

New Urban League focus is aimed in right direction

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The decision by the Chicago Urban League's new president and CEO, Cheryle Jackson, to get out of the social service business may ruffle a few feathers. But it is a giant -- and necessary -- step toward returning the nation's oldest civil rights organization to its original mission: equipping African Americans with the tools needed to succeed in today's America.

Dubbed "projectNEXT," the successful execution of the plan would put the league at the forefront of the urban economic development movement.

During that first wave of migration and for decades afterward, African Americans knew they could depend on the Chicago Urban League to help them find jobs, as well as to develop the social networks that would lead them to better housing and better schools.

Today, in neighborhoods on the South and West sides -- still the hardest hit by under- and unemployment -- the need is different, but just as great.

Nearly 60 years after the dawning of the civil rights movement, many African-American workers in Chicago are still shut out of trade unions that provide the lucrative jobs needed to improve their communities.

And while mom-and-pop stores serve these areas, too often those stores are not owned by African Americans, nor do they provide the employment opportunities critical to boosting another generation of black workers.

That's why plans recently unveiled by Jackson to refocus the Chicago Urban League by concentrating on economic development are as exciting as any urban redevelopment plans we've heard.

Those plans include tackling the exclusion of African Americans in trade unions, partnering with the Chicago Manufacturing Renaissance Council to help African Americans land high-paying jobs in the manufacturing industry, and using the City Colleges of Chicago to train unemployed workers in the trades.

The group's goals are to raise black employment and income levels, to expand the number of black-owned businesses and to promote real estate development.

To meet those goals, the Chicago Urban League will create a small-business incubation center and will work with the Kellogg School of Management to help owners of African-American businesses help themselves.

BP America has pledged \$6.2 million over three years for the initiative, and the Illinois Finance Authority has committed \$1 million to help create an entrepreneurship center.

Jackson's vision for the Chicago Urban League is grand -- but focused enough to lead this organization into the next frontier of the civil rights movement.