

Program in Des Moines.<sup>25</sup> The Free Breakfast Program was supported by other churches including white denominations. According to Reverend Robert Kanagy, pastor of the (predominantly white) Forest Avenue Baptist Church:

We feel it's worthwhile or we wouldn't be involved in it. It serves a need that is real. I would hope that next year it might be done by the schools, where it ought to be.<sup>26</sup>

By means of the Free Breakfast Program and the student demands, the Des Moines Panthers linked the concerns of African Americans with poor whites.

The Des Moines BPP strengthened its ties to the local community by demonstrating that it practiced what it preached. By establishing common interests with ordinary people, the party criticized social programs that exploited people. For example, the Des Moines BPP worked with the National Welfare Rights Organization to address the concerns of poor women who were receiving a government check but had unresolved problems related to poverty and racism.<sup>27</sup> According to Knox and Andre Rawls, the Heartland chapters articulated issues that the traditional organizations either would not or could not address. The Des Moines BPP criticized the welfare system for breaking up black families and discouraging family formation:

like the system was oppressing . . . to the extent that they were taking children from mothers for example, the welfare system. The welfare system was not adequately addressing problems of the mothers and not giving what they need and not only to exist but to really function as a family.

The Des Moines chapter was able to take such a bold stance because it did not share the worry traditional groups had of losing their funding.<sup>28</sup> According to Knox, the BPP's financial independence also made it threatening in the eyes of certain people because there was no reliance on government or state aid. Knox noted:

So this is what we raised that other people were afraid to raise, that your organizations were afraid to raise because they would lose their money. But since we were not funded by anybody (laughter) we had no accountability to anybody but the people. This is why the masses of people had gravitated

towards us. While the system saw a need to try to move to destroy us try to infiltrate us and destroy us, because it would rise to a popular movement because to the kinds of problems that we were addressing.<sup>29</sup>

While Des Moines was making headway in its local organizing, a growing crisis emerged in its relationship to the regional and national centers of authority in the Black Panther Party. There was a brief attempt to coordinate regional activities with the Chicago chapter of the BPP, led by Fred Hampton. The Chicago chapter was the authority for the entire Midwest region by virtue of the city's strategic location and the size of the chapter.<sup>30</sup> The problem, Knox believed, between the heartland chapters and the Chicago leadership seemed to stem from the perception that Fred Hampton and the leadership were more concerned about the relationship with the national committee in Oakland than about the connection to the heartland. The former communications secretary for the Kansas City chapter, Andre Weatherby, recalls traveling extensively between the heartland chapters and attempting to maintain a cordial relationship with the Chicago chapter and Hampton, while attending the Chicago Seven trial and observing the prosecution of Panther leader Bobby Seale:

I was on the west side at Madison and spent two nights there, three weeks before Freddy had got killed in that apartment. Fred wanted us to relate more. Cause he had heard about Des Moines and Kansas City. He sort of reached out to us. And we were supposed to be trying to coordinate something and he was killed after you know, after we had talked somewhat about doing something.<sup>31</sup>

The significance of the Hampton assassination was that soon thereafter communication problems between the national headquarters and heartland chapters began to deteriorate. Previously Hampton had mediated some of the concerns of the heartland chapters with the central committee. However, following Hampton's death an important link to the region was eliminated. The Des Moines chapter of the BPP developed friction with the national BPP because of the national committee's directive that the Des Moines chapter needed to sell more copies of the Panther paper and to increase the circulation. Moreover, the Des Moines BPP chapter and other heartland chapters felt that the national committee was insensitive to the concerns of their region and was not putting revolutionary theory into practice. Knox recalls,