

CITY PROFILE ON RACIAL EQUITY

# St. Louis Park & the Minnesota State Cohort



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REAL RACE, EQUITY AND LEADERSHIP

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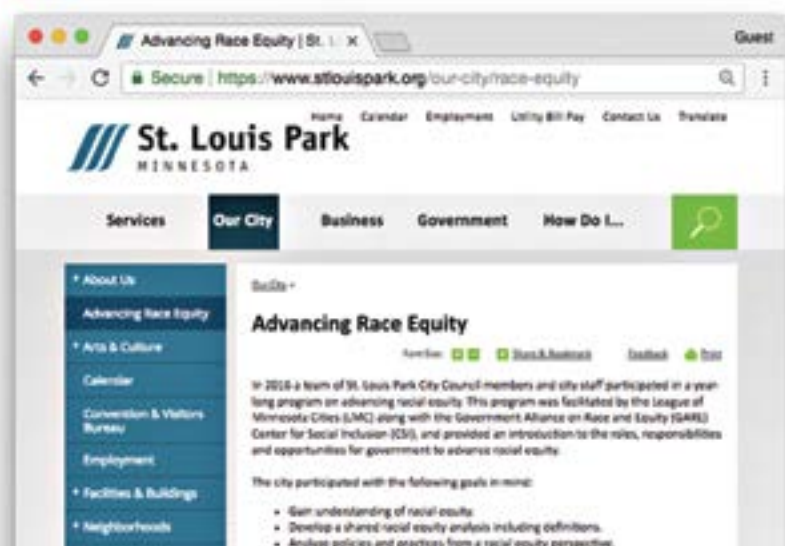
Looking at the root causes of racial injustice can be a daunting process for a city, but it can be less intimidating with a partner. St. Louis Park, Minnesota, has found a collaboration through the League of Minnesota Cities (LMC) and the Government Alliance on Racial Equity (GARE) as part of their participation in a Minnesota State cohort. This suburb of Minneapolis and its mayor, Jake Spano, have had the support of a statewide cohort of elected officials and staff as the city moves toward a new understanding of racial equity.

## Leading on Racial Equity in a Majority White Community

St. Louis Park city employees are 94 percent white, serving a nearly 85 percent white population, but 40% of the children in the St. Louis Park School District are students of color. With an eye to the future, the city has made racial equity a priority and is laying the ground work through the statewide cohort to implement racially equitable policies.

“Elected officials have to take the lead, but do so in a collaborative and inclusive manner. Not unlike many other areas of the United States, Minnesota is grappling with the challenge of disparity between white and non-white communities — including in academic and economic achievement, and social mobility. We have the opportunity, the responsibility and the ability to address these disparities at our local government level.” — Mayor Jake Spano of St. Louis Park

Mayor Spano and a number of city councilmembers have embraced an active role in the state cohort, bringing the information, skills and practices they have been learning back to



**St. Louis Park has made their declaration easily accessible on their website, pictured above.**

St. Louis Park. Mayor Spano was the only mayor to participate in the initial introductory and yearlong cohort. Additionally, five of the city's seven elected officials have actively participated in the yearlong cohort.

Mayor Spano and staff have been using the “courageous conversations” model to educate others and engage in personal reflections. Courageous Conversations™ is an educational training protocol developed by Glenn Singleton, president of the Pacific Educational Group in San Francisco, to help educational

organizations address race and racial disparities through effective cross-racial dialogue.

The trainings use a framework that promotes the six conditions for effective cross-racial dialogue:

1. Focus on personal, local and immediate
2. Isolate race
3. Normalize social construction & multiple perspectives
4. Monitor agreements, conditions and establish parameters

5. Use a “working definition” for race
6. Examine the presence and role of “Whiteness”

## Training and Planning for Racial Equity in St. Louis Park

Throughout the first two years of working with the state cohort, St. Louis Park structured several racial equity efforts to bring city employees and the entire city council into this work. In December 2016, all city employees were trained on the basics of historical and structural racism, followed by a series of study sessions for the City Council. This training led to a commitment of 30 liaisons from all eight departments to continue leading their departments’ racial equity work. In 2017, each department began developing their own action plans, working to make them realistic to implement.

The city council is also working with the city’s Human Rights Commission and Multicultural Advisory Committee, with the St. Louis Park School District and with other community groups on ideas and direction for expanding the city’s racial equity work to the community. A new focus has been placed on increasing the participation and representation of residents of color and women on city boards and commissions.

