

MADISON MAYORAL CAMPAIGN

## Mayoral issues series: Racial disparities, equity at center of campaign



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Perhaps like never before, Madison is facing challenges and ugly truths on racial disparity and equity.

Census estimates for 2008-12 show Madison's poverty rate at 18.5 percent — 15.6 percent for whites, 38.4 percent for blacks, 27.3 percent for Asians and 21.7 percent for Latinos. Almost half of students in city schools live in poverty and a large achievement gap exists between whites and blacks.

And the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families' "Race to Equity" report of October 2013 showed blacks fare far worse than whites in nearly every indicator of well-being for Dane County residents.

Amid those concerns, pent-up frustrations have roiled since a white police officer shot and killed Tony Robinson, a black, unarmed 19-year-old, during an altercation on the Near East Side on March 6.

It has all made racial equity a major focus in the campaign between Mayor Paul Soglin and challenger Ald. Scott Resnick in the April 7 election.

The city must better address disparities in education, employment, and incarceration, said Michael Johnson, president of the Boys & Girls Club of Dane County. "There has been some movement," he said. "We've got to move at a more aggressive pace."

The shooting tragedy can be a catalyst for change, he said.

"This young man is not going to die in vain," Johnson said. "Our city will become a better place because of it."

The Asian community, especially the Hmong, see school students limited by placement as English as Second Language learners, a lack of job opportunities, challenges in health care access, and underrepresentation in political institutions, said Yang Sao Xiong, assistant professor of social work and Asian-American studies at UW-Madison.

Karen Menendez Coller, executive director of Centro Hispano, said the Latino community is diverse, growing, and faces challenges in education, employment and a sense of isolation. "I wish we had more visibility and that our issues were a priority," she said.

Both candidates support a proposal to be introduced to the City Council as soon as Tuesday to create a special task force to examine police policies, procedures and training, especially with the use of force.

“It’s a step toward bridging the confidence level between the community and the police department,” Soglin said.

Resnick added, “We need to be diligent in the process and we need to listen in the process.” The city, he said, can’t treat the tragedy as a dichotomy, with people siding with Robinson or the police.

## **Efforts underway**

Many of the efforts or proposals the candidates cite as addressing racial disparities target the poverty that falls disproportionately on minority communities.

Since taking office, Soglin said he’s launched efforts and initiatives to address poverty and racial equity, including refocusing Neighborhood Resource Teams. That has resulted in new spending priorities such as bus service to the isolated Owl Creek neighborhood, park improvements, traffic calming, and a youth outreach worker in the North Side’s Brentwood neighborhood.

The city, he said, is engaged in three national efforts, including President Barack Obama’s My Brother’s Keeper program. Meanwhile, Soglin said he’s pushed changes in city government hiring practices, workplace culture, seasonal employee recruitment and other areas, and created youth internships. He also said he’s reached out to the private sector to change mindsets at companies to focus on internships, hiring and retention of minority employees.

The mayor cited the new Emerging Opportunities Fund, out-of-school time and healthy food initiatives, a shift to Housing First to address homelessness, and investing millions of dollars to expand neighborhood centers and libraries.

“These reflect systemic changes in how we do business and how we partner in the community,” Soglin said.

Resnick stressed his record as chief operating officer of the software firm Hardin Design & Development to promote equity in a field that’s among the least diverse in our state. He said he’s led efforts to bring industry leaders together with the Urban League of Madison to create learning opportunities and internships that pay a living wage.

On the City Council, he said he helped create a committee to bridge the digital divide, key for students who need access to the Internet to perform well in school. He said he’d partner with the schools to provide all low-income families with a portable router that connects with the citywide network.

## **Further action is key**

The Race to Equity report was a call to action to address structural racism, Resnick said. “We all need to be held accountable, including myself, the mayor, the council and the community,” he said.

Madison must do better on early childhood care, encouraging strong neighborhoods, job

creation and alternative sentencing, he said. The challenge is that the city, school district and Dane County have financial limitations to quickly resolve issues that have been building for generations, he said.

Soglin said, “Tragically, it’s taken Race to Equity and the death of Tony Robinson to rattle a good part of the city.”

The city will have the most difficulty closing disparity gaps in child care for low-income families, which could cost up to \$3 million; the criminal justice system, which has responsibilities divided between the city, Dane County and state; and academics, Soglin said.

The need for early intervention and assistance to minority youth in the criminal justice system, for example, hasn’t been a major focus of the philanthropic community, he said.

Soglin said he’d continue and expand efforts on internships, jobs, out-of-school time, child care, housing, health care and transportation.

“Clearly, the problem has been identified,” he said. “Now the key is getting action. Now the job is to continue the momentum.”

Resnick said he’d propose a plan to increase the number of child care providers, support new and existing operations with an eye to a 24-hour facility, and increase the number of scholarships for low-income families.

Minority communities would also benefit from a special business fund, similar to the \$1.5 million women’s entrepreneurial fund he sponsored in the 2015 budget, he said. He said he’d also seek to improve public transit across the city, bring new voices to the table and offer a new style of leadership.

## **ON THE ISSUES**

This is the fourth in a six part, occasional series on the key issues in the Madison mayoral race. You read can previous stories in the series, as well as our candidate profiles and other coverage of the race at [go.madison.com/mayor15](http://go.madison.com/mayor15).