

# Equal Now

## **We have been waiting long enough. The time for equality is now.**

For many Americans, the founding promise that we are all created equal is hollow. It is time to stop openly fantasizing about a more equal America and fight to create it. Our plan, Equal Now, provides comprehensive policy solutions to many of the inequities and injustices that America has long denied. Equal Now is the prospect of a reimagined future that makes good on America's founding promise: we are all created equal.

## **We speak in specifics.**

Inequality is a widespread crisis. To address it, we have to define it clearly. Our government looks only through the lens of the economy and not at who the winners and losers are. That narrow view has served to grow and entrench inequality; it is the force used for the past 40 years to separate the government from the people and benefit those who are at the top. But we cannot afford inequality any longer. We must focus on who and how our laws and institutions impact. We start with a simple solution: create a Congressional Office of Equal Opportunity. This office establishes a vehicle for legislative solutions, but we must also provide a detailed plan. The first step is to address the five types of inequality. The second step is to tailor a solution for each.

**01 / Civil**

**02 / Economic**

**03 / Political**

**04 / Social**

**05 / Opportunity**

# 01/Civil Equality

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**To force civil equality, we must end the New Jim Crow, reform our court system, reinvent our prison system, hold our police accountable, end mass incarceration, close the school-to-prison pipeline, legalize marijuana, ratify the Equal Rights Amendment, and fight sexual harassment and assault.**

## **Ending the New Jim Crow**

Those who have been incarcerated are being denied rights in ways that echo the struggles of black people before the Civil Rights Act. Currently, it is legal to deny someone with a felony record housing, employment, benefits, and voting rights. Doing so means that millions of Americans, who are disproportionately people of color, are not accorded full citizenship. We must amend the Civil Rights Act to prevent discrimination against former felons and reestablish the premise that once a sentence has been served, the debt to society has been repaid.

## **Reforming our racist, 2-tiered court system**

For our entire history, people of color have found themselves prosecuted and jailed in ways that other parts of the population simply have not. We must eliminate bias from the court and sentencing systems. Doing so demands the following changes:

- Establish a national commission to evaluate and investigate sentence disparities based on race and ethnicity among judges.
- Prohibit any judge from serving who has been proven to show bias.
- Eliminate the cash bail system.
- Ban all fees and fines levied on those going through the criminal justice system.
- End civil asset forfeiture without conviction.
- Eliminate mandatory minimum sentences.
- Eliminate the death penalty.
- Eliminate the parts of the 1994 Crime Bill relating to restrictions on higher education and the death penalty.
- Institute mandatory training for prosecutors and public defenders to address the accessibility and support needs of people with disabilities.
- Fund the rape kit backlog and set a deadline to complete processing within one year.

## **Reinventing our prison system and reaffirm rights**

Prison is intended to be punishment by restriction of a person's freedom. Our system is punitive in many more ways and has always been intentionally cruel. They have stripped the humanity and dignity from those who are incarcerated. The culture and fundamentals of how prisons

operate must be overturned, not just slight revisions to nip at the edges of systemic cruelty. We will look to other examples of how prisons can provide justice for society and dignity for those incarcerated. We must reaffirm human rights with the following changes:

- Ban the use of solitary confinement, a form of torture.
- Allow for a monthly stipend, goods priced at cost within prisons, and eliminate the expense of telephone calls.
- Remove income and profit structures and eliminate for-profit prisons from the system.
- Eliminate the use of restraints on pregnant women, institute a mandatory prenatal health program, and provide free menstruation products.
- An investment of 5 billion must be made in studying, devising, and constructing prisons that are ethical and humane.

### **Enforcing accountability in our police system**

Like the criminal justice system, the policing of our communities has been inconsistent and discriminatory. We believe in taking the following actions:

- Ending qualified immunity. This power gives officers, prosecutors, and other government officials the right to violate a suspect's constitutional rights with virtual impunity and eliminates accountability.
- Ensure criminal liability for civil rights violations and misconduct by police and prosecutors.
- Federal funding of all law enforcement agencies must be contingent on establishing, implementing, and enforcing anti-discrimination policies.
- Revisit and revise the federal standard for use-of-force by officers to require that force only be used when necessary to prevent imminent death or serious bodily injury.
- End the sale of military-style weapons and vehicles to state and local law enforcement districts.
- Mandate the use of body cameras and make all videos (collected in spaces accessible to the public or in public view) part of the public domain.

