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## **County initiative emphasizes people, not programs**

Leslee Kulba

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The Buncombe County Commissioners took some time at their last meeting to hear an update from beneficiaries of the Isaac Coleman initiative. Coleman was a community organizer and advocate for social justice, who died while campaigning for a seat on the board of commissioners.

In his honor, the commissioners agreed to set aside \$500,000 for grassroots community-building. The move followed complaints the commissioners were giving the lion's share of public funds allocated for charitable contributions to large, incorporated nonprofits to defend ideologies, while passing over unincorporated, homegrown efforts designed to help people. It also followed Dr. Dwight Mullen's report on the State of Black Asheville.

Commissioner Ellen Frost explained, "This board was moved by Dr. Mullen's amazing and sad work on the State of Black Asheville. This board was incredibly moved by the horrible, horrible numbers, and so we did something."

Lisa Eby, the county's director of human resources, cited some State of Black Asheville statistics: black babies are twice as likely to be born premature than whites, four times as likely to have low birth weight, and 3 times more likely to die before they're one year old. On average, blacks die six years before whites.

In measures of success, 35% of black children read at grade level while 71% of whites do; 32% of black children are proficient in math, compared to 68% of whites. On average, black people can expect to earn \$1,135 per month less than whites doing the same job. The median household income for a black family is \$26,000 when it is \$46,000 for whites. And, while black males make up 5.6% of the county's population, they account for 28% of the detention center's. The ratios, Eby said, were similar for Latinos.

"Previous attempts to close these gaps have not worked," she said. Frost, Eby, and County Manager Mandy Stone had researched, traveled, and compared notes with government agencies and private foundations to identify best practices. The Coleman grant was designed to "build capacity in community leaders" by giving them skills they need for success. "Building strong, trusting relationships" was another consideration.

Chelsea Follett, managing editor of HumanProgress.org, recently gave a quick summary of what hasn't been working in terms of women's issues and foreign aid. She said Western professionals and organizations have traditionally taken a top-down approach to empowerment. Their "narrative of heroic humanitarians bestowing charity ... is condescending, ... reducing recipients to mute, passive subjects awaiting rescue."

She told how Haiti has 10,000 foreign aid programs that have only perversely harmed the economy, making it in one's rational self-interest to accept handouts in lieu of pursuing personal development. In the standard model of humanitarian aid, only expert professionals and dictators are enriched. Follett refers to this as the aid-industrial complex.

A perfect storm of circumstances can put any single person in poverty at any time, but generational poverty normally requires government help. In Asheville, urban renewal bulldozed vibrant black communities, with homes and businesses, for a highway, and then relocated the once economically-independent people into projects of concentrated poverty with limited transportation options.

For whatever reason, drug dealers gravitated toward those areas, and boys caught carrying drugs got a record that prevented them from ever getting a job. Given the choice of marrying a guy with a record or having children out of wedlock to get a free apartment and free food from the government, the girls acted pragmatically. It should go without saying that skin pigmentation is not holding people back; it is the failure of people to reform the institutions that target them.

A recurring theme in commissioner remarks was the recent police beating of Johnnie Jermaine Rush. He had finished a thirteen-hour work day and was stopped and beaten by police officers for trespassing and jaywalking because he was walking through the parking lot of a business that was closed for the night. Al Whitesides said it reminded him of getting pulled over twenty years ago for driving while black.

Kenyon Lake then introduced leaders representing the seven Isaac Coleman grant recipients: the ABIPA Cares Cooperative, Deaverview: Residents, Schools, and Community in Relationship, Emma Community Ownership, My Community Matters Empowerment Program Collaboration with Positive Changes and Writers in Schools, the Shiloh Community Association/Pearson Plan, United Community Development/Southside Revitalization, and YTL Training/GRACE for Teens and Access for Mothers and Families. Programs were largely efforts to get parents more involved with their children and bring neighbors together.

Three programs stood out for creating opportunity. My Community Matters is sending kids to public events where they interview movers and shakers for a documentary they're producing. United Community Development is creating living-wage jobs in the home weatherization business, filling a tremendous need. And ABIPA is alleviating pressure on care facilities by employing housekeepers for people desiring to age in place with visiting nurses.