

Conference to look at city's economic inequality - Dallas: Variety of leaders to seek public policies to boost quality of life

Dallas Morning News, The (TX) - Wednesday, October 26, 2005

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Hundreds of civic, business, education and political leaders will gather Thursday in Dallas for what organizers call a communitywide conversation on economic disparities within the city, their impact and solutions.

The daylong conference at the Westin Galleria is the first such gathering of the J. McDonald Williams Institute, the research arm of the Foundation for Community Empowerment. The foundation works for the revitalization of low-income neighborhoods in Dallas.

"This is not about research for research's sake, but how it can be applied to help inform a better discussion of public policy that will result in measurable changes," said J. McDonald Williams, chairman and founder of the Foundation for Community Empowerment.

Mr. Williams, who is chairman emeritus of Trammell Crow Co., said those attending the conference come from a broad range of backgrounds, and include grassroots leaders, representatives of nongovernmental organizations and academics.

Mr. Williams said his foundation seeks not only to empower people, but also to change systems that help perpetuate community social and economic disparities, as well as to mobilize and advocate for those changes.

"Getting at good data helps us have a better understanding about the realities and what can be done about it," he said.

Cecilia Edwards, president and chief executive officer of the Foundation for Community Empowerment, said the conference will concentrate on six major areas of concern in the city: education, health, crime and safety, housing and economic development, social capital, and urban revitalization.

She said the institute will introduce "The Wholeness Index," a tool that helps researchers measure and report on a community's disparities. The index will look at economic opportunity in communities, self-sufficiency and civic engagement. An annual report on these areas will let residents know which have the greatest need and impact.

"It's important to realize that economic disparities are not just something that affect one section of the city or one community, but they have an impact on the overall city," she said. "We are focusing on making the city whole, by reducing the level of disparity that exists in the city," Ms. Edwards said.

During the conference, the Williams Institute also will introduce the first six research fellows, who write papers about community revitalization issues. And recipients of the "Let Justice Roll on Like a River" awards will be announced. Featured luncheon speaker will be Jim Wallis, best-selling author and a progressive evangelical leader.

Mr. Williams emphasized that the focus of the conference is to put into practice information about how to improve conditions in the city.

"The world is filled with research and studies and books about poverty issues and education and affordable housing, but poverty is not getting any better," he said.

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Edition: NORTH

Section: METRO

Page: 6B

Record Number: 1180186564

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