to reckon with perceptions and realities of systemic inequity. But while St. Louis was in the spotlight, and the Ferguson Commission was appointed to examine issues within the St. Louis region, the issues that laid the foundation for this incident and the response to it are present in metropolitan areas all across the country—and have been for generations.

What was different this time was that the larger community—including those who did not directly feel or experience the negative effects of these issues—was awakened to the seriousness and impact of these issues on their neighbors and on the community at large.

In response to community outcry, the Ferguson Commission was established to help St. Louis begin to tackle these challenges. Though progress has been made in St. Louis since August 2014, the work is far from done.

It is also far from done in communities across the country.

This document frames the Commission's strategy in terms of lessons learned through its work. The hope is that it will serve as a guide and roadmap that other communities and civic organizations may use to tackle the challenge of systemic inequity.

Editor's Note

This document was developed based on extensive interviews with the Ferguson Commission co-chairs, staff, and other community stakeholders who provided insight into the process.

While we are calling this a "community playbook," the point most frequently emphasized in those interviews was that the Ferguson Commission's success was not derived from any specific

"play" in its playbook. Instead the Commission's success was a result of its philosophy, values, principles and commitments. In other words, the success was driven less by what it did, and more by how it did it.

With that in mind, this document attempts to serve as a useful reference by capturing the essence of that "how," while also including some of the tactics of the "what."

Executive Summary

What the Work Was

The Ferguson Commission was born out of a tragedy. After the death of Michael Brown Jr. in Ferguson, Missouri Governor Jay Nixon appointed the 16-member Commission to conduct a “thorough, wide-ranging and unflinching study of the social and economic conditions that impede progress, equality and safety in the St. Louis region.”

In response, the Commission’s report mapped out a pathway to change centered on policy-focused “calls to action” with named “accountable bodies” best positioned to address each call. Building on the momentum and urgency of the moment, the Commission created a scaled, specific vision towards systemic change that addressed many critical areas that had long contributed to a divided region.

In doing so, the Commission’s work highlighted the many ways the St. Louis region has suffered from community-level trauma and toxic stress. They found that this trauma and stress is frequently the result of systemic inequities that hurt those most in need while favoring those least in need. The desire to address these inequities at the systemic level led the Commission to make the pursuit of equity an essential part of its informal charge.

How The Commission Approached the Work

The Commission made strategic decisions to ensure their time-delineated platform for change would produce the appropriate pathway to the vision of equity. The specific components of strategy are captured as overarching commitments and outlined as lessons learned:

Commitment 1: Build a Team Prepared for the Challenge

Commitment 2: Operate Based on Core Values

Commitment 3: Embrace the Process of Innovation

Commitment 4: Create Space for the Healing Process to Begin

Commitment 5: Commit to Advancing Racial Equity

Commitment 6: Leverage Existing Expertise

Commitment 7: Design a Network of Strategic Partnerships

Commitment 8: Optimize Engagement through Innovative Communication

By engaging the community, and abiding by a set of core values and guiding principles, the Ferguson Commission became much more than a group assembled to produce a set of policy recommendations. It reflected the collective voice of disparate stakeholders interested in charting a path to positive change.

What Is Next for the Work

The work of the Commission was a notable start. Nevertheless, it was only that: a start. Sustained work and progress on the calls to action was an essential next step for the region. Because the Commission was created with an expiration date, its true value is dependent on the commitments of the region to actively disrupt existing systems in an attempt to extend the urgency captured by a tragic death. While the nature of the relationship between community trauma and the systems within that community can seem dire, it also holds the root of possibility for real change. If systems and community members can align themselves around these issues as the core of what is preventing them from thriving, there is the opportunity for real, long-term, systemic, and lasting change.

Background

Context of the Ferguson Commission

On August 9, 2014, the death of 18-year-old Michael Brown Jr. in Ferguson, Missouri, reignited a national debate about citizen-law enforcement relations, sparking heated demonstrations and a subsequent police response in Ferguson that attracted international attention and roiled the St. Louis region.

On November 18, 2014, Missouri Governor Jay Nixon appointed the 16-member Ferguson Commission to conduct a “thorough, wide-ranging and unflinching study of the social and economic conditions that impede progress, equality and safety in the St. Louis region.”

Specifically, the Ferguson Commission was charged to issue a report containing policy recommendations after undertaking a study of the following subjects:

Citizen-law enforcement relations;

Racial and ethnic relations;

Municipal government organization, and the municipal court system; and

Disparities in substantive areas that include, but are not limited to, education, economic opportunity, health care, housing, transportation, child care, business ownership, and family and community stability.

Responsibility for the investigation into any specific police-involved shooting was not within the scope of the Ferguson Commission.



