

OPINION

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"Ask yourself one question. 'Is it right?' Then do what you believe is best for your town, your state and your country." — James M. Cox, founder, Cox Enterprises

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SUNDAY ISSUE: GIVING THANKS, AND HELPING OTHERS

OPINION

Be thankful and keep striving

We must launch targeted interventions to permanently solve region's persistent inequities.

By Milton J. Little Jr.

When I was child, my father worked for the phone company in New York. Once, there was a series of strikes that lasted a year-and-a-half, during which time my father had no income. Like so many families during that time, we struggled.



Little

One day a food basket appeared on my dining room table and I later found out that it was because of United Way. I was grateful at the time, as I am grateful now seeing how the nonprofits in our community stepped up and

stepped in during the pandemic. If it weren't for them and for our own dedicated team at United Way of Greater Atlanta, the toll on children, families and communities would have been substantially greater.

This holiday season, I am thankful for the many donors — individuals, corporations, foundations and others — who made it possible for United Way to invest almost \$44 million in supporting the improvement of child well-being across our region over the past year — representing many meals for hungry families, but also job training, educational opportunities, increased access to

quality child care and health care, and other vital programs to make Greater Atlanta a more equitable and thriving region.

I am grateful for the hundreds of donors who united to raise over \$28 million for the COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund — formed in partnership with the Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta — and for our 481 nonprofit partners who quickly got those funds to people in urgent need of food, housing, child care and more. I am gratified that, in partnership with the city of Atlanta, we were able to keep over 8,000 individuals, children and families housed and safe from eviction.

It is my hope that all of this support made for many more happy Thanksgivings across greater Atlanta.

While recovery is underway in many parts of the community, and federal funds have provided temporary emergency assistance to thousands of families and individuals, many others were left further behind or more severely affected by the pandemic. A disproportionate number of these people are Black and brown people, and particularly women — a fact that impacts the well-being of our entire community.

The 2021 Atlanta Regional Commission Metro Atlanta Speaks survey showed that two of three respon-

dents believe that high levels of income inequality have a negative impact on the economy; and more than three in four say that ensuring racial equity is essential to maximizing economic growth in our region. Prominent economists have shared data supporting those beliefs. Equitable recovery is the path to improving well-being and prosperity for everyone in the community.

United Way and our nonprofit partners have identified six areas requiring our community's urgent attention. Unaddressed, these areas of need will hold us back from achieving truly equitable recovery from the pandemic and arresting the disparities that predated it. But if we unite to tackle these challenges, we can power greater Atlanta's potential to be the thriving, equitable region we know it can be.

Children living in families that lacked the technology and support to keep up with their schoolwork need summer learning opportunities and emotional support to address the extreme stresses of disconnection during the pandemic.

Young adults whose paths to employment were interrupted by the pandemic need new connections to job networks, reopening the pathway to financial stability.

Families who lost their homes and are

living in limbo in motels need access to permanent housing to stabilize their lives and livelihoods.

Families and individuals who lost income during the pandemic and incurred oppressive financial and medical debts need relief from those debts to get back on track.

Children, youth and adults whose mental health was damaged by the pandemic need accessible mental health services restoring their ability to thrive in school, careers and in the community.

Nonprofits called upon to step up to unprecedented levels of demand now need the training and resources to continue to meet more complex and high levels of demand in the future.

Alongside strong partners and the generous support of donors, we are confident that together we can make 2022 a year of equitable recovery. We have a unique opportunity, post-pandemic, to launch targeted interventions to permanently solve for the persistent inequities that our region has long suffered.

We are grateful for what our community has accomplished so far — but we know that, united, we can continue to do so much more.

Milton J. Little Jr. is president and CEO of United Way of Greater Atlanta.

Signs of recovery encouraging, yet challenges remain

By Kyle Waide

We have a lot to celebrate this Thanksgiving. The worst of the pandemic might be behind us. Schools and restaurants are open. The economy is growing. The Bulldogs are amazing. The Braves won the World Series.

The Atlanta Community Food Bank has additional reasons to be grateful. We have worked with our network of 600 community partners to provide 150 million meals to families in need since the pandemic began.

We are grateful for the generosity of our community, which has supported us with the food, funding and volunteers we needed to respond to the crisis.

We are grateful that demand for food assistance has declined by more than 20% over the past several months, as more families get back on their feet.

This has been an extraordinary two years, and we have so much to celebrate.

But this year feels different. Celebrating the year's highlights feels out of sync with this moment.

We are in a hard time. So many of us have lost loved



Waide

ones to COVID-19. Their loss continues to feel raw and unreal.

Labor shortages, inflation and supply chain disruptions make a strong economy

feel stagnant.

We are confronted daily with news stories and images of distrust and division.

More of us are facing mental health challenges. We're tired. And more of us are questioning our obligation to each other and our community. What do we owe each other? Am I getting my fair share?

This is a hard time. And yet, we can be grateful for this moment. Let me explain.

The pandemic and the ongoing reckoning with race and social justice have laid bare longstanding inequities in our communities and systems.

Inequities in health care access led to higher rates of COVID-19 hospitalizations and deaths for low-income families and families of color.

