

Chapter Spotlight: Wisconsin SSN Event Focuses on Issues Affecting the Black Community

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“Our office finds the Scholars Strategy Network to be a valuable resource and we are really looking forward to strengthening our connection with the group.” – Will Zolecki, Chief of Staff to Wisconsin State Representative Supreme Moore Omokunde

Protests for racial justice sparked by the police killing of George Floyd in 2020 brought renewed attention to the many ways public policy specifically impacts the lives of Black residents in the U.S. Like many states, Wisconsin has a long history of racial inequality perpetuated by policies that do not serve – or actively harm – Black residents and communities. That’s why last year, the Wisconsin SSN chapter decided to bring together researchers and members of the Wisconsin Legislative Black Caucus for a conversation focused specifically on Black issues in the state.

Researchers from all across the state came to the virtual event with a broad range of expertise, including the experiences of low-income Black women, incarceration and racial equality in Wisconsin, the election of Black and Brown officials, and the mental health and well-being of Black youth. They were joined by Representative Samba Baldeh and Chief of Staff Will Zolecki from the office of Representative Supreme Moore Omokunde.

The conversation focused on developing [specific, research-based action items](#) in areas such as education, health, social policy, and community involvement. Key to these conversations was a push to increase access for researchers to a state dataset that can show existing racial inequality.



Gladys Mitchell-Walthour

Wisconsin SSN Chapter Leader [Gladys Mitchell-Walthour](#) shared that her hope when putting this event together was to create a space where “it wasn’t just scholars talking to each other”. She added, “We wanted to bring people in the UW system who work on these issues together to actually talk with legislators or staff members from legislators so [those legislators know] we have experts who focus on health or education...and so people who are interested in legislative change would be able to build those relationships.”

Zolecki, from Rep. Omokunde’s office, is interested in precisely the same thing: “At the [event], we learned about the work of each attending scholar and engaged in valuable discussion about how academics and politicians can collaborate for the betterment of all. Our office finds the Scholars Strategy Network to be a valuable resource and we are really looking forward to strengthening our connection with the group.”

Looking forward, SSN Wisconsin is planning a follow up event focused on women's health in the state, another issue area with long standing inequities reinforced by policy decisions. The chapter is also setting up one-on-one meetings between legislators and researchers who attended the event.

In addition to direct conversations with legislators, the chapter has also utilized the media in their state to push for policy changes. Via a partnership with [The Cap Times](#), the newspaper for Wisconsin's state capitol, they have published multiple opinion pieces focused on issues impacting the Black community. These include [a piece](#) in the wake of the police shooting of Jacob Blake calling on Wisconsin university campuses to bring in and support more Black scholars, as well as [a piece](#) about the need to address Milwaukee's structures of racism after the killing of George Floyd.

To learn more about the Wisconsin chapter and their members, check out their [chapter page](#).