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African-Americans in WV Report: A Legacy of Inequality

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. - The American dream is still not open to everyone in West Virginia . . . That's the conclusion of a new report issued in connection with the current Black History Month. Reverend James Patterson of Charleston, executive director of the *Partnership of African-American Churches*, is co-author of that report, "Legacy of Inequality," a study of racial and economic disparities in West Virginia. He says a large part of the African-American community came to the state because it promised a chance for education and opportunity, and the report shows similar or even higher levels of education among black West Virginians compared to the majority of the state. In spite of that, African-Americans have nearly twice the poverty rate.

To Patterson, that means the promise of social mobility is broken.

"Go to school, get a good education and you'll be able to get a good job and you'll be able to do well." This data is saying to us that that isn't holding true. So then the question becomes, "Why?"

Patterson notes there is a lot the state can be proud of in its history of race relations. From the very beginning, African-Americans could join the United Mine Workers, and held important positions in the union. He says in the 19th and early 20th centuries, blacks moved to West Virginia because of greater equality in jobs and education.

"African-Americans came here, by and large, to improve themselves, the whole racial climate being somewhat better, particularly for those who came from the south."

To address the current inequities, the report recommends a statewide Office of Minority Affairs. Patterson says that otherwise these issues slip through the cracks.

"Someone has to be minding the store, holding agency heads accountable and holding systems accountable."

Some observers say America has succeeded in getting past its painful racial

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- John Dewey



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history. But Patterson says the report shows African-Americans here are paid 20 percent less than the median wage, and have an infant mortality rate more than 1.5 times that of whites.

The full report is available at the *Partnership* Web site, www.paac2.org, or from the West Virginia Center On Budget and Policy, www.wvpolicy.org

Dan Heyman, Public News Service - WV

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