Written by Abeni Hill
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Unemployment and racial disparity were focal points of a recent candidate forum held at the Urban League of Minneapolis.

Three candidates for State Representative in District 59B race participated in the forum hosted by Conversations with Al McFarlane. Those who participated were DFLers Terra Cole and Raymond Dehn and Republican Bill McGaughey, who recently announced he was dropping out of the race due to personal issues. The 59B House Seat is being vacated by Bobby Joe Champion, who is running for the State Senate.

Forum Host Al McFarlane, president and editor-in-chief of Insight News had the Rev. Randolph Staten act as a co-host. Rev. Staten served as a State Representative for 58B. He focused the conversation on unemployment and racial disparity.

"Today everyone is talking about the question of the economy," said Staten. Staten said he recently read the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics report on unemployment. "The unemployment rate of African-Americans is 3.4 times that of whites."

Staten asked the panel how they plan on handling unemployment when they are in office.

"We must support strongly and wholeheartedly our businesses on the Northside," said Cole. "We have to look at our workforce centers which are good tools and that are state funded. We need innovative ideas with a tool we already have."

Dehn said just paying less in taxes may not spur job growth within the district.

"(We need) all of us on the Northside (to) start spending our money in our community," said Dehn. "Lowering taxes doesn't create jobs. People spending money creates jobs. I propose we begin (to) align our local, county, state and federal dollars when it comes to job programs and investments in companies to expand their workforces."

Deborah Brown, who was in the audience, asked the panel a question about workplace discrimination. She said she was recently fired from her job and is currently unemployed. Brown believes she was discriminated against.

"I was told I was not a good fit for the position," said Brown. "When we are being let in we are discriminated against, we are scrutinized; we are watched."

"Incidences of workplace discrimination have gone up on both the state level and federal level within hiring as well as in firing," said Cole. "It's not just 'I am not educated enough' or 'I am not qualified enough.' It is something we have to look into and we must investigate and we must correct."

Dehn responded by saying employers need to take the hiring process seriously.

"There is much to be said about what affirmative action is meant to be, and that was that if your work force did not reflect the community larger region you need to affirmatively act to do that," said Dehn. "And that doesn't mean you give someone a huge advantage just because they are a person of color. You need to take a personal investment as an employer and say, 'I am going to have my workforce reflect this community region in which I live.'"

Cole said she identified with Brown.

"What we must do as women and as Black people (is) we must speak out", said Cole. "When we don't talk to HR and we don't call the state and the EEOC (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission) they don't know. There is a serious problem of discrimination in Minnesota with when it comes to young women, young Black women young highly educated Black women," said Cole. "But there is measurable discrimination around a particular gender.

Affirmative action has been highly effective for white women but not as effective as for women of color."

Candidates Ian Alexander, Anthony Hilton and Gary Mazzotta were invited to participate in the discussion, but declined.

Primary elections take place Tues., Aug. 14.