### **Creating a plan to end mass incarceration**

We must set a national commission to reduce our prison population by 50 percent over 5 years and construct a Prisoner's Bill of Rights that are in line with our innate human rights. Furthermore, it must provide a plan for removing bias in our justice system, providing dignity to those incarcerated, addressing the care for those who have mental illness and disabilities, and protecting the rights and opportunities of those who have been incarcerated.

### **Closing the school-to-prison pipeline**

Our most vulnerable constituents often find themselves at the mercy of an increasingly punitive system of educational and legal discipline. We must institute the following corrections:

- End zero-tolerance policies in schools and criminal codes that are school-specific.
- Eliminate the prosecution and incarceration of minors as adults.

- Phase-out school police officers over a 3-year period.
- Ban the use of bodily force or physical restriction in response to the destruction of property, school disruption, refusal to comply with school rules, or a verbal threat that does not constitute a threat of imminent bodily injury.
- Fine schools for the use of law enforcement outside of criminal conduct, school safety threats, and emergencies.

## **Legalizing marijuana and ending a racial injustice**

The policies that criminalize drug use and possession were borne out of racism. Moreover, the enforcement of marijuana laws is done in racially disparate ways. It has disproportionately affected black and Latino men and has played an oversized part in the state of mass incarceration. We will institute the following reforms:

- Legalization of personal use, public consumption, and unlicensed sales of marijuana for those over 21.
- Decriminalize the personal use, public consumption, and unlicensed sales of marijuana for those under 21.
- Expunge the federal record of those who have been arrested or incarcerated under the previous laws.
- Deny states the jurisdiction to decide their own terms for legalization.
- Establish a national guideline for states regarding marijuana record expungement and enforce a timetable through financially punitive measures.

## **Ratifying the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA)**

The first step towards women's equality is recognizing that they are equal to men in our Constitution. Since 1923, the Equal Rights Amendment has been fought for, and now we have an opportunity to ratify it. It seeks to end the distinction between men and women under the law for issues such as divorce, employment, and property. Doing so means to secure women's independence in the legal challenges they face and protect against discrimination, such as unequal pay. With two-thirds of state legislatures foreseeably ratifying the amendment in the near future, we must extend the deadline for in Congress.

## **Fighting sexual harassment and assault**

Prevention of sexual harassment and assault has reached a critical juncture, but there are many structural tools disarming women. We must make clear paths to justice for the victims of such assaults. We must enact the following reforms:

- Ban the application of non-disclosure agreements in instances of sexual misconduct.
- Ban forced arbitration.
- Apply the same standards of disclosure for sexual misconduct as there are for violations of securities law and require companies to disclose sexual harassment claims, amounts paid, and corrective actions taken.

- Amend Title VII of the Civil Rights Act to close the loophole that allows companies with few employees to escape accountability.

## 02/Economic Equality

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**To correct our systemic economic inequality, we must expand homeownership, institute a living wage, reform our monetary system, provide fair access to credit, restructure our child support system, change our poverty metrics, realign the Social Security system, and end the predatory pricing of prescription medications.**

### **Expanding homeownership to redress redlining**

Key to most American's wealth is their home. The equity created over time provides a security net and is most often the largest contributor to the intergenerational wealth of inheritance. We must expand the low-interest, zero-down loans that are available to rural communities to those with lower incomes and net worth. These loans will work as follows:

- Applicable for homes up to 120% of the area's median value.
- Available for households that make up to 120% of the area's median income.
- Not available to households with a net worth over \$200,000.
- Available to first-time homebuyers or those who have not moved in five years.
- Include support for closing costs of 3.5% up to \$20,000 based on need.

