The Urgency of Change

A political climate in which racism is espoused from the nation's highest office did not temper the W. Haywood Burns Institute’s (BI) work in 2018. With a galvanized internal structure, strengthened and growing partnerships and projects, and a new vision of structural well-being, BI continues to work to eliminate racial and ethnic disparities by growing a community-centered, equitable, and restorative justice model. Now more than ever, our work is necessary, impactful, and urgent.

Redefining Our Safety

As we approach almost 20 years of advocacy for a fair and equitable administration of justice, we have many challenges and opportunities before us. We live in a period of mass incarceration fueled by factors which – at first blush – seem too powerful to overcome. Using incarceration as a primary instrument of social control is backward-looking and fails to meet societal demands in a more connected, competitive and greener world. Crime and punishment in our country has resisted modern notions of dignity and humanity in the treatment of law violators. But change is coming from historically-silenced voices that are growing in number and strength. Communities of color, formerly incarcerated folks, LGBTQ communities, researchers, and policy advocates are challenging the status quo and looking to new approaches to achieve community safety.

The Burns Institute has been a part of this movement since its inception. We have extended our work beyond reducing the harms of justice system involvement. We are now setting a vision for transformation. We are moving toward a new north star of accountability steeped in restoration, healing, interventions and well-being for people of color. We are deconstructing structural racism and redefining safety beyond the outdated ideas of custody, control and suppression. This task is not for the faint of heart, but we will continue to move forward fiercely in our efforts to have communities thrive and prosper.

Inner Workings: The Burns Institute’s New Executive Structure

This year was the first full year with BI’s re-invigorated Executive Team at the helm. James Bell, now in his role as Founder and President, continues to shape the vision of BI while CEO Tshaka Barrows tends to the overall workings of our organization, from grant partnerships to internal structure. Samantha Mellerson, Chief of Strategy and Impact, advances BI’s vision by assuring the efficiency and impact of our staff. And Michael Finley, Chief of Strategy and Implementation, directs and strengthens our programmatic work. Together, the team will push forward as the organization takes on new and exciting work in 2019.
Burns Institute Initiatives Thrive in 2018

Our Stats:
Collaborated with and trained:
360 youth/youth serving organizations
800 system stakeholders
374 community engagement stakeholders
190 child welfare system advocates
5 philanthropic partners throughout
26 states
3 tribal communities

Reducing the Harm of Today, and Building the Structural Well-Being of Tomorrow

As a result of decades of reform efforts, the overall number of incarcerated people has declined. Yet there has been an increase in disparities for people of color. Our new structural well-being approach builds on our successful data-driven site-based approach to engage the historical and structurally racist drivers of the administration of justice that are steeped in racial hierarchy and social control.

“The persistent and seeming intractable nature of race and ethnicity in the justice apparatus presents significant dangers for communities of color,” says BI’s founder, James Bell. “Genuine and lasting solutions for change require deep dives into the local institutional and community cultural norms that affect each local justice apparatus. It is in this space beyond data that the BI’s new agenda is engaging.”

BI is on the path to further shape and publicize this work in 2019.

A Broader Perspective

BI does not believe the answers we seek will only be found here at home.

Rather, reimagining justice requires a worldly perspective not anchored in suppression, custody, and control.
BI continues to be a resource for the most up-to-date data on the state of racial and ethnic disparities throughout the nation with our interactive map. In 2019, BI will enhance our map to allow a comprehensive analysis of decision-making in California.

BI co-sponsored two successful pieces of legislation that will help mitigate the existing racial and ethnic disparities in California’s justice system.

- SB 1391 ended the adult court prosecution of 14- & 15-year-olds.
- SB 439 ended the prosecution of children under 12.
- BI was proud to partner with youth serving organizations to promote the Youth Reinvestment Fund, more than $37 million designed to divert youth from the justice system by investing in community-based alternatives.

Our JDAI effort continues to nurture partnerships with tribal leaders, community members, and formerly incarcerated youth with the Pueblo of Isleta in New Mexico, the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, and the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe in Minnesota. JDAI work in Native Country requires humility, cultural responsiveness, and historical competency before and during engagement with each individual tribe, band, or nation. We are compiling a collection of lessons learned, which we will include in an upcoming publication on promising practices for JDAI in Native Country.

Our grassroots community network of over 140 groups has made measurable progress to replace the “cradle-to-prison pipeline”. In 2018, CJNY reinvigorated its regional member convenings. We will host more in 2019! The NYABMC resourced over 20 youth-led campaigns that focused on the divestment and dismantling of harmful and punitive institutions that criminalize young people of color. The campaigns, led by those most impacted by the system, are investing in youth leaders and communities to build culturally-based, community-centered restorative alternative justice systems.

Our significant progress to reduce racial and ethnic disparities in youth justice jurisdictions around the country has poised BI to expand its work into the adult system – a longtime request of BI supporters. BI is stepping into our second year as a technical assistance provider for the Safety and Justice Challenge, working closely with partners and communities on the racial and ethnic disparities in the adult system. We recognize mass incarceration as the economic engine of structural racism and we continue to fight for and with our impacted communities toward real justice.
Your Continued Support

We end 2018 with enduring gratitude for the many people who have made our work possible with their generous support. We look forward to continuing to work closely with you – and showing you what’s possible in eliminating racial and ethnic disparities, breaking down structural barriers to inequity, and seeking well-being for all. We invite you to follow our work at www.burnsinstitute.org.

Please consider a donation to ensure we can continue to improve the lives of people of color involved in the administration of justice in 2019 and beyond.

Please consider making a donation of any size to support our mission.

We appreciate your support!

DONATE NOW!