

Urban League: State of the state

by Lanita Duke

Grassroot News, N.W. — As the dawn of 1983 arrives we contemplate what to expect from the new year by critically examining the old year. In many ways, 1982 was not a very good year for Afro-Americans. Politically and economically we were taken three steps backward and one step forward. The consensus of the National Urban League's "The State of Black America, 1982" is that the status of black Americans is stagnant.

Freddie Pettet, Executive Director of the Portland branch of the Urban League, said these findings did not surprise her. "My reaction is one of disappointment because we are still fighting the same battles we had to fight twenty years ago. As a race we still have the same problem areas. There have been a few gains, but by and large we still have major problems of discrimination in employment and housing. Our economic situation is getting worse rather than better. So, I'll have to admit I was not surprised, just disappointed, because we are still facing those same problems."

Digesting the events and emotions of 1982, what can we expect from 1983? Ms. Pettet replies, "More of the same. What we have to do is to work harder within our own communities to make changes in the area of taking care of our young people and our elderly. We must continue to try to make the system work for us as it does for other communities."

Although "The State of Black America, 1982" dealt with national issues such as the dismantling of Affirmative Action and sluggish economic growth, Freddie Pettet says the national problems just reflect the crisis we have in Portland. "Our youth unemployment is the same as the national average (well over 60 percent). The whole attack on low-income people that is happening at the Federal level is also at the local and state levels in Oregon. The difference between the federal and state level is that the state has the capacity to deal with its low-income blacks and other citizens. If it really wanted to make a difference, it could. In other cities this could not be done; but in Portland, it's possible. If the private sector wanted to change the unemployment status of young black males, they could. There appears to be a lack of a total commitment towards improving the lives of the community."

She says the reason for the lack of

a commitment to the black community is racism. "When you look at the economic conditions of the state of Oregon it's as bad if not worse than in other communities. Businesses are closing, large and small. Even as bad as the situation is for business, if one small business took one or two young people they could make an impact."

The national report concluded that a war is being waged on low-income people across the country. Ms. Pettet believes the lack of a policy to solve the plight of low-income people is hurting the low-income populace. "Anytime a policy impacts people negatively, black people are impacted more than the general population. I don't think enough effort or time is being spent to look at what local or national government can do. One of the problems is that not enough impact is occurring from the minority communities. There are not enough people sitting down and planning a strategy that would include all people. Everything now is done in a crisis situation. However, we'll get to the point where this is not the case and blacks and minorities are involved in the front end of planning where there is some specific thought given to how our community can be positively impacted by whatever policies come out."

"The State of Black America, 1982" paid particular attention to the focus away from Affirmative. Unions are one problem. "Unions in Oregon have reacted the same way Unions everywhere have. Their concern and main focus is for their membership and by and large their membership have not had large numbers of minorities and women. I do not think unions have been as supportive of affirmative action as they could, although there are isolated incidents where a few union leaders helped break the barriers. But when you have economic difficulties where you have large numbers of people being laid off, unions are battling for seniority. In some unions minorities and women are the first to be laid off. What you see on a national level you see here in Oregon, but in smaller numbers."

"The whole direction of affirmative action scaled down from the federal level to the state means it's not a high priority any more. For a state like Oregon it is unfortunate because some of us think affirmative action was never a high priority. In our local governmental staffs—County, City and State—blacks and other minorities are employed only



FREDDYE PETTET

in the affirmative action area and not in the policy-making area. So, we can see that the people who are making the laws are themselves not committed to affirmative action, just by looking at the make-up of their staffs."

1982 was a political year in which black Oregonians did not come out and vote as they should. In light of this, can we exercise political power on our behalf? "The problem is we do not use what political power we have. And that is the main way to sway political figures. If you do not vote the politicians do not feel they should listen to you. A lot of people don't vote because they feel our numbers are too small. I disagree! We have to use whatever political clout or influence we have. We could have made a major difference this past November. When you do not vote this weakens the demands you can make."