Photo: Nicole Hudson



Commission Structure

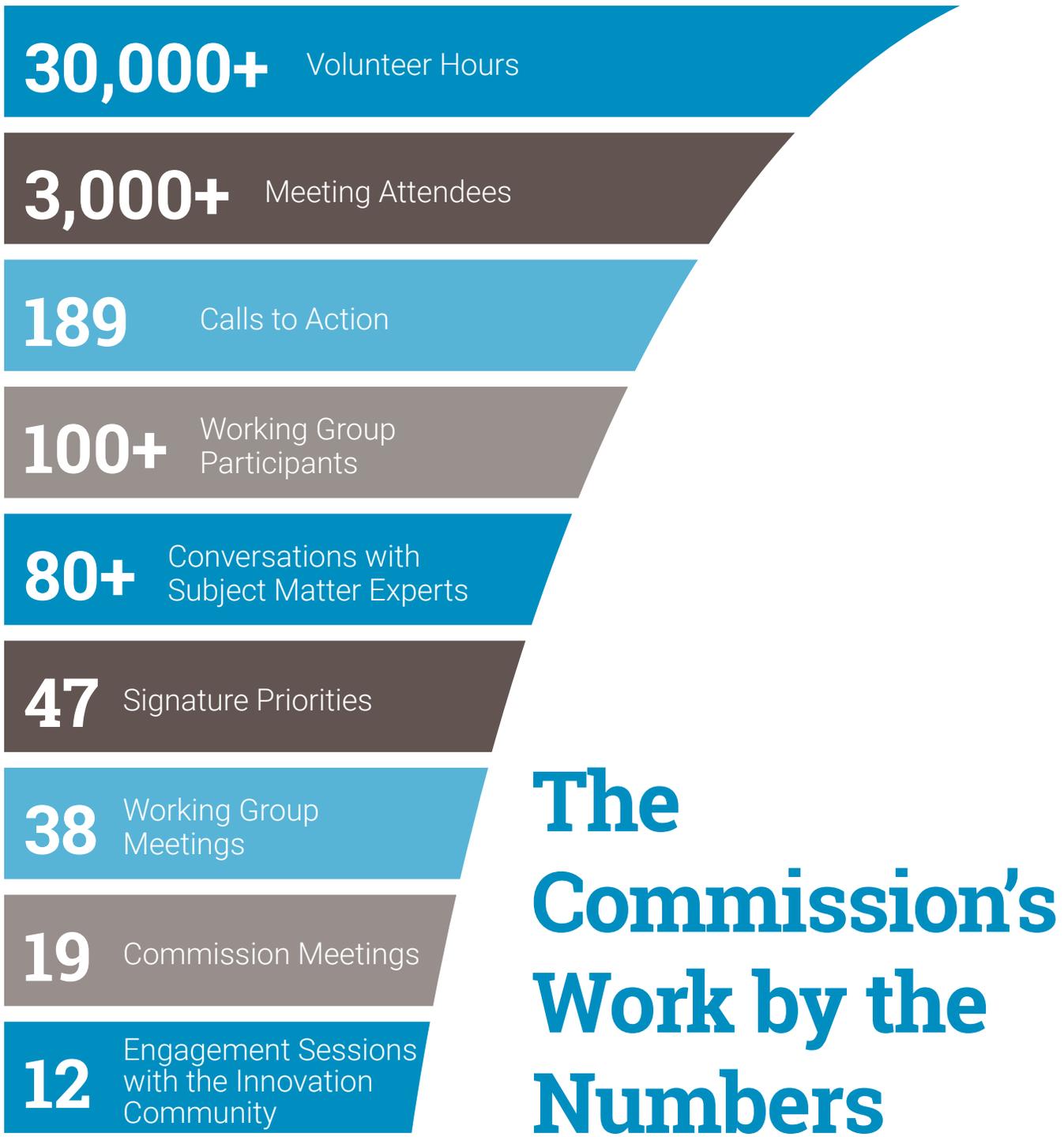
The 16 commissioners met regularly, and supported four topic-specific working groups:

1. *Child Well-Being and Education Equity*
2. *Citizen-Law Enforcement Relations*
3. *Municipal Courts and Governance*
4. *Economic Inequity and Opportunity*

Two commissioners were selected to serve as co-chairs for each working group. Stakeholder input was used to help the co-chairs identify and select the remaining members of the group.

Gathering input from subject matter experts internal and external to the working group, in addition to community feedback, these working groups crafted calls to action for approval by the full Commission. Each call to action also listed accountable bodies, whose participation was deemed critical to making the call a reality.

