

THE TIME IS NOW

**Seizing the imperatives of this moment
to drive transformative change**



Metropolitan Group

the power of voice



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Eric Friedenwald-Fishman

There is a great deal of discourse these days on “getting back to normal.” And it is important to split this into very different conceptual frames—the personal and the societal. On the personal front, all of us have some aching desire for the “normal” of hugging our elders, gathering with friends or just stopping to talk with a stranger without fear of infection. In each of our lives, there is something lost that we long for as “normal,” and we should all wish this kind of restoration for each other. But on the societal expectations front, we need to seize this moment of transformation (a time in which virtually every system and norm in our society is exposed for its flaws and is in some form of flux) to create a far more equitable, healthy, sustainable and resilient society. In this moment, we can and we must categorically reject the goal of “normal,” and instead advance the goal of a just and vibrant community.

This moment, for all of its challenges, offers the best opportunity the United States has had in 75 years to enact transformational change. Due to the combined and widespread economic, public health and social justice crisis, it is likely that the next 12 – 24 months will see the most rapid and large-scale policy shifts and public investment since the New Deal and WWII. The question is not, “Will significant policy and investment happen?” It will. The question is, “Will this investment be targeted to get back to normal (i.e. protect the status quo and perpetuate inequity and a lack of sustainability), or will it be targeted to drive transformation to a just community?”

Across the country, we are seeing advocates and activists leading the way, and I believe we have the unique opportunity to advance catalytic change and that the aligned imperatives of this moment can be incredible assets for change agents.

Aligned interests are a powerful lever. The willingness to take bold steps, to find agreement where it had previously seemed beyond reach, and to let go of or even to make 180 degree shifts in proclaimed orthodoxies are all dramatically increased when there are shared imperatives and a shared sense of urgency. In this moment, we have both.

We have the shared human, economic and political imperative to:

- **address the greatest public health threat in over a century and protect the lives of millions of people.**
- **address centuries of systemic racism that have established, and that daily support, injustice and inequity.**
- **put over 40 million people back to work.**
- **restore and make much more equitable our global, national and local economies.**

And, the most effective, efficient and lasting pathway to meet the demand of these imperatives is to also address long-existing structural inequities. This is the moment for a triple win: addressing racism and inequity; building a healthier more resilient community; and increasing environmental justice. The time is now for every coalition and every movement to ask, “What is the vision we thought could only be a 20-year plan, and how would its radical acceleration create jobs, improve health, build economic resiliency and increase equity?” **For change agents whose calling is the work of creating a just and sustainable world—the time is now.**

The systemic racism and long history of using racist ideas to perpetuate power that murdered George Floyd and thousands of other black people is not new; if there was ever a time to fundamentally address the 400 years of racism in the U.S. and to drive community-driven design of public safety that ends policing as we know it—the time is now.

Recent months showed us that millions of hard-working families do not earn enough to have any savings or to have even short-term economic resiliency in a crisis. If there was ever a time to raise the federal minimum wage to a living wage—the time is now.

With childhood and family food insecurity reaching all-time highs, if there was ever a time to raise the benefit levels and eliminate the barriers to enrollment in SNAP, WIC and school food programs while redesigning our nutrition security system to center on and meet people’s rights for health and dignity—the time is now.

As an entire nation emerges from sheltering in place, and the vast undersupply of safe and affordable housing has been made visible to all, if there was ever a time to employ millions to build affordable housing—the time is now.

In a moment when we are seeing both the tragedies of infections and death in our prisons, as well as examples of long-overdue “compassionate release,” if there was ever a time for comprehensive justice reform and the dismantling of the prison industrial complex—the time is now.

With emerging evidence that proximity to pollution and toxins correlates with higher death rates in environmental justice communities, if there was ever a time to create millions of jobs retrofitting every factory with pollution scrubbers, accelerating the clean and renewable energy transition, and retrofitting buildings to remove toxins and increase energy efficiency—the time is now.

As nearly every household and community experiences shortages in food supplies and sees the very real needs for worker and food safety, if there was ever a time to reclaim our food system and establish incentives that bolster local and rural economies and create jobs—the time is now.

Knowing that nearly 27 million of our recently unemployed neighbors are at-risk of losing their employer-provided health coverage, and that much of our workforce believes if they are sick, they have to go to work because they cannot afford to lose pay, if there was ever a time for universal coverage and paid sick leave—the time is now.

In an election year where the ability for anyone to physically go to the polls is a potential public health issue, if there was ever a time to address a fundamental aspect of voter suppression and establish automatic registration and national vote-by-mail—the time is now.

The list could go on and on. The point is that right now we have the greatest awareness of inequities and structural bias we have likely ever had. We have a compelling need to address the largest unemployment, steepest recession and greatest public health threat in generations. And we have one of the best opportunities in decades to do the work of dismantling structural racism and racist ideas that underlie all of these issues.

There will be immense pressure and powerful interests lined up to drive a “trickle-down/ economic growth over all else” narrative to protect the pre-COVID-19 status-quo and ensure the benefits of the inevitable massive public investment will go to those that need it least. AND there can and must be a counter narrative carried by many voices that breaks this false paradigm and establishes the both/ and benefits of driving for shared and equitable well-being.

Together, advocates, activists and leaders of conscience in every sector can demand that:

- **we address structural racism to benefit every member of our society.**
- **we restore the economy and advance equity.**
- **we create millions of jobs that increase human and environmental health.**
- **we transform systems from food and health care to education and community safety that are more just and more cost efficient.**

There is no trade-off between a resilient and vibrant economy and an equitable and healthy society. We get both faster and better by relentlessly pursuing them as inextricably linked.

This is the challenge and opportunity of our time. And amid all of the uncertainty we must be certain in our resolve, our commitment, our vision and our steadfast purpose.

Together, we can create the just and vibrant community that lives up to the promise of our collective beauty and brilliance.

The time is now.

About the Author



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Eric has been a social marketing pioneer, leading creative and strategy development for the agency’s public sector, nonprofit, foundation and socially responsible business clients. He designs large narrative change initiatives and public will building campaigns to drive changes in policy, practice and expectations that advance a more just and sustainable world.



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