### **Reforming our monetary system**

The Federal Reserve has a mandate of pursuing full employment and price stability. However, this is an antiquated and inadequate way of managing the economy. Full employment in today's economy means that many who were seeking jobs have given up, and others are working multiple jobs in order to make ends meet. When the Fed moves interest rates and adjusts inflation, it can shift prices, structure job markets, and shape inequality. We must amend the Fed's mandate to include equality and inclusiveness within the job market and economy.

### **Restoring the promise of a living wage and dignity**

Corporations profit from squeezing more work from employees while simultaneously underpaying them. If a corporation cannot afford to pay its workers a living wage, then it should not exist. Fostering business cannot be at the expense of the worker. We need to look beyond a minimum wage and ensure a living wage as a promise of working in America. We propose the following:

- Move past a single federal wage and adopt wage standards for rural, suburban, and urban areas based on the cost of living.

- Set a minimum wage that is truly a living wage, rather than one that guarantees poverty for full-time work.

### **Providing fair access to credit**

Those who are poor are often unable to access services or have to pay higher costs because they are not visible in the credit system. In order to increase access and provide credit in a more equitable manner, we will ensure the payment of bills such as utilities, mobile phones, and rent are added as components that determine credit scores.

### **Guaranteeing a child's welfare in child support**

For children to thrive, we must ensure that child support is received promptly and consistently. Our child support systems are incredibly dysfunctional, inequitable, and impoverish women. Less than half of parents due support receive the full amount, and 30 percent receive nothing. We must shift the enforcement obligation from the parent to the government. We will institute the following policy plan:

- Provide a child with governmental support when a parent fails to pay child support or does not pay it on time.
- The governmental support provided will count as a debt to the Internal Revenue Service for the offending parent who and we will allocate the resources to the agency to enforce collection.
- The extension of child support to children 21 years of age if the child is in higher education.
- Establish consistent guidelines for child support no matter if the parents are divorced, separated, or were never married.

### **Identifying and addressing poverty**

The national poverty threshold determines who has access to Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, free school breakfasts, Older Americans Nutrition Program, Head Start, and many other social programs. But that threshold is calculated by an antiquated metric and fails to account for the cost of living variables, a problem that is especially pronounced for those in cities.

Today, the threshold for a family of four is \$25,750. And that amount is inconsistent with our understanding of what is necessary for a minimally decent standard of life. We have the following plan:

- Switch to a fairer system that sets the poverty threshold at half of the median disposable income.
- Calculate separate poverty thresholds for rural, suburban, and urban areas rather than the single figure applied indiscriminately today.

### **Changing Social Security to combat poverty**

When wages have been stagnant for decades and administered discriminately along gender and race lines, many have been unable to prepare for retirement and now rely on Social Security as their only source of income. For the 64 million people drawing Social Security benefits, including the 9.5 million people with disabilities, we must help them meet their needs to live a dignified life and make the system more equitable. We will enact the following:

- An increase of 10% in benefits across the board, which equates to an average increase of \$135 per month, or \$1,620 per year.
- Eliminate the cap on FICA contributions that currently exists at \$132,000 and include investment income into the FICA calculation.

### **Ending predatory pricing of prescription medication**

Soaring prescription drug prices are making it too expensive to stay alive. And many are choosing not to take the drugs, or ration the dosage, in order to afford their basic needs. This often affects seniors who not only need more drugs later in life but whose income is usually reduced in retirement. We will protect seniors by eliminating prescription premiums for Medicare Part D and providing an annual cap on prescription co-pays of \$200 a year for all drugs and \$50 per year to those who live below the poverty line. To do so, we will remove the ban on the ability of the government to negotiate drug prices for Medicare, and cap individual drug prices at an average among competitive OECD countries.

## **03/Political Equality**

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**To create political equality, we must establish a Congressional Office of Equal Opportunity, reestablish and amend the Voting Rights Act, break the stranglehold of money and entrenched power in government, and end district gerrymandering.**

### **Forming a Congressional Office of Equal Opportunity**

Our government looks only through the lens of the economy and not at who the winners and losers are. That narrow focus has served to grow and entrench inequality. For the past 40 years, it has been the force used to separate the government from the people and benefit those at the top. We cannot afford inequality any longer.