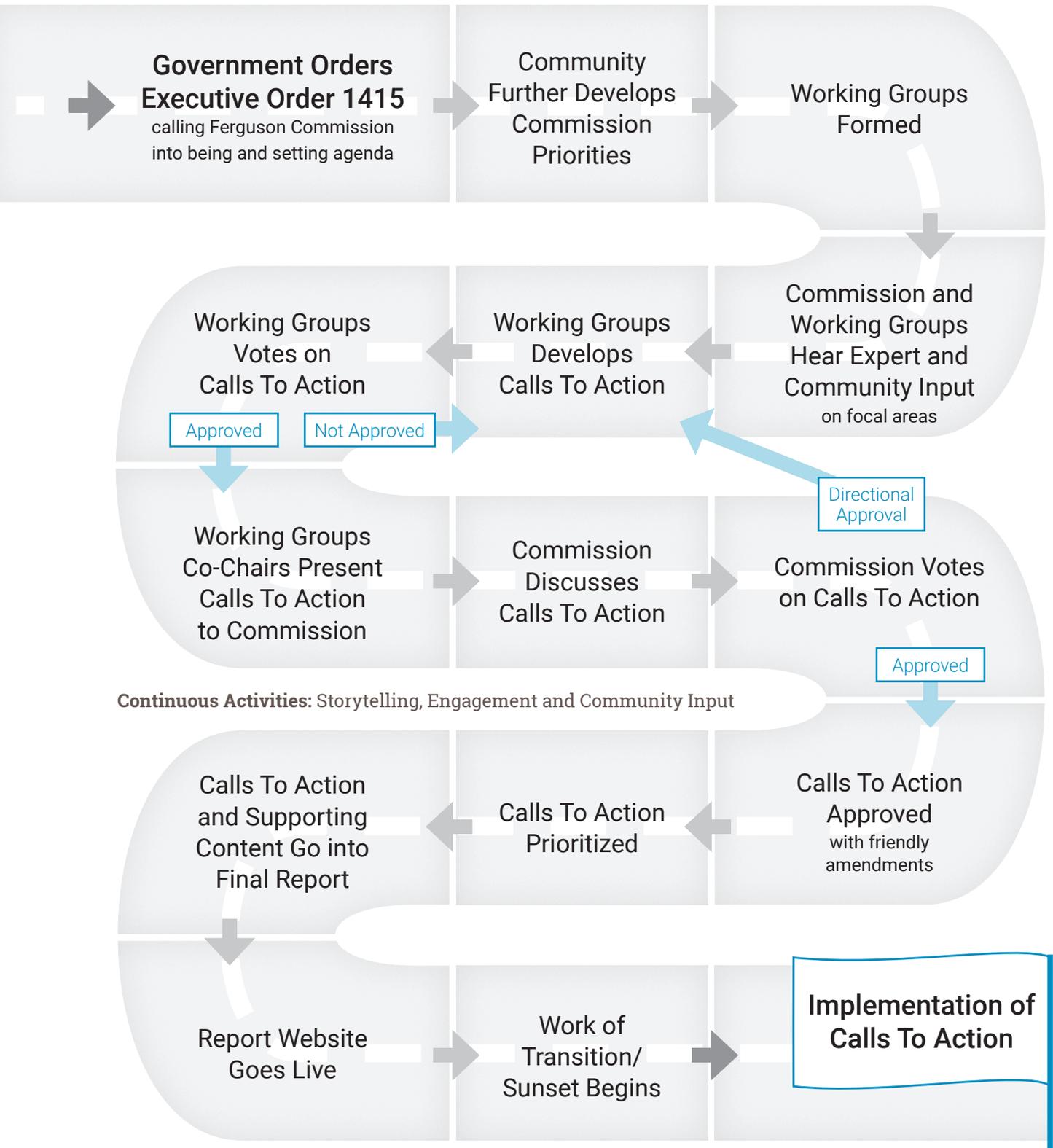
In total, the Commission approved 189 calls to action. Of these, 47 were identified as signature priorities, which were highlighted in the Commission’s final report.



The Commission's Work by the Numbers

In the 10 months between its appointment on November 18, 2014, and the release of its report on September 14, 2015, the Commission engaged with more than a hundred regional leaders, heard from more than a thousand community members, and learned from more than 80 subject matter experts. Synthesizing all of the information that it learned, the Commission recommended 189 calls to action in its final report, identifying 47 as signature priorities that it believed would have the most impact on the region.

Ferguson Commission Roadmap



While a simplification of the iterative process of gathering community and expert input and developing calls to action, the above schematic provides a broad sense of the path the Commission took to producing 189 calls to action and 47 signature calls to action. It also depicts how the Commission transitioned the work back to the community where the long-term work of implementation would be completed.

How the Ferguson Commission Approached its Work

Community trauma deeply affects and is affected by the ways in which systems work. The work of the Commission was thus closely linked to the pain of the community. Trauma and toxic stress can be thought of as a one-time or ongoing deeply disturbing experience often brought on by physical, economic, cultural, emotional, or environmental assault. Toxic stress can include exposure to physical or emotional abuse, violence, and/or increased economic hardship in the absence of adequate support.¹ While studies have shown that nearly everyone experiences toxic stress, minority and low-income communities face it more frequently and often have less access to support.^{2,3} Repeated exposure to toxic stress is harmful regardless of age, but especially for children. These effects include increased risk for stress-related disease and impaired cognitive development.⁴

Reducing the impact of toxic stress and trauma won't be easy. Systems must change to better serve the large number of survivors they work with. The attitudes of

individuals must change from a mindset of fear and hopelessness to a belief in the possibility for change and hope for the future. It will take the work of all of the region, including community members, educators, healthcare providers, and policy makers, but there is reason to believe that doing this work can hold the key to helping communities thrive.

