

Profiles in Excellence: Justin Terrell rages against the machine

Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.
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The system is broken and it needs to be fixed.

For Justin Terrell it is just that simple. The current way the country goes about servicing and caring for its poor is in dysfunction. In the eyes of Terrell, something has to change, and he is at the forefront of a growing movement for change. Make no mistake, Terrell is not just a voice for change, he is quickly becoming an *agent* for change. The 32-year-old former college football running back, is attacking poverty in the same bruising style in which he ran the ball.

"For the past 10 years I've done direct service work," said Terrell, who is the program manager for TakeAction Minnesota's Justice 4 All campaign. "After doing 10 years of really cool work I was dismayed at the way the system is set up to keep people poor."

Terrell said his most recent job prior to him joining TakeAction Minnesota led him to an epiphany.

"I used to run a men's shelter and that job made me realize we need systematic change. Yeah, every night I helped 27 people get a bed, but at the end of the day, the way the system is set up, it still keeps them homeless," said Terrell.

According to Terrell, in order for men to qualify for a bed in the shelter, the men had to have

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zero income. For many homeless, they receive government assistance in the amount of \$203 a month – certainly helpful, but not nearly enough to live off.

"We had a policy that if someone got a government assistance check they could not qualify for a bed," said a frustrated Terrell. "So when you had money you had to sleep on a floor and when you didn't have money you could get a bed; \$203 isn't enough to live on. That right there made me angry. Yet for (the shelter) to get funding we had to make sure the beds were full. So in the middle of the night I would have to go across the street to other shelters and wake people off the floor and ask if they had any money and were they sober. It was on one of those nights when I was waking people up off the floor and I realized I'm not really helping anybody, I started asking how do you really change things."

Terrell fights for the homeless and those living in poverty and despair because he knows first-hand the struggles they face.

"When my family moved here (Minneapolis), we were homeless, so I know what it's like to go through poverty," said Terrell. "My mom worked three jobs. I remember at seven-years-old I'd say to her to go on welfare and she'd say, 'welfare keeps you in poverty, but it doesn't help you get out.'"

Terrell wants to help others get out.

"I would talk to men at the shelter and they would say we don't want to abuse the system and I'd tell them the system is abusing you," said Terrell, his tone slightly angry.

A graduate of Minneapolis' South High School and Bethel College, Terrell said he was introduced to TakeAction Minnesota while studying for his master's at the University of Minnesota – Duluth. There, he met Dan McGrath, executive director of TakeAction Minnesota.

"I loved what I was doing, but I didn't feel like I was making change," said Terrell of his prior work. "With TakeAction we're doing our best to get people to see that this is a systematic problem that requires systematic change."

Terrell said with the Justice 4 All campaign, TakeAction Minnesota is fighting the injustice in the criminal justice system.

"We know that a Black kid on the Northside smoking a blunt is 10 times more likely to go to prison than a white kid smoking a blunt in a dorm room," said Terrell. "That's a systematic problem. We can change that. Thirty-five percent of the state prison population is Black, but five percent of the state population is Black. We have a systematic problem. We know that a white person in the state with a high school diploma has a higher employment rate than a Black person with a college degree. That's systematic. My vision is where a community stands up and we call (bull) on that and we force change."