Reliance on virtual learning revealed the disparities in dig-

ital access for communities of color and rural communities, exacerbating gaps in education access and student achievement.

Home values and stock prices soared during the pandemic, widening the racial wealth gap in our community, making it even harder for less-wealthy families to access homeownership or begin investing in the market.

The Food Bank experienced a massive increase in demand that hit low-income workers much harder, especially in communities of color. Black families were more than twice as likely to be food-insecure than white families before the pandemic. The pandemic widened that disparity.

We've known about these inequities long before COVID-19. But as a community, we have kept them at arm's length.

The pandemic changed all that. No longer can we downplay the systemic racism and economic inequality that strain our social fabric and limit opportunity for too many of our neighbors. It's in our face, every day.

I am grateful for the oppor-

tunity that lies before us. The opportunity to systemically address these challenges in our public policies, in how we run our businesses and organizations and in our relationships.

I am grateful for the countless individuals, of all backgrounds, who work courageously, inside workplaces or as activists in the community, to challenge leaders like me to examine how I contribute to and benefit from these inequities.

I am grateful for the public leaders who are developing local, state and federal policies to combat these inequities. Consider the Child Tax Credit, which reduced demand for assistance by 20% virtually overnight.

I am grateful for companies large and small that are changing how they do business, how they support lower-income employees and how they use their platforms to advance change.

These efforts are not enough to counteract longstanding inequities. But they are exciting. They will result in fewer families needing help from the Food Bank, allowing us to provide more help for those

who still struggle with hunger. I hope these changes are the beginning of something much larger.

We don't all share the same vision for our future. In this hard time, division and anger are everywhere. The path forward will not get easier any time soon. But as a colleague of mine reminds me when I want to pull back from these challenges, "We can do hard things."

Ten Thanksgivings from now, we might think back to this moment, when social unrest and a public health and economic crisis forced us to re-examine our values. When we considered new commitments to extend opportunity to more of our neighbors. When we confronted an existential question for our community: What do we owe our neighbors?

My prayer this Thanksgiving is that we answer that question with both a long list of actions, and with a simple understanding of our role in community. What do we owe each other? All that we can give.

Kyle Waide is president and CEO of the Atlanta Community Food Bank.

Pandemic brought renewal of the spirit to build together, make difference

By Lisa Y. Gordon

The saying that no man or woman is an island seems fitting for our experience of navigating a very devastating and disruptive pandemic.

The disruption to our daily lives has happened in a myriad of ways that seem endless. Yet, the things in life we took for granted just a few years ago are our highest priority right now. We are making time for our friends and family, taking care of our neighbors, reconnecting with colleagues, and realizing that we can make a difference when we come together to solve our most pressing problems.

Collectively, we can do so much more when we are out



Gordon

of our silos. Our very existence depends on finding new ways to work together. I am most thankful that I have witnessed a renewed com-

mitment to our community and a hunger for new solutions to address the critical issues created by systemic poverty, including the need for a safe, decent place to live.

Over the last year, coming together for Atlanta Habitat has meant a renewal of building together as the COVID-19 pandemic receded. Instead of large gatherings and engaging with over 12,000 volun-

teers, we had small, safe gatherings of groups. This created an intimacy with our mission, helping us realize that even in a crisis, the synergy of people working together can create change, sometimes incrementally, but always transformative.

More importantly, thanks to the support of friends of Habitat, including our donors, strong corporate partners and the philanthropic community, we were able to prevent massive foreclosures for homeowners who had been successful at meeting their mortgage obligations pre-COVID-19. There was a focus on not losing the very people who had overcome barrier after barrier to achieve the dream of

homeownership, but also serving the growing pipeline of need exacerbated by the home becoming a place of work, school, fine home-cooked dining and worship.

Our military veterans and seniors who needed home repairs patiently waited for us to reach them in safe ways, even sheltering safely on their porches or in their cars while repairs were made to their homes that ensured they were safe, dry and accessible. As this work was completed, we witnessed tears of joy and saw the immediate impact on the people who anchor many of our most challenging communities. They have given back by their service to our country and communities.

We are most excited about coming out of this storm and facing the future with bold intent to continue the collaboration that began with nonprofits, corporate and philanthropic partners to find innovative solutions to build our community. As we do our part to provide more housing opportunities, we will welcome our new neighbors at our affordable home community at Browns Mill Village and embrace our future with an appreciation of the opportunity to serve and reconnect with volunteers who remind us that, by working together, we can make a difference.

Lisa Y. Gordon is president and CEO of Atlanta Habitat for Humanity.

ABOUT THIS PAGE

The editorial page offers the AJC editorial board's insight and opinion on issues important to our community. It's a key part of our forum where different viewpoints are represented.

The board's mission is to be a catalyst for discussion and solutions-oriented community action to better both the Atlanta area and Georgia.

While the editorial board will offer opinions each Sunday, we recognize the importance of balance and of showcasing other views. Look for them on this page. Our intent is to give you more than just our viewpoint on each week's topic — with it will come a wide variety of information to help you make the best possible decisions.

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