From the beginning, the Commission was focused on producing a number of targeted policy calls to action to drive the region toward healing and positive change. Engaging in such

deeply personal, highly sensitive, and historically embedded work requires intentional effort to drive toward “unflinching” outcomes. Though the outcomes were unpredictable, the Commission made strategic decisions to ensure their time-delineated platform for change would produce the appropriate pathway to the vision of equity. Its approach can be defined through a series of commitments that functioned as an overarching strategy for moving and scaling such complex, urgent, unflinching work toward regional change through a commission:

Commitment 1: Build a Team Prepared for the Challenge

Commitment 2: Operate Based on Core Values

Commitment 3: Embrace the Process of Innovation

Commitment 4: Create Space for the Healing Process to Begin

Commitment 5: Commit to Advancing Racial Equity

Commitment 6: Leverage Existing Expertise

Commitment 7: Design a Network of Strategic Partnerships

Commitment 8: Optimize Engagement through Innovative Communication



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The Commission attempted to construct teams that were steeped in the work and committed to the core values. The commissioners and staff alike had to work collaboratively to produce and deliver insights worthy of the growing movement towards positive change the region began to undertake.

Create an Inclusive Commission.

The Commission benefited from the Governor’s staff selecting a

diverse set of commissioners, because it ensured many voices were included, and, perhaps even more so, because the commissioners were not simply a lineup of the “usual suspects” or familiar names who were regularly appointed to high-profile positions.

Select Generalists. While the staff benefited from including some specialists, the amorphous, evolving, unpredictable nature of the work lent itself to building a

team of flexible generalists who could bring a wide range of skills, expertise, and experience to the table. When expertise was needed, the Commission called upon existing organizations to loan a resource to the work. This allowed the work to get off the ground quickly, leverage existing skill-sets and capacities within the region, increase buy-in, and keep costs as contained as possible.



“We have to get over this one-face, one-leader, one-voice-represents-the-masses idea. Movements are the exact opposite of that—several faces, several come-froms, several factors, several things. Because movements aren’t about an individual.”

— Community member and advocate

Ease Difficulty through Strong Facilitation. The Commission engaged strong facilitators for Commission and working group meetings to foster productive discussion, ensure core values would be honored, and still adhere to the agenda. The abilities to map conversations real-time, synthesize nuanced debates, recall previous decisions, speed up or slow down discussions with ease, and propose solutions when members got stuck on next steps were all necessary for moving the work forward despite the complexity.

Take Care of Each Other, Take Care of Yourself. There was an emotional, psychological, and even physical toll to doing this work. Staff in particular often served as the “shock absorbers” in this process, absorbing the emotion, feedback, and conflicting direction from commissioners to community members. Thus, being a part of the Commission, and being a part of the staff especially, called for a massive commitment of time and energy—physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. The staff prioritized taking care of each other and

taking care of themselves and built an intentional work culture around this notion.

Remember the Purpose in the Work. The Commission knew that it was undertaking difficult work. It endeavored to address a complex web of intersecting social issues that the nation has wrestled with for centuries. The timeline for change is long; while the commissioners and staff knew there would be small victories along the way, they also knew that they may not see the full effect of the change within their lifetimes. Even for efforts where they might make progress in the near term, there was often no clear finish line.

Moreover, as a commissioner, as a member of the staff, or as a member of a working group, they knew they were more likely to receive criticism than praise, and that their efforts were more likely to be met with skepticism than optimism.

To do this work, then, they knew they must believe there was a greater purpose in it. This was not a job, or just another civic organization for which they might volunteer.

This was a cause. It was a calling.

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Commissioners and staff believed that if they approached the work the right way, they would achieve the best outcomes possible, regardless of the unexpected challenges or circumstances that arose. The core values articulated below represented what it meant to commissioners and staff to do the work the right way.

Honesty. We must be honest with ourselves, we must be honest with the public, and we must be honest with those who may least want to hear the uncomfortable truth.

Authenticity. We must be our true selves; we must be real. We cannot pretend or paper over those uncomfortable truths. This process will reveal painful, shameful realities about our region. We must acknowledge them, and we must acknowledge our role in them.

Accountability. We must hold ourselves accountable for abiding by these principles and adhering to these values as we do this work. We must hold the accountable bodies in our region and our state responsible, for their contribution to the current state of affairs, and to the work that lies ahead.

Transparency. We must be transparent in our work, not just because of the sunshine law, but because transparency is critical to trust, accountability, and credibility. We cannot be trusted and we cannot be credible if we are not transparent.

Vulnerability. We must be strong, for the work demands our strength, but we must be vulnerable, too. We cannot pretend to have all the answers; we must acknowledge that this is hard for us, too, and we must be willing to ask for help.

Humility. We must remember that it is an honor and a privilege to be entrusted by the community to lead this work. We must always remember that this work is bigger than any one of us.

"I love doing the soft work first—what people consider 'soft,' the rules of engagement, the guiding principles, the *how will you do this work*, the common agreement about our agenda together. That's what I would do first: How are we going to have conflict, how are we going to fight? Because we're going to. Let's be healthy about that. When you get up and walk away, does that mean leave me alone, or should I go chase you? I need to know *that* stuff—it short-circuits some of the entanglements down the road. Do your work up front, relationally and with people."

— Bethany Johnson-Javois,
Managing Director, Ferguson Commission



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Scaling solutions for such intimate work as a commission is not only powerful, it's also novel for the region—and in some respects, the nation. The unique, bold approaches the commission took to propose scaled solutions caused the work to function as a grand experiment in system-level change.