Since 1974, one office has ruled supreme in lawmaking: the Congressional Budget Office. Functionally, it is a nonpartisan agency that provides financial analytics to Congress for proposed legislation. What it has done to the legislative process is narrowly focus attention on the budget and deficit at the expense of justice and investment in the future. Moreover, it is an

indiscriminate analysis that does not account for the impact legislation has on society as a whole or different groups within it. We have defaulted to an inherently conservative view of what policy is intended to do. In order for our society to address its inequities, policy must look beyond the metrics of the general economy and our fiscal responsibilities.

We must focus on who our laws and institutions impact and how. To accomplish this, we must establish a Congressional Office of Equal Opportunity, a co-equal counterpart to the Congressional Budget Office. This office would be a truly nonpartisan and analytically credible agency that serves all of Congress and assesses legislation in terms of the opportunity and equality it would create or the inequality it would engender. Additionally, it would review our current laws to determine how and where we have institutionalized inequality. Simply put, the office would intercept and expose systematic indifference and injustice in the laws that shape our lives.

### **Reestablishing and amending the Voting Rights Act**

This landmark piece of legislation made voting accessible to those who had been disenfranchised or suffered voter suppression. Recently, it has been gutted. As a result, lines are longer for black Americans, there are fewer places to vote, and polling stations have been concentrated away from communities of color, all to diminish the political power of people of color. We must intercept these disenfranchisement strategies by amending the Voting Rights Act in the following ways:

- Make polling stations accessible by an evenly applied metric.
- Establish a standard number of voting machines per voter and enforce their distribution.
- Establish a reasonable maximum distance that any individual can travel to vote.
- Reestablish Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act and mandate that all states must get federal preclearance before changing any voting measures to determine if they are discriminatory.
- Allocate sufficient funds to enforce and prosecute voting rights violations by states.

### **Breaking the stranglehold of money and power**

The House of Representatives passed a sweeping anti-corruption, pro-democracy reform bill, the For the People Act (HR-1), that died in the Senate. Among many other things, it intended to establish public financing for campaigns by matching small donations; the requirement of Super PACs and “dark money” organizations to disclose donors, a national automatic voter registration system, and election day as a federal holiday. We must reintroduce and pass HR-1, but with the following amendments:

The right to vote must be absolute, and the opportunity to vote must be extended to everyone.

- Mandate an early voting period of two weeks, including weekends, with hours on both Saturday and Sunday.
- Reinstate voting rights to all who are incarcerated or who have a felony record.

- Extend the national election to two days, a Sunday and a Monday, with the Monday counting as a federal holiday.

Our government has been intercepted by the wealthy and corporations and completely disconnected from the American people. Changing that means removing their disproportionate influence in politics and legislation.

- Introduce a \$1,000 annual cap on individual political donations, including lobbying.
- Limit the amount an individual can contribute to their personal political campaign to \$200,000.
- Ban Super PACs, those extra-democratic organizations that allow those with the most wealth to disproportionately dictate the discourse and outcomes of our elections and legislation.
- Prohibit lobbying organizations from making donations. The causes these organizations support should be motivation for a political representative's support, not the check that is written to their campaign.
- Limit the terms of congresspeople to 12 years. This will provide robust change within districts and states and introduce competition into under-contested districts.

### **Ending district gerrymandering**

Congress members should not be able to choose their constituents. We must protect representative democracy and permanently end the restructuring of district lines that serves to disempower Democrats and people of color. We will work to establish an independent, nonpartisan federal commission to redistrict states.

## **04/Social Equality**

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**To engender social equality, we must institute Paid Family Leave, ensure women have reproductive freedom, end the “pink tax” on women, create social protections for LGBTQ+ people, and guarantee equal standing and pay for those with disabilities.**

### **Instituting Paid Family Leave to prioritize families**

America started the fight for paid family leave, and 100 years later, every other developed country in the world has it. They know that paid family leave is critical for children's development, increases middle-class income, and alleviates poverty. However, this crucial funding is denied, and disproportionately impacts our most economically vulnerable populations, often forcing women to choose between being a mother or having a career. To reprioritize families over corporations, we propose the following:

- 6 months paid leave to each parent for each child up to the age of 18.
- 100% of income covered up to \$75,000.
- 50% of income covered for \$75,000-\$150,000.
- Cap at \$56,250 in benefits per parent.
- Increasing payroll taxes for employers to fund costs.

