

Urban League: Voting Laws Threaten Equality Gains

By Suzanne Gamboa
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The National Urban League is calling on African-Americans to get out and vote come election time as a means of countering state laws the group says threaten education and economic gains made by blacks.

Borrowing from the Occupy Wall Street movement, the 101-year-old civil rights group made "Occupy the Vote" the theme for its annual State of Black America report released Wednesday at Howard University. The report evaluates African-Americans' progress toward equality, and this year's version "Occupy the Vote to Employ, Educate & Empower" also measures white and

"I refuse to operate from a standpoint of 'Woe is me,'" said Morial, a former mayor of New Orleans. "We have to tell people we are not going to let these laws stop us."

According to the report, improvements in health and education among blacks have made up for losses in civic engagement, economics and social justice.

"The bottom line is that the recession has caused slippage of progress in the status economically of African-Americans and when we talk about these issues, we are trying to ensure that any recovery that's being articulated and designed is a recovery that includes everyone, that it is not just a recovery for some," Morial said.

But concerns abound among civil rights and minority leaders that new state photo ID and other laws will widen the gap between blacks and whites. Several states have implemented laws that narrow the list of acceptable forms of identification needed to vote. Some states have restricted who can register new voters, or they have eliminated early voting days such as Sundays before elections, which are popular among black churches.

Supporters of the laws have said they will curb voter fraud, but the NAACP has said they are a concerted effort to suppress the vote of minorities, students and the elderly. Some states are offering to provide free IDs, in cases where cost of getting an ID is an issue; but civil rights groups say the laws still will deter legitimate voters, such as Bettye Jones, 76, of Wisconsin.

Jones has been registered to vote in Ohio since 1956. But she moved to Wisconsin, which requires voters to show Wisconsin Department of Transportation-issued driver's licenses or state IDs. To get one of those she has to show a birth certificate, as required by federal law. However, Jones was born at home and doesn't have a birth certificate.

"They know there was an era where black people, colored people, Negro people, their records were not cared about," said Debra Crawford, Jones' daughter.

Jones is a plaintiff in a lawsuit filed by the Advancement Project and others challeng-

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Latino equality.

The campaign will include, among other things, a website dedicated to monitoring voter laws and providing information on voting requirements. The league also hopes to conduct get-out-the-vote bus tours, said CEO Marc Morial.

A concern, Morial said, is that some state laws could widen the equality gap between white and black Americans by discouraging political participation of African-Americans. He says their votes are needed to ensure continued support of programs that have helped close the equality gap.

Champion



PHOTO COURTESY CITY OF PORTLAND

The White House has chosen André Ashley, sports management supervisor for Portland Parks & Recreation as a "Let's Move! Champion of Change." Ashley, a 10-year parks employee, will be recognized at the "Champion of Change," event March 22 at the White House.

The awards honor "leaders who are doing great work to increase access to physical activity for youth in their community."

"Anytime a field, court, or gym is in play in Portland, André and his team are behind it in some way," says parks zone manager Doug Brenner.

Ashley has worked with NIKE, to bring sports resources and opportunities to Portland's youth.

Commissioner Nick Fish says he's proud of Ashley's work. "André tirelessly provides the programs, partnerships, and places that keep athletes of all ages at play in Portland," he said. "His leadership guarantees that Portland Parks & Recreation offers many ways to stay active and healthy."

ing Wisconsin's law as discriminatory.

Morial's call for an "Occupy the Vote" movement comes as civil rights leaders commemorated the 1965 "Bloody Sunday" violence that erupted around voting rights protests in Selma, Ala. Protesters were beaten and gassed, and some died. Civil rights activists have been using this year's anniversary events to condemn the new state voting laws.

Black Americans have built a strong record at the voting booth - the 2008 turnout of 65.2 percent of black eligible voters nearly matched the 66.1 percent turnout of white eligible voters. Although turnout and registration slipped in 2010, 1.1 million more

black Americans showed up to vote two years ago than in 2006, according to Pew Hispanic Center's research.

Rather than the new ID requirements, other steps can be taken to address fraud, errors and other problems in the voting system, the National Urban League said in its report. Registering people to vote when they turn 18 in the same way young men are required to register for the draft or the way taxpayers are automatically enrolled to start paying taxes are two suggestions made in the league's report by the Rev. Lennox Yearwood, president of the Hip Hop Caucus, which works to get young people active in elections.

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