

# THE BLACK HEALTHCARE INITIATIVE COALITION INC. --- WHAT IT CAN TEACH THE WCBA DIVERSITY COMMITTEE ABOUT PROMOTING DIVERSITY IN THE LEGAL PROFESSION

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*Note: This article is the second of three dealing with the Winnebago County Bar Association Diversity Committee members' efforts to acquaint themselves with the Black Healthcare Initiative Coalition Inc., which has garnered much support and success in its black community outreach efforts. The final article follows.*

*It deals with the insights this author gleaned from talking to Black Healthcare Initiative Coalition President Dorothy Reddic about matters of race.*

The Black Healthcare Initiative Coalition Inc. ("BHIC") is a 501 (c) (3) not-for-profit organization. According to a BHIC brochure sent to me by its president, Ms. Dorothy Reddic, the organization was formed in December, 1989 after several community health providers in the Rockford area responded to a national health awareness teleconference that focused attention on the special healthcare needs of black families. The Rockford organization was formed to focus specifically on the needs of black families living in Winnebago County. Even though its *raison d'être* is still to provide Blacks in Winnebago County greater access to the healthcare system and assistance in realizing what lifestyle changes they may have to make to stay (or get) healthy, the BHIC's events are free to the public and open to all regardless of race. The BHIC has considerable name recognition in Rockford and its programs are both well-sponsored and well-received by the community. Its 'Come Meet the Black Doctors' event regularly attracts 150-400 people annually. So does its Silver Chalice Challenge free health care fair focusing on 'Sugar' Diabetes [i.e., Type II diabetes].

What relevance can the BHIC's work and officers have for the WCBA Diversity Committee's efforts to increase the diversity of the legal profession in the Winnebago County? After talking at length with Ms. Reddic about the BHIC's work and issues broadly surrounding diversity and race, it seems to me that the BHIC and its officers can teach us a lot. Enumerated below are some of the insights I received from first hearing Ms. Reddic and Mr. Parham speak about the BHIC at the August 23, 2010 Diversity Committee meeting then from interviewing Ms. Reddic for this article.

Insights Gleaned From Ms. Reddic's and Mr. Parham's Presentation Before the Winnebago County Bar Association Diversity Committee:

1. The BHIC's stated goals are focused, action-oriented and can be applied to the legal services arena as well as to the medical professions. The

organization summarizes its goals in four words: Access, Delivery, Education, and Prevention. It seeks to improve Blacks' access to the medical system by encouraging medical providers to reach out to them with innovative healthcare delivery programs tailored to black families' needs. For example, the BHIC enlists beauty salons and churches in efforts to encourage black people to go to the doctor and attend to their health. These kinds of efforts are necessary because numerous studies have shown that black families have had problems accessing the medical system for financial and other reasons and don't feel comfortable with traditional healthcare delivery options. Many black peoples' lack of awareness about diseases to which they may be more prone and ways to promote their families' living a healthy lifestyle also had to be addressed. That is why the BHIC seeks to educate the black community about its families' risks for certain diseases through their education and disease prevention health campaigns. Their sponsored events offer free health screenings and pamphlets on various healthcare issues impacting black families. The BHIC also advocates for disease prevention by encouraging black families to have a primary care doctor they trust instead of relying on emergency room services on an intermittent basis for their healthcare. It is not that difficult to make an analogy to the legal services arena. Blacks and other minorities may also have problems accessing the legal system and understanding and feeling comfortable with how legal services are delivered, understanding their legal rights and obligations, and knowing how to stay out of legal harm's way.

2. The BHIC's central focus is community service. It is not focused directly on increasing the number of minorities in the medical profession. However, its efforts have been instrumental in promoting this goal in various ways. For example, it encourages young people to volunteer at the BHIC's events. Ms. Reddic told me that BHIC members want black young people to see that being a professional is something they can truly achieve. Seeing other black people in professional roles is still exciting and unusual for many black people, Ms. Reddic explained. That is why the BHIC hosts the 'Come Meet the Black Doctors' reception. The event celebrates the black doctors' professional achievements while encouraging black people to have a primary care doctor they can trust. Although they've conducted no formal studies on whether the event increases the diversity of the physician pool locally, Ms. Reddic and Mr. Parham told me that they have anecdotal evidence that black doctors are drawn to the

medical community here in Rockford in part because of the BHIC's efforts to celebrate their achievement and encourage their efforts to build a medical practice. They also have heard from doctors and patients that past attendees have indeed established doctor-patient relationships with the doctors in the black doctors medical directory.

