

"Black people of all socioeconomic backgrounds are actively engaged in charitable activities."

BY EMMETT D. CARSON



Helping Our Own

When most of us think of philanthropy, we envision a select group of people, usually white, who are able to donate large sums of money to charities and educational institutions. Despite the common notion that Black people are more likely to be recipients of welfare than givers to charity, there are millions of Black philanthropists—people who give money, volunteer their time or donate goods and services to causes and to people in need. A new study on Black philanthropy by the Joint Center for Political Studies in Washington, D.C., finds that nearly 70 percent of all Blacks gave money, food or clothing or performed some service for homeless or other needy persons in 1986.

A small but vocal group of Black conservatives have repeatedly claimed lately that middle-class Blacks have reneged on their moral responsibility to the poor by failing to take an active role in alleviating their poverty. Such opinions, which have become a recurring theme, need challenging.

Long before Blacks were eligible to request government assistance, we formed organizations to provide charitable services to the community. Beginning in the 1700's and up until the Civil War, Black churches and fraternal organizations such as the Masons routinely provided the poor with money, food and clothing and helped es-

establish programs to educate youth. One measure of the success of the leadership and services these organizations provided is that there were attempts to eliminate them. In fact, by 1835 several states, including Virginia, Maryland and North Carolina, had laws that banned Blacks from forming and belonging to "lyceums, lodges, fire companies, or literary, dramatic, social, moral or charitable societies."

Despite adversity, Black philanthropy survived and is responsible, in part, for the development of the first Black churches, schools, banks and insurance companies. And perhaps most important, Black philanthropy has enabled us to address social issues that concern the community as a whole. The tradition of harnessing our collective charitable resources was the major underpinning of such social movements as the Underground Railroad, the Garvey movement and the Civil Rights movement.

Today Black churches, fraternal organizations and social-welfare groups, with the addition of newer Black fund-raising organizations such as the National Black United Fund, the United Black Fund, Inc., and Associated Black Charities, represent the center of philanthropic activity within our community. Black people of all socioeconomic backgrounds are actively engaged in charitable activities to help others. For example, in 1986 61 percent of all Blacks made a financial contribution

to a charitable organization, and 17 percent of these contributed \$500 or more.

Given the myths, it may surprise many that a substantial portion of our charitable activity is directed to organizations such as Black churches, the United Negro College Fund, the NAACP and the Urban League. In 1986, 61 percent of all Blacks who donated some good or service donated half or more of those goods to a Black organization; 51 percent who volunteered their time volunteered half or more of it to Black organizations; and 47 percent of all Blacks who made financial contributions gave half or more of those funds to Black organizations. These statistics strongly refute the popular notion that we do not support our own institutions.

Another prevalent myth is that we do not participate in work-site payroll-deduction plans. Across the country, Black fund-raising organizations have been fighting to gain access to such plans sponsored by local and state governments and private employers. In 1986 the Black United Fund of New Jersey raised \$500,000, over half of which came through its participation in private and government payroll-deduction plans. Nationally, a greater percentage of Blacks than whites participated in such programs (69 percent compared with 59 percent of whites).

Given our greater participation, we should take steps to ensure that our donations to charitable organizations receiving contributions from these plans—regardless of whether they are Black—are used to address problems in our communities and are allocated in accordance with priorities that we, as a community, establish.

Each of us, however, must do even more. The problems of drug abuse, teenage pregnancy and poor academic achievement that infest our communities are well known. While government assistance is needed, we must continue to increase our efforts to do what we have always done—provide for ourselves. ♦

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