## **Ensuring women's reproductive freedom**

Access to abortion has become increasingly challenged by legal and extra-legal methods. We must recognize that this is a fight for women's individual rights and freedoms. We remain committed to providing safe access to abortion and reproductive health to every woman, regardless of income, geography, or circumstance. We must take the following steps:

- Establish a federal law that provides the right to abortion without government interference.
- De-emphasize Roe v. Wade. While this landmark ruling did much to establish the right to abortion, we must look at the legislative and economic conditions that prevent women from making their own decisions about their health and reproductive rights in the States where they have been all but eliminated.
- Increase access to medical abortion.
- Guarantee that insurers cover all women's reproductive care, from birth control to pregnancy to abortion.

## **Ending the "pink tax" on women**

Women pay more for the same products simply because of packaging; this amounts to an average of \$1,350 a year for women and contributes to wealth and income inequality between genders. We will end such predatory pricing and, for the next ten years, offer the following countermeasures to the "pink tax":

- \$1,350 tax credit for all women 18 and over.
- \$350 tax credit for those under 18.
- Ban on pricing based on labeling or targeted demographic.
- Fund the enforcement of the predatory pricing ban.

## **Creating social equality for LGBTQ+ persons**

Despite the apparent progress members of the LGBTQ+ community have made, we are not equal in America. We still face legal discrimination in housing and employment and have seen a rise in hate crimes. Furthermore, some hard-won protections are being countered through legislation and litigation, nationally and locally. We propose the following measures:

- Reintroduce and pass the Equality Act, legislation that would amend the Civil Rights Act to "prohibit discrimination on the basis of the sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, or pregnancy, childbirth, or a related medical condition of an individual, as well as because of sex-based stereotypes."

- Publicly manufacture PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis), an anti-HIV drug, and distribute it for free.
- Authorize PrEP and PEP (post-exposure prophylaxis) to be distributed without prescriptions.
- Ban the use of religious exemptions that aim to be a back door for denying civil rights.
- End the ban on blood donation from sexually active gay men.
- Ban discrimination against transgender people at homeless shelters.
- Establish guidelines within the Department of Justice to address the discriminatory outcomes the trans community experiences.
- Establish a fund to reinforce Title IX policies against the discrimination of LGBTQ+ people at primary and secondary schools.
- Federally ban the discredited practice of “conversion therapy.”
- Create national guidelines and fast-track processes for gender identity changes and IDs.
- Adopt a code of conduct in schools that prohibits harassment or bullying someone for their sexual orientation or gender identity. Enforce the rule by conditioning federal funding on its administration.
- Fund the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act and amend it to create programs for LGBTQ+ youth.

### **Providing equality for those with disabilities**

We have addressed the needs of those with disabilities as a function of their adaptation and integration into society and the economy. Our view, even today, is one of “salvaging” those who are seen as helpless by making them self-supporting and less of a burden on the government, society, and their families. In doing so, we allowed our social, economic, and political structures to avoid the need to adapt and be more inclusive of those who are disabled. We must end the legalized discrimination against those with disabilities and provide them with equal protection. Doing so demands we take the following actions:

- Reintroduce and pass the Equality Act, which updates federal civil rights law to ban discrimination in employment, housing, public accommodations, jury service, education, federal programs, and credit on the basis of disability.
- Close the loophole in the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 that allowed for those with disabilities to be paid less than minimum wage.
- Foster the employment of the disabled by providing a tax credit of up to 75% of wages for businesses that employ people with disabilities.

