



PHOTO BY MOTOYA NAKAMURA/MULTNOMAH COUNTY COMMUNICATIONS

Multnomah County Commissioner Loretta Smith and Los Angeles-based filmmaker A.J. Ali shake the hands of young members of the community attending a town hall to discuss solutions and best practices to address racial disparities in the county's justice system.

# Youth and Justice Focus

## Town Hall looks for solutions and best practices

BY MELISSA NAVAS

While African Americans in Multnomah County make up less than 6 percent of the population, they make up about 22 percent of the jail population.

That overrepresentation – while not new – prompted County Commissioner Loretta Smith to bring together local youth, community members, law enforcement officials and black elected county officials from across the United States to discuss solutions and best practices to address racial disparities in Multnomah County's justice system.

Smith hosted the Black and Brown Boys and Men Town Hall May 31 as a precursor to a meeting in Portland of the National Organization of Black County Officials.

Emceed by author and actor Hill Harper, the session included Multnomah County District Attorney Rod Underhill; Multnomah County Sheriff Mike Reese; Multnomah County Sheriff's Office Capt. Derrick Peterson; Los Angeles-based filmmaker A.J. Ali, and Alameda County, Calif. Supervisor Keith Carson.

Smith said that many of the racial disparities in Port-

land are issues mirrored in communities across the nation.

"We need to get to the bottom of it," she said. "We need to figure out how can we decrease some of those disparities."

Harper, who has authored books and starred in television and film, highlighted the current climate for addressing racial disparities and the key role that access to public education plays.

"It seems the political debate has become more and more preoccupied with power maintenance with very few real solutions ever offered," Harper said. "Meanwhile millions of young men and women graduate from the streets and matriculate to prison rather than to college."

Hill shared statistics on what he called a "hyper incarceration" crisis. About 2.24 million people in the United States are now held in federal, state, and local jails, representing one-quarter of the world's total prisoners. Another 4.8 million people in the U.S. are under parole, supervision or probation. In 30 years, the United States' prison system has quintupled.

Harper asked the panelists to address topics like sentencing disparities, law enforcement living in the communities in which they work, fear of police, and police training and recruitment.

District Attorney Underhill spoke about his office's work to identify root causes of racial disparities in the criminal justice system. A Racial and Ethnic Disparities Report from last year found that black people are overrepresented at every stage through Multnomah County's adult criminal justice system - from arrest through sentencing.

"We need to sink our teeth into what we're seeing here" to make policy adjustments, Underhill said.

Smith highlighted a Coalition of Communities of Color report which identified social, economic and educational barriers faced by people of color.

"You can't achieve equity when you face challenges like this. Education should offer a pathway out of poverty but all too often it doesn't," she said.

Smith, who has championed jobs for young people in Multnomah County, focused on how a community supports its youth.

"Until we give our young people an opportunity to have an opportunity there are going to be high disparities in the jail system, there are going to be long sentences longer than anyone else, there are going to be folks who live in communities who are highly policed," Smith said.

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