Similarly, perhaps we can encourage more minorities to practice law in Rockford if we show as a group that we are interested in providing legal services to minorities and are willing to meet their special needs. Also, we can show our willingness to consider their special needs by asking minorities to share their special needs with us. If they perceive that we are receptive to their needs, perhaps they will feel more comfortable trusting us with providing for their needs. We can also encourage minority youth to volunteer in legal services-type positions. They could observe and learn. Ms. Reddic told me that it is very important that young minority people be able to find mentors. They must believe in themselves as well. Often, we learn to believe in ourselves if others believe in us. Too often, Ms. Reddic shared with me, minority youth get the impression that others don't believe in them. As they often face difficult financial circumstances, it is hard for them to believe that they can succeed. It is important that the young people be reached early -as young as elementary school, she told me, because one must prepare academically for the professions. If one only starts to prepare in high school, it can be very late to develop a strong academic record. Even if one gets into college, it is a struggle to succeed academically without a strong foundation.

3. The BHIC has garnered strong support from the community in part because it has reached out to sponsors via a letter-writing campaign. It has also striven to develop ongoing relationships with sponsoring organizations. Sponsors have been very supportive of the BHIC's work because they see how real the need is for the black community to receive special attention to their needs. This is because the black community is at increased risk for many diseases in part because of genetics, in part because of lifestyle, and in part due to socioeconomic factors. I imagine that if one looked at legal risks, the black community might also face heightened risk. It is certainly worth examining. We could similarly reach out to sponsors citing the special needs the black community (or other minority communities) face.

4. The BHIC has learned that the Black community tends to hear about events best through word- of -mouth. The best places to publicize events are places that black people frequent the most-church, beauty salons, neighborhood stores, etc. We could similarly publicize our efforts in these locations. The churches have also been

strong supporters of the BHIC. They play a crucial role in black families' lives. We should bear that in mind. The churches might be willing to help us create a supportive atmosphere for black professionals.

5. The BHIC publishes a very popular medical directory of black medical practitioners. People ask for it year-round. We could publish a directory of minority lawyers and paralegals. This would show support for these minority professionals and illustrate to others that minority lawyers and paralegals do practice in the Rockford area. It would also help show our support for their efforts to establish an ongoing presence in the Rockford area legal community.

6. The BHIC has been successful in the black community in part because its primary officers are black. They also grew up in Rockford and have first-hand information about the issues minorities face in our area. I asked Ms. Reddic if she thought non-black people could meet black peoples' professional needs. She thought that they could address their professional needs but would have to make a special effort to understand black culture if they wanted to be truly effective. She gave me an example of how that is true in the medical arena. Her grandfather has diabetes. He went to one doctor for dietary guidelines but didn't find the doctor's advice helpful because he typically ate foods such as chitlings that the doctor's nutritional guides didn't analyze for carbohydrate content. A black doctor would tend to be more aware of black peoples' taste preferences and therefore be more helpful to a patient such as his grandfather. At the same time, non-black people can learn to be of greater help to their black clients by making an effort to learn about and understand black culture. This takes effort, Ms. Reddic stated. One must be willing to ask questions and show a willingness to learn. One must also show respect for black culture.

While the above informal analysis of how the BHIC's efforts are relevant to our own legal services and legal professionals concerns does not conclusively prove that the methods employed by the BHIC for approaching the black community and celebrating diversity in the medical profession would work for us, they have been successful and are well-regarded in the community. Ms. Reddic and Mr. Parham have also graciously agreed to help the WCBA Diversity Committee in its efforts to either design a similar event for lawyers and/or allow the WCBA to participate in the BHIC's events.

# INSIGHTS ON ISSUES OF RACE GLEANED FROM INTERVIEW WITH DOROTHY REDDIC, BLACK HEALTHCARE INITIATIVE COALITION INC.'S PRESIDENT

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*Note: This article is the third of three dealing with the Winnebago County Bar Association Diversity Committee members' efforts to acquaint themselves with the Black Healthcare Initiative Coalition Inc. (BHIC), which has garnered much support and success in its black community outreach efforts. The first article described in general terms the WCBA Diversity Committee's efforts to learn from the BHIC. The second explained why the BHIC's efforts in the healthcare arena have relevance to the WCBA Diversity Committee's efforts to promote diversity in the legal profession. This present article discusses the insights this author gleaned from talking to Black Healthcare Initiative Coalition President Dorothy Reddic about matters of race. I interviewed Ms. Reddic early this fall. Her words resonated with me then. They resonate with me even more now in light of the heated discussions the Rockford community is having in light of District 205 School Superintendent LaVonne Sheffield's recent December 9, 2010 speech to the Rockford Chamber of Commerce about how matters of race still affect the quality of our children's education find it especially relevant.*