# **05/Equality of Opportunity**

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**To provide equality of opportunity, we must create government-funded Opportunity Security Accounts for children, provide a Child Cash Credit regardless of income,**

**reshape our higher education system, invest in our teachers, close the school funding gap, end school district gerrymandering, and fund endowments and tuitions at Historically Black Colleges and Universities.**

## Providing Opportunity Security Accounts

Four decades of growing wealth inequality has entrenched opportunity for a few at the expense of opportunity for most Americans. This two-tiered society impacts those who are black and Latino with precision and has almost foreclosed any opportunity to escape poverty. Reestablishing those opportunities and ending the cycle of poverty means investing in the security of future generations. To do so, we will establish Opportunity Security Accounts with the following benefits:

- \$1,000 in an interest-bearing government savings account at a child's birth.
- Up to \$1,000 contributed annually from the government based on the net worth of a household.
- At 18 years of age, the child may use the account (which, with interest, would be worth \$25,116 for households below the poverty line) for health care, education, or housing or may defer the account toward retirement.

## Providing a Child Cash Credit to secure better outcomes

20 percent of our children live in poverty. It is not just a moral issue; it is one of determining the future for one-fifth of the population; better learning outcomes and an increase in future income by 19 percent are linked to a modest increase in funding for children. We must enact the following solution:

- Cash child credit payment of \$300 a month per child for parents, instead of the once-a-year tax credit.
- This would last from birth until the child is 18.

## Reshaping higher education

100 years ago, high school became a necessity because it was good for the individual and society. Today that is true for college, and public higher education is a basic need that the government must make available in the same way it does for public K-12 education. We must recognize the value of higher education goes far beyond vocational job skills and economic opportunity. Education provides a better understanding of our self, environment, and choices. Opening opportunity means that everyone, including those who are older, must have the ability to get a full education without the burden of taking on massive student loan debt, a factor that is increasing income inequality and poverty. We must take the following actions:

- Make public colleges, universities, and trade schools tuition-free, including graduate studies.
- Allocate protected funding for the humanities within the public institutions.
- Expand Pell Grants by 20 billion per year to cover non-tuition expenses.
- Establish that student loans must not be for-profit.
- Restructure all student loans to be at under .25 percent as the interest rate.
- Create mandated allowances of (up to) \$1,000 per month for living expenses.
- Extend the repayment period for student loans to 25 years.

- Close for-profit higher learning corporations by banning accreditations and student loan funding.

### **Investing in our teachers**

Public school teachers have been our most effective ambassadors for the government and key to the prosperity of our children. We must support them. We will do so in the following ways:

- Repay the student loans of teachers who remain in the public school system for five years.
- Adjust and federally fund the difference between teacher's pay and the median area income; this way, teachers can afford to live in the area in which they teach.

### **Eliminating the school funding gap**

Public schools in poor or non-white neighborhoods have been consistently underfunded. To apply funding to a public good in a discriminatory way changes the outcomes for those students in both the short-term and long-term. A 20 percent gap in spending per student is the difference in that student completing an additional year of education, earning 25 percent more in their lifetime, and reducing the chance of poverty by 20 percent. Furthermore, this funding gap further entrenches divisions of property and wealth. School funding is directly related to a neighborhood's home values, and deliberate underfunding of schools is theft of wealth from those who live there. We must take the following steps:

- End school district gerrymandering by mandating the Department of Education to draw district lines that are balanced and equitable instead of states.
- Federally fund the 23-billion-dollar gap between white and non-white schools (including a mandate that all school lunches are hot, free, and nutritious).

### **Funding endowments and tuitions at HBCUs**

Opportunity has always been denied for black Americans. However, they have seen gains, though unequal, through a college education. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have played an outsized role in fostering opportunity for black Americans and are best positioned to jumpstart this path. Unfortunately, many of these institutions are on the brink of financial ruin. To increase enrollment, alleviate the debt burden of higher education that plagues black students, and secure the future of the HBCUs, we must enact the following:

- Seed the 102 HBCUs with \$30 billion in endowment contributions for them to reinvest in their future and secure the educational foundation of black Americans.
- Federally fund the tuitions of the 300,000 students at HBCUs in perpetuity.