

OUR VIEW

State of Blacks in Las Vegas

The National Urban League's annual State of Black America report (SOBA) always provides occasion to access where African-Americans have come from, what we're doing and, hopefully, where we're going.

Former New Orleans Mayor Marc Morial is executive director of the National Urban League and on April 6, he delivered remarks in Washington, D.C., summarizing the findings of the annual status report.

"Forty years ago, we were at the height of the Civil Rights Movement," he told the crowd. "And on a cold January night in Selma (Alabama), half a year after the (1964) Civil Rights Act was signed into law but still two months away from the bloody showdown on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, Dr. Martin Luther King inspired a crowd of one thousand strong to keep the faith and the fight alive. Because, no matter what gains they had made, he told them, when it came to the full economic equality they dreamed of, there was still a 'long, long way to go.'"

"Forty years later, we can look around and take some comfort in the gains we have made since that day," Morial continued. "A Black middle-class that has quadrupled, an African-American poverty rate that has been cut in half, and more African-American doctors, lawyers, business owners and elected officials than ever before... But when we look at where we are now, when we look at this year's State of Black America report... we see that we still have a long, long way to go."

How true.

Morial notes that the unemployment rate between Blacks and Whites has widened, a reality apparent in Las Vegas, where the rate is twice as high in predominantly West Las Vegas than in the suburbs. He also notes that the median net worth of an African-American family is \$6,100, compared with \$67,000 for a White family, less than 50 percent of Black families own their own homes (41 percent in Las Vegas, according to Census figures)—compared with more than 75 percent of Whites—and that the racial wealth gap is growing, also evident here. Morial calls these trends the "Great Backslide."

Despite an unprecedented show of voting strength—keyed largely by hip-hop activists like Russell Simmons and P. Diddy, their efforts melded with grassroots support from groups like the National Urban League (NUL and its affiliates registered more than 100,000 people for the November 2004 elections)—Blacks remain a politically neutered voting bloc. As such, we lack the solidarity needed to fend off assaults on affirmative action and to fight for revamping an easily corruptible (and overly partisan) electoral process. (Rewind to November 2004: allegations of electioneering in Ohio; locally, Clark County Commissioner Yvonne Atkinson Gates clashed with a Republican activist outside a polling station at H.P. Fitzgerald Elementary; Gates claimed the activist was trying to intimidate Black voters.)

Says Morial: "Congress need to show some courage, cross the political isle and pass a strong, unwatered-down extension of the Voting Rights Act. The time to talk about voting discrepancies and voter intimidation is not a month or even a year before the next election—it is now. Neither party has made this a top priority yet this year—they should now."

The SOBA report also broaches repatriation for ex-felons (Assemblywoman Chris Guinchigliani and Sen. Steven Horsford recognize this and are pressing for change) and to revamp the penal system. "It costs \$17,000 per year per person to jail someone in Shelby County (Ga)," Morial says. "And for every three people they release, two are coming back in... Think about how much this accelerates the Backslide."

Thankfully, a lot of what Morial proposes—raising the minimum wage, closing the home ownership gap, increasing Black entrepreneurship, ensuring quality public education, mentoring—are in practice (or planning) here. By devoting more time, energy and money to our problems, we can improve the state of Black Las Vegas.



Blacks, seniors and AIDS crisis

By Dora LaGrande
Sentinel-Voice

While we all hear about HIV/AIDS in the African-American community, what's really going on? A report released in February 2005 by the Black Aids Institute confirms that African-Americans account for more than half of the new HIV cases reported annually. Over 54 percent — double what the rate was a decade ago, while the infection rate has been holding steady among Whites — that is stark evidence of a widening racial gap in the epidemic.

Other troubling statistics indicate that almost half of all infected people in the United States who should be receiving HIV drugs are not getting them. Why is this burgeoning epidemic in our community not being dealt with effectively? Before I answer this question, let's look at the startling statistics:

- Black teenagers account for more than 66 percent of new aids cases among teens, although they make up only 15 percent of the U.S. teen population.
- Up to 33 percent of African-American men (that have been tested) who have sex with men under age 30 are HIV positive.
- As of 2003, 40 percent of all AIDS diagnoses among African-Americans could be traced to contaminated needles.
- African-Americans are three times as likely to experience adverse effects, in-



ON THE RECORD

By Dora LaGrande

cluding premature death, because of sexual activity.

- About 40,000 African-Americans test positive for AIDS each year, and 18,000 die.
- Black AIDS case rates are 821.1 per 100,000 — nearly five times the rate for White Americans (166.2).
- HIV infection is among the ten leading causes of death for African-Americans in every age group up to 65 years of age.
- HIV infection is the number one leading cause of death for African-Americans 25 to 44 years of age.
- More than one-half, 58.9 percent, of pediatric AIDS cases reported were African-American children.
- About 60,000 people age 50 or over have AIDS in the United States, and over half have been infected for two years or less. Here again, this group is mostly comprised of older women and minorities.
- In the U.S., women, in general, make up 47 percent of all new AIDS cases, and 72 percent of the infected women are Black. Every day, 20 Black women become infected. It's spreading among the young, who are the most sexually active. It is the leading cause of death of Black women ages 24 to 35.

Women do not have to engage in high-risk behaviors or be drug users or prostitutes to be in the 72 percentile; they just have to suffer the misfortune of sleeping with the wrong person.

Some say it's easier for women to contract AIDS because biologically our bodies are more vulnerable. An HIV-infected woman is twice as likely to give a man the virus during sex than the likelihood an HIV-infected man is to give it to a woman. Some say these statistics reflect the lack of power women have to compel their sexual partners to use protection.

But does the prevalence of this pandemic facing Black womanhood stem from a lack of power, or a lust for

pleasure? Is it carelessness or did we not pay attention to preventive measures out of a false sense of security that this disease was not relevant to us thinking that it was a gay White man's disease?

What you don't know can kill you —and it is killing Black women. So, when do we begin to take absolute responsibility for our lives and our bodies? And when do we start to take responsibility for our children who wind up suffering with the disease directly by contracting it in the womb or indirectly as we wither away from the disease?

The statistics that had me totally in awe are those relating to the senior population:

In 2004, AIDS cases rose faster in middle-age and older people than in people under 40. A common stereotype is that older people do not have sex or use drugs, thus, very few prevention efforts are aimed at people over 50, and most educational ad (See LaGrande, Page 13)



Nevada's only African-American community newspaper.
Published every Thursday by Griot Communications Group, Inc.
900 East Charleston Boulevard • Las Vegas, Nevada 89104
Telephone (702) 380-8100
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