

# A BLACK AGENDA FOR TENNESSEE

Tennessee's governments of all levels need to adopt a Black Agenda. The fact that the black poverty rate in Knoxville is 41.6%<sup>1</sup> is a clear indicator that programs and efforts at equality to date have been ineffective.

**“How far in a state can a recognized moral wrong safely be compromised?”**

**-W. E. B. Du Bois**

Black people and Black communities deserve and demand thoughtful, visionary, and alternative policies that address the issues important to their communities. This Black Agenda has been inspired by presidential candidates like Elizabeth Warren and developed with input from black leaders in Knoxville and other parts of Tennessee, and the Federal-Level Black Agenda 2020<sup>2</sup>, which Matthew Park has endorsed. It has been constructed with an eye toward specific policies that are needed in Tennessee at the state level, though many policies will require the partnership of local municipalities.

## RACIAL EQUITY FRAMEWORK

All decisions of government made shall be made using the Racial Equity Framework<sup>3</sup>. Training on the framework should be provided to every government employee and legislator.

## FINANCIAL

1. Create a new, non-profit black-led banking institution state-wide with a \$41 million grant.
  - a. This bank will be responsible for administering the state's microloans program, which will give no-interest loans of up to \$50,000 to local businesses that need startup or growth capital.
2. Ban on pay-day loans and other predatory lending institutions that disproportionately affects the black community<sup>4</sup>.
3. Implement a nano-capital program through a public-private partnership to provide low barrier capital to support small businesses and reduce racial inequality.
  - a. Low barrier entry for entrepreneurs to get capital grants of up to \$5,000.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.welfareinfo.org/poverty-rate/tennessee/knoxville>

<sup>2</sup> <https://black2thefuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/BlackAgenda2020.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <http://greenlining.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/GLI-REF-Toolkit.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.scribd.com/document/368207795/Fighting-Predatory-Lending-in-Tennessee-Metro-Ideas-Project>

- b. See the full Nano-capital policy brief for more information<sup>5</sup>.
4. Fund grants to local small business mentor and incubator organizations that provide assistance with marketing, accounting, tax planning and preparation, business continuity planning, recruiting and hiring, training, crucial conversations training, financial planning, and other crucial services.

## TRANSPORTATION

1. Create the Bureau of Passenger Rail within the Tennessee Department of Transportation.
  - a. Initially fund passenger rail projects which use existing track as a majority of the project's line.
  - b. Require that stops and stations be built first in low-income black neighborhoods. The stations should be co-designed with the communities in which they will be located.
  - c. Passenger rail infrastructure should look to work in partnership with local transit such as buses and pedestrian spaces to reduce average commutes as much as possible.
2. Public transit fees are a regressive tax and directly disadvantage the poor. Additional state funding should be made available to urban and rural public transit systems that do not charge rider fees to individuals making less than \$50,000/year.
3. Local transit authorities should be incentivized with state grant funding to create fixed lines to rural areas to service rural workers that work in the surrounding cities.

## HEALTH

1. Black Americans are more likely to die at an early age from all causes<sup>6</sup>.
  - a. In order to monitor the impact of black health in hospitals, an oversight board will be established. 75% of the board will be black community members.

On a quarterly basis, all hospitals will submit reports to the board, and any hospital found to have improper mortality rates will be fined or be subject to investigation. On a yearly basis, the Oversight Board may require the

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<https://content.web-repository.com/s/69667442445218811/uploads/policies/Nano-Capital-8082667.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/aahealth/index.html>

hospital to make direct improvements and policy changes to improve rates for specific causes of death.

- b. Increase public funding for community healthcare centers and public health information.
  - c. Make it easier for new hospitals and medical centers to open state-wide by reforming the Certificate of Need process<sup>7</sup>.
  - d. Improved accessibility to healthcare facilities in traditionally black communities. This includes incentivizing the opening of healthcare centers in black neighborhoods, and providing grants to local public transit authorities to create robust transit networks that allow people to easily get from home to routine medical appointments.
  - e. Incentivize doctors and hospitals to have better health outcomes instead of profit margins.
  - f. Focus on, and fund, health and wellness care instead of focusing on “sick care.”<sup>8</sup>
  - g. Work to end bias in treatment, such as in pain management, where black people are systemically undertreated<sup>9</sup>.
2. The infant mortality rate among black mothers is nearly twice that of white mothers in Tennessee<sup>10</sup>.
- a. Require the inclusion of doula care in private and government-funded healthcare coverage.
  - b. Implement a state-wide Baby Box Program. See full policy for more details<sup>11</sup>.
3. To combat food deserts, offer incentives to build grocery stores or neighborhood food co-ops that sell healthy, but affordable foods.
- a. The first incentive is a sliding scale, the higher the rate of poverty in the potential grocery store’s census tract, the greater the capital incentive from the state.
  - b. If the grocery store is more than 60% owned by a black community member, an additional incentive will be added. *“No organizations track the number, but sources familiar with the situation and some of the remaining grocers suggest that fewer than 10 Black-owned supermarkets remain across the entire country.”*<sup>12</sup>
  - c. Neighborhood Food Co-ops will be incentivized via state-backed no-interest loans up to 100% cost of construction and opening plus three

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.tn.gov/hsga/certificate-of-need-information/certificate-of-need-basics.html>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4339086/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4843483/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/infant-mortality-rate-by-race-ethnicity>

<sup>11</sup>

[https://content.web-repository.com/s/69667442445218811/uploads/policies/Baby\\_Boxes-8084607.pdf](https://content.web-repository.com/s/69667442445218811/uploads/policies/Baby_Boxes-8084607.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> <https://civileats.com/2018/01/08/why-are-there-so-few-black-owned-grocery-stores/>

months of operat. Neighborhood Food Co-ops will also be eligible for the same direct capital incentives as private grocery stores.

