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Black political leaders call for action beyond voting

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A panel of local elected officials talked about the black vote at the Homewood Community Engagement Center on Feb. 11. They included (from left) Pittsburgh City Councilmen Ricky Burgess and R. Daniel Lavelle; State Rep. Ed Gainey, D-Allegheny; Nickole Nesby, mayor of the city of Duquesne; and State Rep. Jake Wheatley, D-Hill District. Tim Stevens, chairman and CEO of the Black Political Empowerment Project, moderated the discussion. (Donovan Harrell/University Times)

By DONOVAN HARRELL

Black elected officials gathered in the Homewood Community Engagement Center on Feb. 11 to discuss the importance of political participation, as part of Black History Month and its national theme, "African Americans and the Vote."

The event, hosted by the CEC and the University Library System, featured a panel discussion between black elected officials and voting advocates.

This upcoming electoral season has high stakes, said Crystal McCormick, director of diversity and inclusion initiatives for the library system, and "the African-American vote is crucial in many ways."

"These are troubling times," McCormick said. "It's our hope that the panel discussion will garner and foster our knowledge and our energy for those who may not be registered to vote and those who are registered who could not vote in the last election to vote in the upcoming primaries or the 2020 presidential election."

The panel included Nickole Nesby, mayor of the city of Duquesne; Pittsburgh City Councilmen R. Daniel Lavelle and Ricky Burgess; and State Reps. Ed Gainey, D-Allegheny, and Jake Wheatley, D-Hill District.

Tim Stevens, chairman and CEO of the Black Political Empowerment Project, moderated the discussion as the panelists spoke on a myriad of topics including why they got involved in politics, the 2020 presidential election, their ongoing, frustrating political battles for equity and barriers black people face when attempting to vote.

"Can you imagine what would happen if every black person in America voted in each and every election," Stevens said in his opening statement. "We haven't utilized the power that we have."

Each panelist noted issues with getting their fellow politicians to help back projects that would help address economic inequalities in the black community, from criminal justice reforms to making housing more affordable. Nesby said she has also faced constant harassment since taking office.

Even though the black vote is crucial in the upcoming elections, it's important for black people to remember that the "the weight of the world" doesn't fall on them and only them.

The political system alone cannot solve every issue, Wheatley said. To make societal progress, communities, the private and public sectors and other stakeholders need to join together on issues, Wheatley said.

"That means you got to have some real engagement and difficult conversations with each other," Wheatley said. "When we started getting our folks who are not engaged, we engage, and we have to do it in a way that meets them where they are."

He later added that while it's important for stakeholders to meet with their political representatives to discuss issues, the overall goal of changing unjust systems shouldn't be lost.

"We have to meet with these people because in order to have the conversation engaged, you have to communicate. But I'm like most like black people around here that's frustrated and tired of just meeting with these people," Wheatley said. "We want to get to a point where we don't have to meet with them. The system should be correcting itself."

Gainey later said that it's also crucial to improve the black community's economic power. One way to do this is to hold business owners more accountable for promoting diversity and inclusion in their hiring practices.

Nesby added that black people can rise above their various challenges by seeking out positions of power and partnering with outside communities.

"At the end of the day, start going back to your community, your block, your people, and start putting your people in those positions of power," Nesby said. "Not looking for somebody else to give you the answer you already know — quit giving them power over you. If you look at our system and how it's set up, it is set up for us to fail. So divided, we're always going to fall, but together, we can reshape our whole region."

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