

Contact: Hannah Greene
Phone: 510-272-6768
Email:
hannah.greene@acgov.org

1221 Oak Street, Suite
536
Oakland, CA 94612
Main: 510-272-6695
Fax: 510-271-5151

Alameda County
Supervisor Keith Carson, Fifth District

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Opinion-Editorial

The African American Community Must Come Together Now

By Supervisor Keith Carson

Now is the time for members of the African American community to gather and get to know each other so we can celebrate our successes and shape the future. The African American community in the East Bay is diverse and thriving, but we also face steep challenges and quickly disappearing resources. In recent dialogues with community leaders, I came to the realization that it has been over a decade since we as a community have come together to find out what is going on and who is doing good work.

Out of those conversations was born the idea for a community forum called "African American Organizations Making Connections," which will be held from 8:15 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Saturday, May 1 at Oakland's Merritt College. The purpose of the event is to promote and recognize the exemplary work being done throughout the East Bay by our community-based organizations, faith leaders and business owners. These are the people who work in the trenches every day, serving our community and caring for our neediest members. They are also the entrepreneurs who have great ideas for a small business but just need that angel to give them a leg up and an encouraging word. In our panel discussions and breakout sessions, we will hear from these everyday heroes about models of success and proven strategies for how to deal with the challenging issues we all face.

"Making Connections" is also about initiating strategic partnerships and identifying ways to maximize our capacity to best serve our community. Especially now, as governments and nonprofits tighten their belts and slash programs even further, it is essential that we find ways to work together. The cruelty of the current economic crisis is hard to escape: resources are disappearing just as the needs of our community are growing ever more pressing. Even before the economic downturn, the African American community in the United States was facing great challenges. Now the situation is even worse. We have all heard the statistics:

- In March 2010, the national unemployment rate was an average of 9.7 %. For African Americans, the rate was a staggering 16.5 %.
- In 2007-2008 in Alameda County, 34.8% of African American high school students dropped out of school, compared with 7.7% of whites, 23.5% of Hispanics, 6.4% of Asians and 16.9% of American Indians.
- Nation-wide, the life expectancy for African American women is 76.1 years old compared to 78.0 for Whites. African American men die more than 6 years earlier than their white counterparts, at the age of 69 as compared to 75.3.

It is imperative that we come together to face these challenges and start to identify creative solutions. I also firmly believe that our youth are part of the answer, which is why we will hear from a youth panel and will award prizes for the winners of our Youth Art Contest, who have shared their unique artistic perspectives on the state of the African American community in the East Bay.

To open the program, Congresswoman Barbara Lee and Assemblymember Sandré Swanson are scheduled to provide remarks on the state of the nation and the state of the state for the African American community. Dr. Wade Nobles, founder and Executive Director of the Institute for the Advanced Study of Black Family, Life and Culture, Inc., will give the keynote address. I call on all members of the African American community to attend this important event to share your stories and meet new friends.

To register for the event, please visit www.acgov.org/board/district5/makingconnections.htm

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Alameda County Supervisor Keith Carson represents the Fifth District, which includes Albany, Berkeley, Emeryville, Piedmont, and parts of Oakland (North Oakland, Rockridge, Grand Lake, Fruitvale, and Dimond District neighborhoods).