- d. Repeal the regressive tax on groceries. All groceries, menstruation products, and essential health needs should be tax-free.

## VOTING RIGHTS

1. Voting rights are just that, rights. No person should be disenfranchised from their right to vote.
  - a. Immediately restore the voting rights of all those in Tennessee who have been disenfranchised.
  - b. Ban unilateral voter registration purges.
  - c. Implement automatic voter registration. Anytime a person interacts with a government department (i.e. getting a driver's license, getting food assistance, obtaining a building permit, etc) their voter registration will automatically be filed or updated.
  - d. Repeal voter identification laws that are a burden to many black people and hinder their right to vote.
  - e. Allow no-excuse absentee voting through vote-by-mail.

## HOUSING

1. Endow local black-led Community Land Trusts<sup>13</sup> to combat displacement and the targeted destruction of black neighborhoods.
  - a. Increase opportunities for renters to become homeowners.
  - b. By increasing homeownership, the cycle of poverty can more easily be broken, and families can build generational wealth.
2. Increased fines and penalties for banks and lenders found to discriminate against the black community.
3. Increase public funding for subsidized and affordable housing.
  - a. Invest in creating new subsidized housing and affordable housing units.
  - b. Update all current subsidized and affordable housing.

## EDUCATION

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<sup>13</sup> <https://groundedsolutions.org/strengthening-neighborhoods/community-land-trusts>

1. Grant monies to ensure Tennessee's seven Historically Black Colleges and Universities are thriving and will remain so over the long term.
2. \$25 million targeted grant for Knoxville College to renovate and upgrade key portions of campus.
3. Implement universal childcare. Most black people in Knoxville would have to work full time from January to June in order to pay for childcare for one infant<sup>14</sup>.
4. Implement universal preschool. High-quality universal preschool for three and four-year-olds.
5. Enable educators and education professionals to fix the state's broken BEP formula so that equality of funding exists in inner city schools.
6. Investments and funding in inner city schools should be increased to overcome the historical underfunding that is systemic in Tennessee.

## CRIMINAL JUSTICE

1. End Money Bail and Exorbitant Fines and Fees.
  - a. Mass incarceration has been fueled by cash bail. Working-class people in pre-trial detention can lose their jobs, children, homes, and vehicles because of the inability to pay bail. When using a bail bondsman, installment plans on the money can cause a financial disaster. All this while wealthy people are able to bail out on almost any crime from assault to manslaughter.
  - b. Working-class people are more likely to take plea deals when they cannot afford bail, leading to innocent people pleading guilty.
  - c. The state government should make grants to assist municipalities in replacing pre-trial systems designed for money bail.
2. End for-profit practices. Capitalism has no place in our justice system.
  - a. For-profit practices in the criminal justice system further cause financial hardship for families and their incarcerated loved ones. A clear example of this is the high cost to make phone/video calls to jails and prisons.
3. End arbitrary time-based sentences, including mandatory minimums, that have consistently been targeted at the black community.
  - a. Mandatory minimums are cruel, ineffective, and racist. Instead of sentencing based on "time for the crime," judges should be sentencing to holistic transformation plans based on input from mental health professionals, substance abuse counselors, education experts, and others. The state's job is not to "get even," but to assist in a convicted person's treatment and transformation.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.epi.org/child-care-costs-in-the-united-states/#/TN>

4. End the death penalty.
  - a. Death penalties are cruel and unusual punishment. Capital cases are also more expensive than in cases where the prosecutor is seeking a life sentence.
5. End the school to prison pipeline by implementing a restorative justice model, eliminating zero-tolerance policies and limiting the presence of police in schools.<sup>15</sup>
6. Grant power to community police oversight boards to have subpoena and disciplinary authority to supervise the police.
7. Mandate all police departments to participate in cultural development programs and racial equity framework training. Full training should occur during the academy, with update training each year, and full course refresher every three years.
8. Require three seats on the Board of Parole to be reserved for members of the black community.

## **JUST TRANSITION TO A GREEN ECONOMY**

1. Ensure that green infrastructure is built in black neighborhoods first and at an equitable rate.
2. Infrastructure and other contracts must use at least 35% local, black-owned businesses.
3. Offer jobs in the Tennessee Conservation Corps that would retrofit homes and rentals to be more sustainable. This would lower carbon emissions and reduce utility bills for residents.
4. Fund community food gardens with state grants.
  - a. Prevent local utility companies from charging wastewater fees for community gardens where only water, not wastewater, service exists.
  - b. Provide training to teach people to grow food and prepare food from the garden into meals and canned storage.

## **CONCLUSION**

1. This Black Agenda should evolve to incorporate new ideas and data as they become available.
2. In order for progress to be made, this Black Agenda is a progressive one. Making root-and-branch structural change requires tremendous progressive ideas and a willingness to reimagine systems.

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<sup>15</sup><https://www.thepraxisproject.org/blog/2019/8/21/breaking-the-school-to-prison-deportation-pipeline-through-restorative-justice>

3. Submit new ideas for inclusion in this plan by emailing [info@matthewpark.com](mailto:info@matthewpark.com).