This is a Process of Discovery and Discernment. As it approached its task, the commissioners and staff knew they would discover what worked and what didn't. In this process of discovery, they would discern what the systemic issues really were, how they were connected, and where they came from.

Knowing that they would discover things along the way, they committed to being prepared to deviate from the original plan. As one staffer said, "Doing this work is like taking a flashlight into a cave, and committing to explore the contours and hidden tunnels of the cave, no matter how deep or how scary they may be."

Framework for Change

Discover and Discern

Enter with humility into the unknown.

Start with a Plan

Plan, but prepare for it to change.

Prototype and Iterate

Try out the plan and adjust.

Abandon as Applicable

Forget sunk costs. Let go and celebrate the learning.

Drive Towards Execution

Build knowing something must be executed.

Though never explicitly laid out, the Commission found itself applying and adhering to several guiding principles to help it adapt to change and innovate throughout the process.



Photo: David Dwight

A Plan is a Starting Point. As much as they developed a detailed plan and believed that the plan would work, the commissioners and staff were always prepared to change it. They prepared themselves to be flustered, for things not to work, to discover unexpected roadblocks ... for things to simply not go according to plan. Being willing to learn, and to apply new information, even if it completely upended the plan, was a key trait.

The mindset around planning was that even though it may change,

a plan is still valuable—it provides a starting point and a way to get things moving, but it's dangerous to cling to it too rigidly or fall in love with it. In fact, radical listening is likely to cause the plan to change.

Prototype and Iterate. The commissioners and staff embraced prototyping and iterating—developing a concept, putting it before the audience, seeing what worked, and adapting—quickly. They often went through multiple iterations of a concept until landing upon the right solution.

Be Willing to Abandon an Idea.

The team also embraced failure as an essential part of the process, understanding that even if something they had been working on for days didn't work, there was value in at least eliminating one possible option. In addition, ideas, phrases, concepts, and other snippets of work developed often resurfaced later, in a new approach, a new idea, or a new framing of an old idea.

Ideas are Great, but Practicality Matters.

In the process of discussing possible solutions, many brilliant but highly conceptual ideas were developed, many of which might have worked some day, but could not help the process in the present. The Commission wanted to keep an eye on the future, but worked to strike a balance of long-term vision and a practical, pragmatic approach to concrete next steps.

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People are rightfully and understandably frustrated by the inequity they have seen and experienced. The Commission understood that it should not dismiss or downplay that frustration, but rather honor it by absorbing an ounce of the community's pain along the long, collective journey toward healing.

Commit to a Trauma-informed Approach. Early in their process commissioners identified that the community had been impacted by significant trauma and toxic stress, in some cases for generations. Trauma and toxic stress can be thought of as a one-time or ongoing deeply disturbing experience often brought on by physical, economic, cultural, emotional, or environmental assault. The Commission embraced a trauma-informed approach through engagement sessions with the public by raising awareness of the issue, identifying trauma and toxic stress as a community priority in order to encourage systemic change, and identifying resources to help individuals reduce the

impacts of toxic stress and trauma, learn coping mechanisms, and plot a path toward healing. Making healing a community priority created access to new resources,

brought in crucial partners to create systemic change, and reduced the stigma that prevents people from getting the professional help they may need.



HONESTY ROOM



Photo: Nicole Hudson

Begin with Radical Listening.

At the first community meeting, commissioners spent significant time setting context and explaining details like compliance with the sunshine law. In all, it was three hours before the commission heard from the public. While the information in the opening session was important, waiting so long in that first meeting to allow the community to speak turned off the audience, who was hurt, frustrated, and angry, and who wanted to

be heard immediately. It became integral to the healing process for the community to be able to express pain and anguish even if it would seemingly disrupt traditional protocol. Moving community input towards the beginning of each agenda was a subtle, but powerful display of the commitment to allow the community to set the tone of each meeting.

This was significant as many members of the community

had felt invisible and unheard for so long. This process was an opportunity to truly listen, so that the Commission could more effectively act. The Commission committed to listening openly and patiently; to seeking first to understand, then to understand some more. They focused on listening not to respond, not to explain, but to allow people in the community who had been marginalized to genuinely feel heard, valued, and validated.

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The Commission committed to intentionally applying a “racial equity lens” to the work. Applying this racial equity lens meant considering racial disparities in areas including education, economic opportunity, health care, housing, transportation, childcare, business ownership, and family and community stability. In modeling the application of this lens for the region, important lessons were learned about moving hearts, minds, and institutions toward equity.

Lean Into the Discomfort. The Commission knew that talking about race, inequity, and privilege would make some people uncomfortable, and that even if they were not uncomfortable, they needed to understand and acknowledge that others might be. However, the commissioners and staff learned that discomfort means change is happening, and, when they sensed it, learned to lean in rather than back away.

Words Matter. People struggle with language around race and equity. One role the Commission embraced was to help people find



the language to talk about these issues—to define common terms to be able to discuss these issues productively.