## Public Platforms

Mayo Spano has used many platforms to elevate the issue of race among residents, especially those who are white. In a June 2017 article in St. Louis Park (now City South) Magazine about the city’s racial equity efforts, he

## City: Saint Louis Park, Minnesota

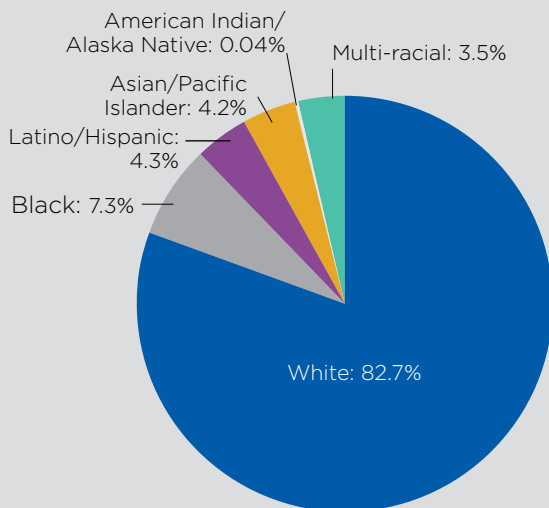
**Year Starting Racial Equity Work:** 2016

**Mayor:** Jake Spano

**Form of Municipal Government:** Council-Manager

**Population:** 47,043 (July 2015, American Community Survey)

### Demographics:



said, “If I could ask that one thing come of this interview, it’s that people reading this article take a look at [the documentary Race: The Power of an Illusion-The House We Live In].” Produced by California Newsreel, the third episode in a three-part series focuses “not on individual attitudes and behaviors but on the ways our institutions and policies advantage some groups at the expense of others.” The mayor says that when he speaks he’s pleased at the support he receives from people of all backgrounds, like when he made racial equity the focus of his 2017 **State of the City speech**.

The city has made a transparent public commitment to “Advancing Racial Equity.” One of the key steps in this work has been to hire a full-time Race Equity Coordinator, elevating

the importance of race in policy making and community building to equal footing with more traditional city departments like police, fire, public works and economic development. This work has also included placing a racial equity statement on its website at [www.stlouispark.org](http://www.stlouispark.org), along with key information that has informed the City Council’s process of learning about the issues, such as an **analysis of racial inequities** in St. Louis Park and resources from the state cohort’s curriculum. To further bolster these efforts, the city has added educational information online about the city’s commitment to racial equity, key concepts like the definitions of equity and implicit bias and some of the racial demographics for St. Louis Park’s employees and overall population.



*“The work is about race, and we owe it to our residents, business owners and children who are people of color and indigenous to own our own biases and work better.*

— MAYOR JAKE SPANO, ST. LOUIS PARK

## Minnesota Cohort Builds Leadership for Racial Equity

The cohort that St. Louis Park has participated in also included nearly 30 other cities in 2017, with 18 cities participating in the introductory statewide cohort and 11 participating in the advanced cohort focused on implementation. St. Louis Park city leaders expressed that they have benefitted from the cohort environment, which provided an opportunity to begin the city’s racial equity work together in a peer-learning environment with a structured curriculum.

Leading the effort to develop this statewide cohort has been the League of Minnesota Cities a membership organization of more than 800 cities dedicated to promoting excellence in government, which provides guidance, advocacy, training and services to members. In response to a call from its members, LMC took on the transformational work to partner with GARE and provide leadership on racial equity in a non-partisan manner to launch the first cohort of cities in 2016.

“We developed the model of working with a set of jurisdictions over a year long period, our first cohort in 2016, and there was a lot more interest

than we expected. As we have built the field of cities tackling racial equity, we have found that having hundreds of jurisdictions working together truly helps to advance the work, helping them learn from each other’s struggles and progress,” said Julie Nelson, Senior vice president, Center for Social Inclusion and GARE.

GARE is a membership-based initiative supporting local jurisdictions to take concrete actions to move their policies, practices and procedures towards a new status quo that directly address historical and current structural racism and takes racial equity into account when making decisions about funding, policies and day-to-day government operations. GARE brings together local and regional government entities in states to form learning cohorts with the goal of working to achieve racial equity and advance opportunities for all. Through these cohorts GARE works with city elected and appointed leaders to “focus on strategies that normalize conversations about race, operationalize new policies and cultures, and organize to achieve racial equity.”

## Summary: St. Louis Park & the Minnesota State Cohort

**1** St. Louis Park’s Mayor and City Council have made a strong commitment to publicly and explicitly acknowledge racial equity as a city priority.

**2** The city’s work on racial equity and healing has benefited from an effective peer learning network through the League of Minnesota Cities.

**3** As a city where most residents are white, St. Louis Park has recognized the importance of engaging all resident in advancing racial equity.

For Mayor Spano, one of the biggest challenges has been helping people understand that racial equity is a journey, not a checklist, and results take time. “Isn’t this aligned with the kind of community we want anyhow?” Mayor Spano asks. *“The work is about race, and we owe it to our residents, business owners and children who are people of color and indigenous to own our own biases and work better. But, I also tell people who might question why a city is involved in this — that all of our city services will be better when we use a racial equity lens. It forces us to challenge and question the way we’ve done thing for decades and the time is long past to do this work.”*



REAL RACE, EQUITY AND LEADERSHIP

NLC’s Race, Equity and Leadership (REAL) initiative serves to strengthen local elected officials’ knowledge and capacity to eliminate racial disparities, heal racial divisions, and build more equitable communities. Learn more at [www.nlc.org/REAL](http://www.nlc.org/REAL)

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