

Recommendations Summary

October 5, 2020

Background

In recognition of the learnings that emerged from the Black Birth Summit on September 17, 2019, the focus of the subsequent Summit gathering was on building understanding and healing within the black birth worker community. The initial Summit revealed the ways in which lingering internal differences and disagreements prevented various individuals from feeling comfortable even envisioning what a collaborative of black birth workers could be. A Restorative Talking Circle was identified as the initial step in building a new foundation and relationship amongst black birth workers – one that could enable the eventual establishment of a Collaborative working together for healthy black births.

The Talking Circle was initially scheduled to take place in March 2020, only a couple months after the initial Summit. Unfortunately, the onset of a global pandemic not only upended this plan, but also completely redefined the ways in which people could work and be in community with one another. As a result, the Talking Circle was pushed back to the end of June and its format shifted to a virtual gathering. Furthermore, the Talking Circle occurred about a month following the death of George Floyd in South Minneapolis as a result of police violence and amidst weeks of the sustained protest and uprising that followed throughout the Twin Cities. Many within the black birth worker community were trying to adjust to the shifts in operation necessitated by the pandemic while also trying to process and respond to the intense trauma of police violence and social unrest experienced by their communities.

The Talking Circle

The resulting Talking Circle was a small, intimate virtual gathering full of the wisdom of elders with vast experience in the birthing field. A total of 10 people attended, including four people from the planning team and one staff member from the Minnesota Department of Health's Center for Health Equity. The Circle was organized into three parts leading attendees on a journey to talk through 'what happened', 'what we need to work on', and 'where we are trying to go.' Keywords and key phrases identified for the Circle included: acknowledge, rebuild relationships, collective power, restore, move onwards.

The following summarizes key points made in each part the Talking Circle:

How do we acknowledge our past hurt but not stay stuck there?

- Unaddressed hurt often lingers and grows onto other things. In the past, we have not stopped to address when hurt moments happen. As black people, we wear a lot of masks to survive and it can be difficult to be vulnerable and say "you hurt me." We miss so many opportunities to discuss because we are so busy being busy and wearing our various masks. We have to be to be transparent with the people we're in community with.
- Helpful to have intentions established in spaces shared – if we know it's a safe space to address a situation as it occurs, it can all for that to occur.
- Need to be mindful of how situations are addressed: shift our language and approach to "carefrontation" instead of "confrontation." We should continuously seek wisdom in how we approach others when we are hurt.
- Being present has so much to do with one's own self-awareness – where one's heart is, when one is feeling hurt. Learning what grief has caused us to do will help us learn how to recover our own hearts. In the birthing community that becomes the work: "how can I heal myself so that I can become medicine to my family and my community?"



Considering the state of our world, how do we rebuild our professional and personal practices and relationships?

- Internal discord is impacting birthing outcomes within the community: people seeking care outside of the community because of the conflict.
- Being able to step back and reflect on one's role in conflict – not as an affront but as learning.
- Understanding our losses and working through them so we limit the triggers we have.
- Have to take the time and effort to make relationships work.
- Rely on our elders to share their history on how to mend relationship: mentorship!

How can we activate (use or build) our COLLECTIVE power to move forward as black birth workers to better support each other and RESTORE peace within our birthing community?

- Create more spaces in which community members can slow down, sit down and commune.
- Be open – try to get more laypeople into the community.
- Not working in isolation – create birthing teams and cohorts of support to work with families.
- Use the directory developed from the previous Summit event as a tool to make connections. Bring in allies that are active in spaces that support birthing working and families (e.g. health, nutrition, etc.)
- Support others in their own work; be available and willing to support as a way of restoring & creating news ways of being in relationship with one another.

Reflections and Recommendations

Of the five individuals (non-staff and non-planning team) that attended the Restorative Talking Circle, two completed the post-Circle evaluation. One individual rated the Talking Circle as “excellent”; the other individual said it was “very good.” Both either agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements about the Circle:

- Increased my understanding why or how interpersonal hurt and systemic harm can negatively impact how I do my work
- Helped me find personal and collective healing as a black birth worker or healer
- Reminded me of why my work as a black birth worker or healer has meaning
- Offered a supportive environment to build up fellow black birth workers and healers
- Intensified my belief in the role that the black birth worker and healing community can play in tackling infant and maternal morbidity and mortality
- Valued my contributions to the conversations
- Provided helpful resources
- Was a satisfactory replacement for an in-person Restorative Talking Circle in terms of accomplishing our objectives

While the Talking Circle was rather different from how it was initially envisioned, it still offered an incredibly valuable space to identify mechanisms to continue working through and moving forward from hurt that has lingered amongst community members. That said, the reach and impact of the Talking Circle should be understood within some critical context:

- Attendance was noticeably low. One participant stated in their evaluation that they “wished more people attended.” Many of those that called for healing within the community were not present for this gathering.
- COVID-19 has profoundly changed collective focus and the ways in which people are able to work together. The progress made towards healing (and eventually developing a Collaborative) will likely be slow due to limited in-person interaction.



With respect to next steps, here are some to consider moving forward:

Continue identifying and offering ways for the community to connect and rebuild.

The global pandemic has caused significant isolation and opportunities to connect outside naturally occurring meetings and gatherings have decreased. These opportunities should be both specific to the Black Birth Summit aims and for more general purposes.

Reach out to key participants in the original Summit that did not attend the Talking Circle.

There may be various reasons why the participants who expressed the most need for time to heal did not attend the Talking Circle. Reaching out to connect one-on-one with these individuals may not only reveal critical information to help the work move forward but may also serve as a form of healing and understanding itself.

Begin building towards a Collaborative with those who are ready to do so.

A year has passed since the Black Birth Summit, and no clear Collaborative has emerged to date. It may be that some who were ready a year ago to begin planning are still ready now, and others who were not ready have become so along the way. Begin to plan towards a Collaborative with those who are ready while building in ample space and opportunity for more to join along the way. This work does not have to start from scratch: **Use the recommendations developed following the September 17th Black Birth Summit to inform how this work unfolds and occurs.**