Build the Business Case. Most people understand the social justice case for racial equity. But there is a business case for racial equity as well, with benefits to business, government, and the economy as a whole. While speaking to what is just, the Commission also spoke to the benefits that all segments of the community would experience if the

region could achieve greater racial equity.

See the Role of Policy. The Commission realized that progress toward racial equity should be achieved by long-term sustained work for policy change, not simply by creating new programs. Public policy was recognized to have played a key role in creating a racially segregated region. Any intention to significantly build a pathway towards racial equity necessarily involved changes to institutional policies.

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In examining the wide range of issues it explored, the Commission looked outside its members to gather insight from across the region and nation, tapping a range of different resources.

Expand the Definition of Expertise.

While many of the experts the Commission consulted came from academic fields, the Commission was intentional about also engaging those without formal training but respected knowledge. Much of the Commission's learning about the region's struggles came from these non-traditional experts whose life experience provided deep insight.

Have an "Honest Broker" in the Room. Some experts can be seen as biased. Having an "honest broker," a neutral research team trusted and assumed to present data from a balanced perspective or trained facilitators committed to honoring all perspectives, helped mitigate concerns over bias, especially when proposing action steps around politically charged issues.

Ensure Diverse Voices Around the Table. Each working group included a wide range of views, some at opposite extremes. As a result, any calls to action determined by consensus would have been

too safe. At some point in the debate, it became necessary to just call it to a vote. Online polls and voting proved effective in these instances. While having diverse views in the room made achieving consensus rare, it ensured that a broad range of perspectives were considered on all topics. It also furthered the credibility of the groups, and by extension, the Commission, because constituents felt their voice was represented in the decision-making process, even if they were not happy with a decision.

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Change efforts must happen within the context of a rich ecosystem. The Commission kept this in mind when launching and sustaining its work. The Commission also worked to recognize the dynamics at play, create points of entry for stakeholders and invite the environment to shift along with it as it learned.

Think Systemically (Embrace the Complexity). Too often this work is done piecemeal; people work on one facet of the issue even though all of these issues—schools, courts, policing, poverty, transportation, health—are interconnected. The Commission emphasized that these are systems problems that should not be reduced to a series of isolated issues. It acknowledged the connections, and worked to help others understand and appreciate the interconnectedness. The Commission was uniquely positioned to bring together people who had long addressed these issues in their own silos, to help them think systemically, and to get them to work together.

Prime Partners to Richly Engage in the Work. The Commission reached out for relationships with potential allies and partners in its earliest days—before they needed something from them. Because at that stage it was not always clear how partners might engage, the Commission's early partner outreach focused on critical relationship-building. As a response, the Commission communicated its objectives and provided briefings on early learnings, encouraging partners to tune their radar to issues of racial equity, and letting these partners know that the Commission respected their role and standing in the community, wanted and valued their input, and hoped to find ways for them to be a part of the solution. Partners would then often suggest ways they thought they could help and lend their particular skills, resources, expertise, or networks to the effort.

Build Bridges in All Directions.

The Commission’s approach to identifying partners was broad and inclusive. The Commission sought out partners in government agencies and public officials, in the corporate community, with civic groups, in the non-profit and foundation sectors, and in the grassroots organizing and activist communities.

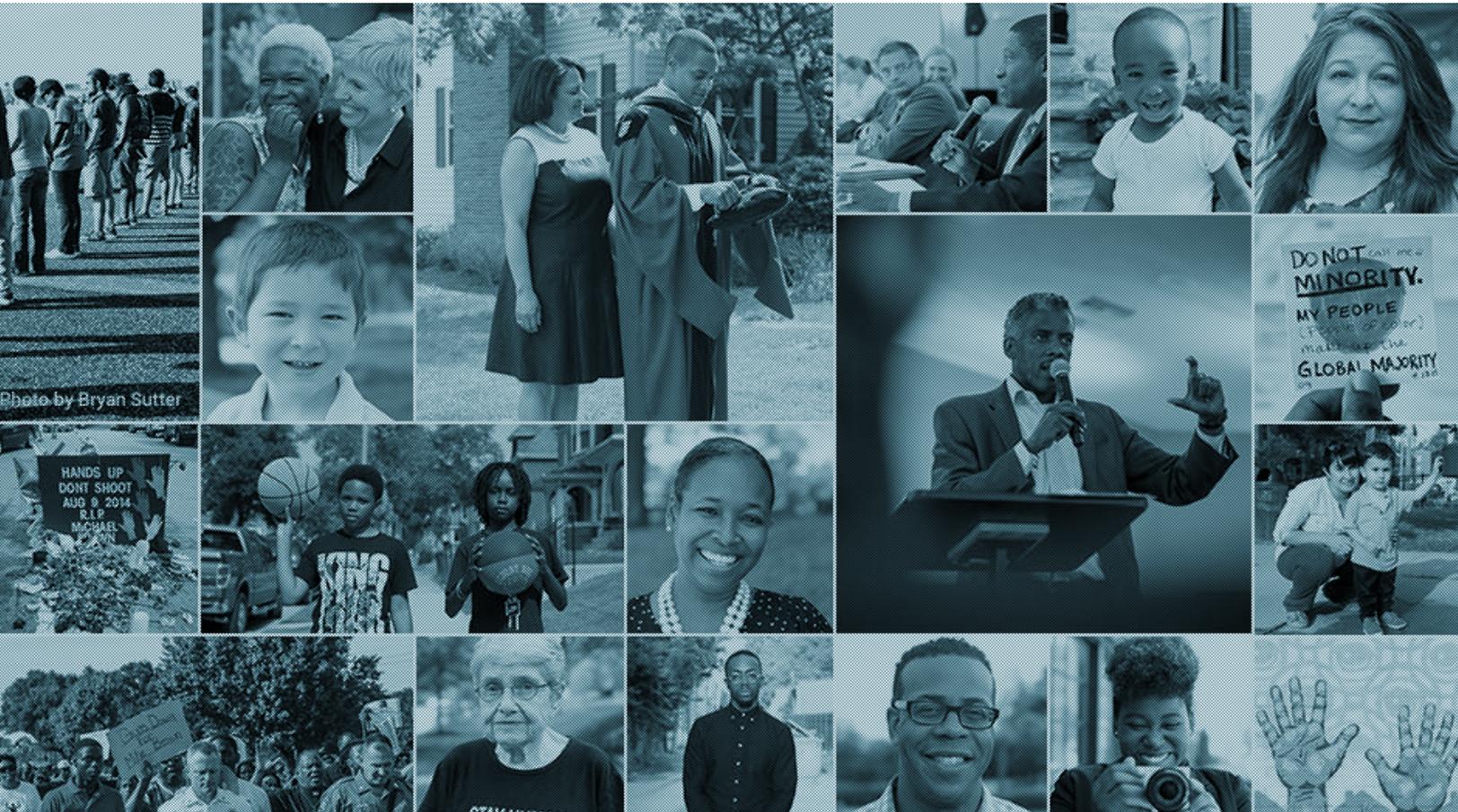
Pick Your Spots. Because the work was so complex, and because the Commission was working to bring so many partners to the table, the focus with partners was to get them to do what they did well, rather than to attempt something