Black Healthcare Initiative Coalition Inc. President Dorothy Reddic is currently a doctoral student in Adult and Higher Education at Northern Illinois University. Before beginning work on her doctorate, she worked in the social services field. She has served as the president of the Black Healthcare Initiative Coalition Inc. (BHIC) since 2005; from 2000-2005, she served as the organization's secretary. During her tenure, the organization started the Come Meet the Black Doctors reception. She first joined the organization as a volunteer after attending one of its events. Why? She was impressed by the work of the organization and felt it was something she could actively support. She never dreamed she'd become the organization's president. She credits a former president of the BHIC, Mr. Alphonso Goode, with helping the BHIC achieve credibility and high visibility in the community. It was also Mr. Goode who instituted the Silver Chalice Challenge. Ms. Reddic grew up in the Rockford and vividly remembers the People Who Care school desegregation lawsuit filed in 1989. It made a real impression on her. Rockford, she told me, still has strides to make in achieving true desegregation and equal opportunity for its minority populations.

During the course of our conversation about race, which I felt was candid and deep, I asked her whether it might not be true that many of the problems faced by black

people could be attributed to their having, on average, a lower socioeconomic status, rather than to their race per se. She responded that while socioeconomic factors play a role in black peoples' feeling it is harder for them to succeed in life, they are not the only factor. She attributes many of black peoples' problems in society to the legacy of slavery. This surprised me as I thought black people have made considerable strides towards true equality in our society and didn't think they'd still feel the effects of slavery were ongoing. While slavery ended long ago in the United States and no one currently alive can be personally blamed for it, Ms. Reddic told me, she believes that the experience of slavery permanently affected black culture and has contributed to black cultural problems like broken families and lower records of educational and professional achievement. She also believes that they also routinely are still treated with less respect in American society.

Ms. Reddic is proud of her black heritage, she told me. Her African ancestors celebrated life in dance and song. Many were rich in land. They were a proud people. When they were brought to the United States as slaves, however, their heritage was stained with poverty and powerlessness. Today, though black people have been free from slavery for over a century and discrimination against them is less obvious, it still exists. They feel it acutely. I felt really badly about that because there is nothing we can do to erase that era of history. It happened. At the time, slavery was legal.

I asked Ms. Reddic what she believed can be done now to help Blacks achieve their full potential in life. She stressed the importance of mentoring, education, and more community outreach to black people. I wondered aloud to her whether some of the challenges black people in this society may face aren't generational. Young people today encounter black professionals on an increasing basis. Public school students attend school with those of other races. There are laws in place to prevent workplace discrimination. Although discrimination still occurs and acceptance of other races cannot become a reality through legislative fiat, I believe there is less discrimination now than in the past. If that trend continues, black people should find that their issues of feeling accepted in society will diminish over time. She said that she did hope that with time discrimination against Blacks will become rare as well as illegal. I reminded her that even different European peoples discriminated against one another in the past; locally the Italian and the Swedish immigrants did not get along at first. Today, however, it is very common to see a Rockfordian of both Swedish and Italian descent.

I hasten to add, however, that does not mean that one can be complacent now. In my view, even one person's being discriminated against or prejudged negatively because of their race is too much. At the same time, we all have a perspective on life colored to some extent by our appearance and the family culture in which we came of age. We cannot escape having that perspective. We can, however, learn to modify it by not automatically accepting our first, 'gut' reactions to people and events. Instead of doing that, we can try to see people as individuals and not mere symbolic representations of stereotypical groups.

Hearing Dorothy Reddic speak about race opened my eyes to the issues of race in Rockford and in our society in general more than any social science text or newspaper article I ever read. I simply could not truly understand what issues black people face without hearing the experiences of a black person face-to-face. I, for one, am willing to make the effort to understand black culture better. As lawyers, I believe that we sometimes hesitate to talk about feelings and want to give the impression that we are eminently knowledgeable about all matters touching upon our professional lives. We also like to feel in control of our personal lives. However, our attitudes towards race and diversity have been formed over the course of many years and are influenced by societal attitudes. We are often not fully cognizant of the reasons for our 'gut' feelings in these areas. Often, we are most aware of either a sense of comfort or discomfort around those whose heritages are different than our own. I hope that my fellow WCBA members will join me in exploring our feelings about race in America and the difference these feelings still make in today's society. Why? Even our unconscious notions about race can color our professional judgment, affecting the service we give clients and the way we analyze cases. They can also affect the way we treat members of the bar who do not share our racial identity.

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