Minnesota has the resources, but thus far has lacked the political will to end income disparities between whites and blacks — disparities that have plagued the state for far too long and are getting worse.

I applaud Gov. Dayton’s recent announcement that he plans to dedicate an office within the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development to focus on the issue. However, I am concerned that it will take months for that office to become fully functioning and perhaps years to achieve meaningful change.

We can no longer spend time admiring the problem. We need to stop discussing the issue and implement a strategy that yields results in the short run, as well as the long term.

One resource that has gone untapped and will yield immediate benefits for low-income individuals is a federal matching program that works in tandem with a program already in place in Minnesota. The matching dollars, which could be used to expand employment and training to low-income job seekers, are being left on the table because of inaction by our state officials. MSPWin, a coalition of hunger, housing and workforce advocates, has been working tirelessly to educate state leaders about this missed opportunity. These dollars could train able-bodied men and women to be productive members of the workforce next year.

Specifically, the dollars are related to Minnesota’s Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP, aka “food stamps”). SNAP is a federal program that assists very-low-income individuals and families with basic nutritional needs. SNAP has an accompanying funding stream — SNAP Employment and Training — that allows states to provide employment and training services to individuals receiving SNAP benefits. The employment and training funds can be used to support a variety of education, training and employment services to help individuals at the low end of the economic spectrum achieve financial stability and self-sufficiency.
If we took advantage of the program, Minnesota’s E&T funds would total at least $15 million per year — an amount that would come from the federal government, not our state budget.

With the help of MSPWin partners, which include community-based service providers, foundations, city and county staff, legal advocates and the Greater Twin Cities United Way, we have an opportunity to build a robust employment and training system — but we must act now. Other states including Wisconsin, which received more than $22 million in federal funding in 2015, have dramatically grown employment and training support for SNAP recipients and in the process put thousands on a path to a career.

The time has come for us to stop discussing the issue of racial disparities and start implementing strategies that can and will make a difference in people’s lives, as well as strengthen our state overall.

The best social service program in the world is a living wage job and a career. We can and should work together to ensure every man and woman has the resources they need to become educated, employed and able to support their family and community. How can we justify — to ourselves as well as to these individuals — not making every effort to secure these funds so they have the opportunity to transition their lives for the better?

Louis J. King is president of Summit Academy OIC, a community-based vocational training and job placement program in North Minneapolis.

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