outside of their comfort zone. In each partner engagement, the Commission sought to empower partners to do what they do extremely well, finding ways to contribute their unique personal and organizational skills, and thus let others do what they do extremely well.

Shift Solutions from Programs to Policy.

The Commission’s interest in affecting generational change led to its policy-focused orientation. Its subsequent calls to action focused on policy recommendations, rather than program recommendations. While programs are often designed to help alleviate community pain

that exists today, effective policies help prevent pain from occurring in the future. Unfortunately, funding streams and skill-sets of many players working toward positive change efforts across multiple sectors are not positioned, allowed, or asked to engage in policy work. Here policy work is not exclusive to legislation; rather policies are “covenants” made and agreed upon to cement how work is understood, sustained, and regulated. It can be significant for a region to shift into advocating for internal and external policy changes as opposed to programs alone, but it is necessary to guide stakeholders toward that distinction.



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It became clear early on that the Commission's work was not just delivering a report, but rather fueling a movement toward systemic change. Thus, a standard "getting the word out" communication strategy would not be sufficient. The objective could not simply be dissemination of information—it had to also include influencing perception and fostering engagement.

Go Beyond Just Getting the Word Out. While some of the region's citizens were acutely aware of the costs and impacts of racial inequity when this work began, others were largely unaware. If the region remained as divided in its awareness as it was in so many other areas, real change would be impossible. The Commission needed to create shared awareness of the region's harsh realities in order to gain support for the calls to action that addressed those realities. This need drove the effort to raise broad understanding and

consciousness of the issues the Commission was examining.

Tell Stories. Though there was ample data to demonstrate racial inequity in the region, the communications team knew that too often data failed to change hearts and minds. Their storytelling strategy put a face and a narrative to abstract issues, making them real, human, and concrete. Data can be easy to dismiss, but stories challenged the audience to actually deal with and engage with the people whose lives are reflected in that data. These stories were told across a variety of media: video, photography, audio, and written stories. As they put out more and more stories—primarily through the website, and then through social media—those stories were shared, and as word spread, more people with stories to tell were referred to the Commission and more people found their way into reading the report.

Consider a "Digital First" Release for Increased Engagement and Accessibility. Releasing the report digitally made it easily accessible and readable on devices most people have in their pockets, which encouraged exploration and engagement. In addition to driving people to the website to engage with the report, the communications team brought the report to where people already were—social media—and presented bite-sized chunks on those platforms so people could easily click, engage, and share the content. Much more so than any linear, print report, the report website enabled people to easily dive deep on a single topic and explore related topics. Finally, releasing the report online also meant that the report would be dynamic, not static. A more responsive report was a more engaging report. As one staffer said, "The best way to keep the report from gathering dust on a shelf is to not ever put it on a shelf."

What's Next?

The Ferguson Commission operated within a specific window of time: its report was due to the governor on September 15, 2015, less than a year after the Commission was created. Of course, the vast majority of the issues it was grappling with were not going to be resolved by September 15. Thus, while the Commission worked to affect policy change during its brief existence, and its report outlined the challenges and made policy recommendations for how to address them, an important part of its work was also to determine how the work it initiated would continue after the Commission's sunset on December 31, 2015.

