

NEW Reviews

By Nancy Welch
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Driving Local Investment for Black Arizonans

The State of Black Arizona, October 2021

In an early chapter of *Until I Am Free: Fannie Lou Hamer's Enduring Message to America*, a recent biography of the civil rights icon, historian Keisha Blain tells of Hamer's determination to always "tell it like it is." Her devotion to sharing the truths of lived experience was fundamental, as was her belief in the power of local leadership, even in a national movement.

Driving Local Investment in Black Arizonans follows Hamer's lead. This fifth volume from State of Black Arizona connects the dots from the past and present to the future for Black Arizonans through data on education, the economy, infrastructure, health, and civic life. The work highlights the importance of state and local leadership now to break down persistent barriers to "Black Arizonans' prosperity and their ability to continue to build thriving communities and fully participate in the economy."¹

Directed by The State of Black Arizona and written by JDD Specialties, the project was underwritten by boldface sponsors and advised by a Steering Committee which included representatives from Center for the Future of Arizona, Greater Phoenix Economic Council, Mass Mutual, APS, Black Chamber of Arizona, Greater Phoenix Urban League, and Arizona Center for Economic Progress. Our interesting times shaped the publication also, considering Covid's health, economic, and social effects, a resurgence of (and pushback on) interest in improving diversity, equity, and inclusion throughout the economy and society, and the aftermath of the 2020 election, to name only some of the defining characteristics of the past few years. Discussions with community leaders and public opinion surveys about issues and priorities for Black Arizonans set the focus on education, economy, and infrastructure as core issues with healthcare and civic life as emerging topics.

Driving Local Investment details circumstances and their consequences for Black Arizonans in the five areas, including such aspects as disparities among population groups in educational achievement and earnings, differences in rates

¹*Driving Local Investment in Black Arizonans*, The State of Black Arizona, October 2021, p. 5. Full disclosure: I have worked with State of Black Arizona and executive director Teniqua Broughton in the past.

of homeownership and wealth, deficiencies in broadband, transportation, and other services that limit access to high-paying jobs, negative realities in healthcare, and effects of uneven civic participation and leadership.

The authors acknowledge that these situations or the premise of this publication are not new. However, that does not make their eradication any less important. To resolve the issues constraining Black Arizonans, State of Black Arizona and its partners call for “a multi-pronged policy effort, both at the state and local level working in tandem to ensure access to high-quality career and educational pathways. We need to center job quality in our workforce so that everyone has the opportunity to thrive and live with dignity. We need leaders that are committed to building infrastructure that modernizes where we live and work.”

The publication’s 13 multi-part, systemic recommendations and calls for more and better data about Black Arizonans comprise a reparative and constructive agenda, rather than a step-by-step plan. The actions will be familiar to and supported by many public policy players across sectors and interests. The desired actions in *Driving Local Investment* range from early childhood education and full-day K, a diverse teaching workforce, and reducing financial barriers to college and career pathways to investing in high-quality jobs and boosting home ownership to increasing access to quality broadband and public transportation services and more. The agenda’s strong sense of urgency and emphasis on connections among issues and their implications reinvigorate these frequently discussed and worked-for ideas and invite greater commitment to change throughout Arizona.

Driving Local Investment in Black Arizonans, because of its nod to history, significant agenda, and recognition of intersections among issues, is a valuable publication, especially now when so many are intent on moving diversity, equity, and inclusion ahead. The changes recommended would do much to eliminate disparities and ensure that Black Arizonans—and indeed all in the state—have the opportunity to do more and better. However, given Arizona’s past and present politics, achieving them will take not just state and local leadership, but also fortitude and time. Each recommendation implies multi-faceted success across numerous spheres of influence.

Every educator, policy maker, economic developer, civic leader, medical professional, business person, and civic advocate will want to read this publication and consider where and how they can help make the agenda into lasting successful policies, programs, and practices. Every institution, whether already engaged in some aspects of the agenda or just thinking about it, should reach out for collaboration.

Information for public action is always necessary, but is rarely sufficient. Investment, leadership, implementation, resources, and persistence matter too. Because this agenda will most likely be completed over time and many leadership changes, a deeply knowledgeable “watch dog” for specific actions and overall progress for Arizonans seems necessary. For example, recent broadband improvement grants through new federal infrastructure funds hold promise for underserved communities, but how the projects are implemented will be critical to monitor. Keeping a close eye on initiatives underway and in the planning stages, potential legislation, and existing and new collaborations in relation to the *Driving Local* agenda may be a role State of Black Arizona and partners choose to play. Otherwise, opportunities for the dramatic changes called for may be missed.

Arizona in 2022 is larger, older, and more diverse than it used to be. The economy has grown and diversified. The state may be different, but history is always close at hand and “every generation must do its part to push forward.” *Driving Local Investments in Black Arizonans* provides a valuable roadmap for a more prosperous future for the state.