District 18 will remain in the minds of the black community for a long time as an example of political disorganization. Freddie Pettet agrees with this assessment. "There was no logical reason to have six or seven blacks running within that one district. What we needed to do was to get two or three people whom we thought could best represent District 18. Instead everyone saw an opportunity to get into politics. No one was willing to subvert their own personal needs and ambitions for the good of our community. Hopefully, the community has learned from this experience and when that seat

comes up again we'll do a better job of strategizing so a black can represent the district."

When you think back on 1982, what lodges in the minds of the Executive Director of the Urban League? "The lack of political organization is one item that will stay on my mind. The whole issue with the schools will produce a positive ripple effect in 1983. Out of the whole struggle for quality education came a black Superintendent. The issues with the police will have a ripple effect in 1983 and I'm not sure whether it will be positive or negative. In 1982 a lot was brought into the public's eyes and this resulted in the Police Review Board. Also, the community came out against crime with the march against prostitution."

Freddie Pettet's New Year's resolution is, "To continue the fight to work towards the betterment of our community. To try and get positive elements working internally and to continue to speak out against injustices. These are not new resolutions, just perpetual ones." She says the community ought to work harder to improve itself. "We continue to reach outside our community for assistance. But we have the resources within our community to better it. Let's open up that resource and utilize it in 1983."

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Project to reduce fear of crime

The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) has awarded the Police Foundation \$1,830,534 to conduct an 18-month experiment in two cities designed to reduce the fear of crime in inner-city neighborhoods, preserve commercial vitality in these areas, and, possibly, have an effect on the crime rate itself.

James K. Stewart NIJ Director, announced the award and the selection of Houston as one site for the experiment at a ceremony in Houston last week. Also in attendance were Houson Police Chief Lee Brown and Police Foundation Research Director Lawrence Sherman.

The experimental program also will be undertaken simultaneously in Newark, New Jersey.

Stewart said that the experiments will focus on conditions in some neighborhoods that generate fear among the residents and provide an environment in which crime thrives.

"In the next few months," Stewart said, "Houston and Newark Police Department officials and Police Foundation researchers will be enlisting the help of the business community and private citizens in formulating strategies to reduce citizen fear of crime. These strategies should be developed by June or July and then given actual testing for 12 months."

Stewart, a former Oakland, California, police official, said that "as every police officer knows, the fear of crime contributes greatly to a host of urban ills: the deterioration of neighborhoods, the drying up of commercial activities, and a fortress mentality among citizens that leads to abandonment of city streets by the law-abiding."

Stewart said the experiments will test the premise that a neighborhood whose character is within the control of the people who live there is generally a safer neighborhood.

"The overall effort," Stewart

said, "is based on the belief that a community's fear of crime may itself be a major factor in the health and future of the city. The debilitating apprehension about crime weakens the fabric of an urban neighborhood's social and economic life."

"Police departments that work closely with representatives of the local neighborhoods and that expand their concern for crime incidents to also include order problems can reduce unwarranted citizen fear and encourage people to reclaim their streets and communities."

The central purpose of the experiments will be to test strategies for reducing fear of crime in a set of representative and statistically comparable inner-city neighborhoods.

A corollary objective will be to test the effect of the same strategies on the business life of the neighborhoods.

To test the general theories the study will examine several related questions:

- Can united efforts by the police and community reduce disorderly behavior in public spaces and so reverse an atmosphere that suggests nobody cares about such behavior?

- Will amelioration of these factors have a direct effect on reducing fear of crime and perceptions of a neighborhood as unsafe?

- Will the reduction of fear of crime have a direct effect on reducing serious crime itself on the premise that a neighborhood that is not fearful may attract less crime?

- Will a reduction in serious crime, if any, reduce public fear of crime?

- Will a reduction of fear increase a neighborhood's commercial activity?

"Police alone cannot begin to rebuild communities demoralized by fear. If they are truly to keep the peace, police must work in tandem with citizens and all branches of lo-



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cal government that contribute to the health of the community," Stewart said.

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