Becoming More Than Just a Commission

By engaging the community, and abiding by a set of core values and guiding principles, the Ferguson Commission became much more than a group assembled to produce a study with a set of policy recommendations. In just 10 months, the Commission also became:

- *A place where the community could share its stories, and be heard;*
- *A home base for the community healing process;*
- *A communication hub, to keep the community informed on the issues the Commission was exploring;*
- *A central entity where the community could go with questions, for support, with offers of help, and more regarding these issues;*

- *A bridge between different sectors: community and business, community and government, etc.;*
- *A bridge between activists in the street and established civic, business, and government entities;*
- *An asker of difficult questions that needed to be asked—of public figures, of community leaders, and of the region;*
- *A giant spotlight illuminating situations, stories, and data that had been known for years to many, but had been largely ignored because no issue drew people's attention to them;*
- *An illuminator of connections between issues that may have previously seemed disparate, but had always been linked (such as housing, schools, law enforcement, municipal courts, economic opportunity, health, etc.);*
- *A hub and repository for local and national research related to these community issues;*
- *The region's "kitchen table"—a convener of conversations, and a reason for people to stay at the table to work on these issues; and*
- *A catalyst for follow-up, helping turn those conversations into action.*

The work was a notable start. Nevertheless, it was just a start. Sustained work and action on the calls made was an essential next step for the region.



Sustaining the Work

Because the Commission was created with an expiration date, after the report was complete it was important to identify an entity to continue the work and help implement the calls to action the Commission recommended. The process used to identify this entity was iterative and began with a public Request for Qualifications (RFQ) process.

At the final Ferguson Commission meeting a new partnership was introduced, “Forward through Ferguson,” which bridges the work of the Commission by securing institutional commitments from the commissioners and staff who were positioned to advance the work.

Key Lesson Learned: Start Thinking About Sustainability from the Beginning

As the Commission and community began to see and feel the positive impact the Commission was having, people began to get anxious

about what would come next: Who would continue the work of the Commission when the Commission was gone?

But the Commission had to first honor its specific charge of producing an unflinching report outlining a path forward for the region. To show a way forward, the report included signature priorities with related policy calls to action, national model examples, context and history, day-to-day implications, as well as other necessary tools and information. And while the report includes many specific policy calls to action, it is not an implementation plan. There was so much to do and so much to focus on in such a compressed timeframe that the Commission had little opportunity to work beyond the report it was charged to produce.

What this meant was that the report never spelled out step-by-step solutions, or answered questions about how proposed

solutions would be funded, as those things were beyond the scope of the Commission, the charge of which was to identify needed changes and call on those accountable for that change to act. Each individual or organization had to have a role in making these changes a reality.

Given the chance to start over, however, several stakeholders recommended incorporating this question of sustainability, and making time to design solutions, from the start.

There were several reasons offered for this. First, it provides more time to think about and explore options for the transition, rather than compressing this work into a short timeframe.

Second, the Commission’s work was focused on policy—and the policy-making process can be slow. If public affairs leaders were more aware of how the work would be sustained beyond the Commission’s sunset date, it may have eliminated the uncertainty some of them had about backing Commission-supported policy recommendations, likely benefiting the Commission’s public affairs efforts.

Third, thinking about sustainability from the start can inform other decisions made throughout the process and can enable Commission partners to think in terms of long-term relationships in addition to short-term efforts.

Could an Effort Like This Work Proactively?

The death of Michael Brown Jr. and the community outcry in response created a movement in the St. Louis region. This movement generated an urgency and focus that translated into the work of the Commission. That urgency and focus mobilized individuals and organizations. It kept media and community attention on the Commission and on the issues it explored. It also gave the Commission leverage—to bring people to the table and keep them there. It generated action, not just discussion.

While the Ferguson Commission was created in response to a specific situation, what happened in Ferguson didn't create that situation—it revealed difficult truths that had been reality for many people for many decades. The underlying issues that led to that situation exist, to varying degrees, in every metropolitan area in America.

But does a community need to wait for an inciting incident to have the urgency and focus this work requires?

Not necessarily. A proactive approach to this work could be effective if a community was able to create a movement that captured the hearts and minds of people without a single incident. But first, that community would have to turn the pain of inequity from what is common and accepted into something that is no longer mundane. If leaders in that community could make collective history feel like a discrete moment in time, and convey the severity of trauma and the weight of toxic stress, perhaps an additional incident would not be necessary to incite change. Instead, the stark reality of the damaging harms inflicted by inequity—in terms of health, wealth, access to opportunity and any number of other indicators—would be polarizing enough to catalyze action. Doing so would likely require key influencers including grassroots organizers in

that community to stand up and say that this is an urgent issue that needs to be addressed now—before it becomes something the community is forced react to. All this is, of course, challenging, but worthy of pursuit.

While the nature of the relationship between community trauma and the systems within that community can seem dire, that dynamic also holds the root of possibility for real change. If systems and community members can align themselves around these issues as the core of what is preventing them from thriving, there is the opportunity for real, long-term, systemic, and lasting change.

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All photos: Lindy Drew Photography unless otherwise noted.

Footnotes

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