Written by Abeni Hill
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Poverty was the topic for a recent forum held at the Urban League of Minneapolis.

The forum served as a screening for Hennepin County Dist. 2 County Commissioner candidates. Participating candidates were Leslie Davis, Rolf Erickson, Linda Higgins, Tonia Johnson Kathleen Murdock, Paula Pentel and Roger Smithrud. Many of the candidates linked poverty to unemployment and lack of education.

"There is one common denominator throughout this district," said Murdock. "That is that families are struggling throughout this district."

Murdock said many factors go into poverty such as unemployment and job training. Murdock also said Hennepin County has not done much to solve the issue of poverty.

"I was there (in county government) a long time through the prosperous years and then the very lean years," said Murdock. "I have not seen (the county) cut spending to a big degree in a lot of areas that I think are not the business of the county."

Murdock wants the county to focus on social services for residents highlighting an interfaith outreach and community partners program in Plymouth that helps the community with food shelves and affordable housing.

"There is a great, great need that is being served there," said Murdock.

Pentel said varying factors can contribute to poverty and unemployment.

"I think we need to start with the families and start with the children," said Pentel. "Families are no longer able to afford that daycare that allows them to have a job." Pentel thinks the county

should focus on social services for families.

Davis said his proposals will help the economy.

"The water plan that I proposed will bring in $80 million and fresh money to head the county," said Davis . "We use that for energy conversion."

Davis thinks the county should stop using coal plants for energy and said the money should go to the energy conservation equipment and into business and residential homes, which will lead to jobs.

"We will put thousands of people to work," said Davis .

Smithrud said job preparedness is key.

"We need to have more jobs available to people," said Smithrud. "We also need have the training so that they are capable of getting jobs and employers that are willing to provide jobs."

Erickson said he would value employees input for cost-cutting jobs.

"Employees would suggest cost-cutting measures to make the government more efficient," said Erickson.

Higgins said the county should work with other levels of government to collaborate on job training and education programs.

"Not everyone starts at the same place when looking for a job to provide for their families," said Higgins. "I think the county has a big role to play in helping the folks who need job training and education."

Johnson called for greater minority inclusion in job hiring.

"I would like to see Hennepin County take the leads and actually hire more people of color from their communities," said Johnson, who said there is double digit unemployment in Minneapolis . "I worked at Hennepin County and I know for a fact that Hennepin County does not hire minorities to the number that they could."

Johnson also called for Hennepin County to assist high schools in emphasizing college opportunities.

The forum was presented by the radio program Conversations with Al McFarlane and moderated by Al McFarlane, president, editor-in-chief, Insight News and co-chair of the Coalition of Black Churches and African American leadership Summit , the Rev. Randolph Staten.

Staten said he was looking for candidates who have solutions to poverty.

"There is one issue that seems to be from a national perspective and a local perspective and it has become something we don't talk about anymore and that is poverty," said Staten. "And yet poverty is gripping our nation, gripping our county, and gripping our state."

Staten went on to say, " Hennepin County itself is in violation of the law and even in terms of its hiring practices," said Staten. "The Department of Labor came out and said (the) Metropolitan area and Minneapolis had the highest unemployment rate among Blacks in the entire United States of America ."

Staten said lack of education is not a factor in all cases and even with a college degree, Blacks still earn less than their white counterparts.

"In fact a Black person with a college education makes less than a white person with a high school education," said Staten.
Jill Davis, Steve Dehler and Blong Yang, who are also running for the seat declined to participate in the forum.