

Creating a vision for equity in Oregon

Nkenge Harmon Johnson and Katie Sawicki, of the Urban League of Portland, share insights about the latest State of Black Oregon report

BY ANN-DERRICK GAILLOT
STAFF WRITER

Last month, the Urban League of Portland released the State of Black Oregon 2015, the second iteration in its series of reports released roughly every five years. Through data, case studies, essays, profiles and portraits, these studies detail the economic and social realities of life for black Oregonians.

The latest report tells the stories of several organizations and individuals working hard to advance racial equality in Oregon. However, the numbers show that since the first report, in 2009, many economic and social conditions have not improved for black Oregonians, and some areas, such as unemployment racial disparity, has actually gotten worse.

New Urban League President and CEO Nkenge Harmon Johnson and policy director Katie Sawicki, the executive editor of the new State of Black Oregon, hosted Street Roots at the Urban League's headquarters in North Portland to talk about the new report and its potential to facilitate race equity across Oregon.

Ann-Derrick GailLOT: *What has the initial response among the bigwigs been (to the State of Black Oregon)?*

Nkenge Harmon Johnson: Really good. People have been excited about the report. They have been curious about it. I've had a few different meetings where before I arrived to meet the new "bigwig," they had already reviewed the report, either the hard copy because they had shown up somewhere where we were selling it before we sold out or they've gone online to download it. We launched the report over a month ago, and there continues to be excitement around it. New folks encounter it every day.

A.G.: *There is so much in the report, and the Urban League*

obviously has limited capacity, so how do you prioritize what needs to be accomplished first?

N.H.J.: So here's the good thing about the report. There are action steps at the end of every chapter, there are things that we can jump on and get to work on right now. It is not the work plan for the Urban League. It is the work plan for all those people who understand that this work is important for our community and for our state.

Katie Sawicki: One of our hopes when we put these reports out is to be a convener of a lot of these different components. So while we won't be doing all the work, we see one of our roles as creating a vision for what

equity looks like in the state of Oregon and saying, hey there has been so much work done around this. We're gonna put it in one place so we can all see what we've done so far and where we can go. So that we're not all starting from scratch each time.

A.G.: *There's so much data in the report, but there's not as much data for black immigrants and black LGBTQ people.*

N.H.J.: That's one of the reasons that the team took pains to talk to people. Because in cases where there isn't pre-existing data, at the very least you have to have stories. And that can inform our work a great deal, especially as you start to hear the same story in different places. It opens a window to the idea that there's a need to collect data about these different communities, where before people may have been able to deny these communities even existed.

The fact

that the Urban League included in the report stories and some information about these groups means that in the future when other folks start to do this work, they have to include these groups so that eventually there will be data.

K.S.: It's about creating that visibility and saying we know that you are here, and now everyone else does too. And I think that is, to me, 50 percent of why this report is so important and why all the photographs in the report are all real black Oregonians. There's not a single stock photo in there, and that was because we wanted people to not just read that there are black people in Ashland but to see that. A lot of times, that's the most powerful thing.

A.G.: *You both know a lot about the lowercase state of black Oregon, but in the State of Black Oregon was there anything that surprised you?*

N.H.J.: That there are so many issues that we found, some of the shocking data relevant to black folks in Oregon that is on point for white people who live in rural communities in our state.

A.G.: *What do you mean by that?*

N.H.J.: Jobs, the high unemployment rate in the African-American community. Unemployment, the rate has gone down all across our state, especially in Portland and Multnomah County. But it still turns out that black folks have higher rates of unemployment than everybody else. The same thing is true in other parts of the state in rural communities where they hear about all of the wonderful things that are happening in our economy and all the businesses that are coming to our state, all the jobs that are being grown here and there, but none of that is happening in their communities.

Health care: You can use the same example. A reason that a woman in North Portland doesn't seek early prenatal care, doesn't receive early prenatal care is the same

See REPORT, page 5



PHOTO: ANN-DERRICK GAILLOT

The State of Black Oregon isn't just a compilation of statistics, but an examination of numerous factors in the lives of black Oregonians and what needs to be done to improve the lives of all. All of the areas covered include recommendations and policy initiatives for economic and social change. The report also honors the historic contributions of black settlers and visionaries, as well as the diversity and partnerships within the black community.

Nonetheless, many challenges stand out as imperatives for change:

- Despite steady economic improvement, black unemployment remains double that of white Oregonians. Thirty percent of blacks live in poverty, with the income gap between white and black Oregonians higher now than it was prerecession.
- Between 2000, and 2010, the full-time

employment rate for white men increased 2.5 percent. For black men, it dropped more than 10 percent. For white women it dropped just over 1 percent. For black women, the full-time unemployment rate dropped nearly 11 percent.

- In education, black students face significantly disproportionate discipline rates, from elementary school to high school. That, plus the impact of poverty, community displacement and related factors have led to lower achievement

scores, higher drop-out rates and lower college enrollment. Black students also have a much higher rate of borrowing money for a college education and a far higher rate of not finishing due to debt.

- Only 32 percent of black households are homeowners, compared to 65 percent of white households. Only 1 out of every 100 small businesses in Oregon are black-owned businesses (1.2 percent).