

Promoting Black Male Achievement

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ment's coordinator, told the Portland Observer.

Robbins works with a 20-person steering committee led by black male leaders of the community who focus their efforts on the justice system, employment, education and family stability.

The group's economic development subcommittee, led by Portland Opportunities Industrialization Center Director Joe McFerrin II, recently helped improve the success rates of young men of color in high school completing work-readiness training.

The county-sponsored Summerworks job training program improved its success rate of African American youth completing internships from 17 percent to 90 percent.

Last year, the group's Family Stability subcommittee coordinated a healing summit for black men and boys experiencing trauma to improve home life.

Robbins said there's more work to do.

He credits Antoinette Edwards, director of the Office of Youth Violence Prevention, and Erika Preuitt, director of Adult Services Division of Multnomah County's Department of Community Justice, as two influential figures, among many others, in the early stages of Black Male Achievement's formation.

Robbins came on board in 2015 after being a stay-at-home dad for a year. Before then, he worked with Portland Opportunities Industrialization Center, which is a non-profit working to secure the future success of at-risk youth through employment training, education, mentoring, and family outreach. Before then he was a law stu-

dent.

He said he was inspired to do direct public service or policy work, instead of pursuing a career as a lawyer from the experience he gained working under the supervision of a defense attorney in law school.

"I saw a very broken system," he said. "I saw way too many, especially young men, who were black and brown who were coming in at a point where they had no options. And I could see that there are clear signs the person needed help, long before they stepped into the courtroom."

Robbins said he jumped at the opportunity to work with Black Male Achievement because it aligns with his values and affords him a chance to address some of the issues he'd witnessed assisting with court cases.

Ongoing issues the organization is currently trying to reform are Measure 11, Oregon's mandatory sentencing law that allows minors to be tried as adults for violent crimes, and how school resource officers are used in public schools.

The group's Justice System subcommittee is focused on reforming the way Measure 11 is used in courts. The mandatory sentencing law that Oregon voters passed back in 1994 sets mandatory sentences for 21 violent crimes and mandates that youths be charged as adults for those crimes.

But, Robbins said, the way it's been applied has been problematic. He said there has been a tremendous disparity in the number of charges against black youth when compared to similarly situated white youth.

A report from 2011 by Partnership for Safety and Justice and Campaign for Youth and Justice confirmed that while the black youth population of

the state was around 4 percent, they represented 19 percent of Measure 11 indictments.

Another area of focus is on the prevalence of police officers in public schools. There is currently at least one school resource officer for each high school in Portland Public Schools.

"We just don't think they're safer with police there, ultimately," he said. "Police should come in when there is a crime and they are investigating it. They shouldn't be sitting in a school waiting for the crime to happen," Robbins explained.

According to the Portland Police website, the officers are meant to keep youth out of the criminal justice system through "mediation, dialogue and accountability" and to "serve as a resource and role model for our city's families and schools."

According to a 2011 study from Southeast Missouri State University, however, school-assigned police officers were unable to dislodge youths' already negative perceptions of police officers. What's more, a 2012 report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics showed that, on a national scale, school-based arrests disproportionately affect black boys.

Robbins calls on community members who are interested to get involved.

"People of all walks of life are needed in different ways," he said. "We need people to be joining in our effort, even if it's just staying informed about what we do."

Anyone interested in getting involved, becoming a steering committee member or subcommittee member can check out the Office of Equity and Human Rights' Black Male Achievement website, portlandoregon.gov/oehr/66514.



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