



# Jeffrey Hassan of the African American Leadership Forum (AALF)

African Americans face large gaps in income, education, beliefs

A Civic Caucus Review of Minnesota's Public Policy Process Interview

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As a group, African Americans in Minnesota are doing poorly, says Jeffrey Hassan of the African American Leadership Forum (AALF). Some national surveys show that Minnesota African Americans rank either last or next to last in the entire country when the factors of income, poverty, homeownership and education are combined.

Hassan references a January 2016 report by the State Demographic Center that describes the economic status of Minnesotans, broken down by 17 cultural groups. The report uses a number of measures, among them, education levels, median household income and percent living in poverty. Somalis, Native Americans and African Americans rank among the lowest groups in education level and household incomes and among the highest groups in percent living in poverty.

In its own 2011 report, AALF identified five gaps in education that must be addressed to have an effect on the achievement gap: preparation, time, teaching, leadership and belief gap. Hassan discusses the belief gap and says a recent survey about parent engagement in education shows that 60 percent of parents surveyed felt they were somewhat or mostly confident in making educational decisions for their child. But only 20 percent of teachers surveyed were confident in parents' ability to make those decisions.

Hassan examines some of the structural and institutional reasons—including slavery, Jim Crow laws, redlining and incarceration rates—why the education gap and income gap persist between whites and African Americans.

Formed in 2008-2009, AALF is a Minneapolis-based nonprofit that brings together more than 1,200 African American leaders in the Twin Cities from all different sectors. The organization tries to address gross disparities and inequalities affecting Minnesota's African American community. Its current priorities include health and wellness, economic development, and education.

## Biography

Jeffrey Hassan has been executive director of the African American Leadership Forum (AALF) since November 2014. AALF is a nonprofit Minnesota corporation whose mission is to address racial disparities in education, health and wellness, economic development and community safety.

Hassan began his legal practice in 1976. As a private attorney to the State of Minnesota Department of Human Rights, he litigated the landmark Minnesota employment discrimination case of *State of Minnesota v. Continental Can*. The case established employer liability for sexual harassment between coworkers. Since that time, he has served as legal counsel to numerous corporate and government entities in cases involving tort, employment, employment discrimination and workplace misconduct.

From 1991 to 1998, he practiced law in Washington, D.C., with the law firm of Jordan & Keys, LLP, where he represented clients on automobile liability claims, medical malpractice claims, director and officer liability claims, and multi-district product liability claims.

In 1998, Hassan returned to Minnesota to the law firm of Hassan & Reed, Ltd. He has represented plaintiffs in personal injury, medical malpractice and police misconduct litigation in state and federal court. In 2002, Hassan formed Jeffrey A. Hassan, PLC. Until November 2014, he served as outside legal counsel to Minneapolis Public Schools in the areas of employment, employment discrimination and investigation of workplace claims of employee misconduct. He has also performed workplace investigations for the University of Minnesota and the Metropolitan Council.

Hassan is a 1973 graduate of Macalester College in St. Paul, where he was a member of Pi Sigma Alpha, the National Political Science Honor Society. He is a 1976 graduate of the University of Minnesota Law School.

## Background

Since September 2015, the Civic Caucus has been undertaking a review of the quality of Minnesota's past, present and future public-policy process for anticipating, defining and resolving major community problems. On Nov. 10, 2016, the Caucus issued its report based on that review,  *Looking Back, Thinking Ahead: Strengthening Minnesota's Public-Policy Process*. The Civic Caucus interviewed Jeffrey Hassan of the African American Leadership Forum to probe his experience and that of his organization in addressing public-policy issues.

### Information about the African American Leadership Forum.

The African American Leadership Forum (AALF), a nonprofit organization based in Minneapolis, was formed in 2008-2009 to bring together the brainpower of African Americans in the community to try to address gross disparities and inequalities affecting the African American community in Minnesota. According to the [AALF website](#), the organization is a movement of more than 1,200 African American leaders in the Twin Cities, representing business, nonprofits, government, education, health, religion, politics, philanthropy, the arts and grassroots organizing. AALF believes that members can do more together than apart.

All work of AALF is done through convening, work groups and action teams. AALF's network creates the space for African Americans to create a shared agenda for solving the community's critical issues. The group's mission is to establish a just and healthy society that works equally well for everyone. Its

work encompasses the following priorities for 2015 to 2017: health and wellness, economic development and education.

AALF lists its objectives as the following:

- Maximize the potential of African American children and adults;
- Reclaim and amplify the vital role of family, culture and spirituality in the African American community;
- Alter the socioeconomic trajectory of the African American community;
- Strengthen African-American-centered institutions; and
- Challenge and change systems that disproportionately harm African Americans.

AALF runs the Dr. Josie Johnson Leadership Academy, now in its second year, one of the group's flagship programs. A year-long, leadership-training program, it focuses on young people aged 22 to 40 to help develop the next generation of leaders for the African American community. Forty people have come through the program. AALF also has developed a program called "Unconscious Bias Training" and has run one pilot training session.

## Discussion

**As a group, African Americans in Minnesota are doing poorly** . According to Jeffrey Hassan of the African American Leadership Forum (AALF), some national surveys show that African Americans in Minnesota rank either last or next to last in the entire country when the factors of income, poverty, homeownership and education are combined.

Hassan said that compared to the rest of Minnesota's population, the state has the greatest inequality in incomes for African Americans and Native Americans in the country. Data highlighted by AALF shows that African Americans are the only racial or ethnic group in Minnesota to have experienced a decline in income between 2013 and 2014. Median income for black Minnesotans declined by almost 13 percent during that time period, dropping to \$27,000, compared to a 2.6 percent increase to \$64,000 for white Minnesotans.

**Nationally, Minnesota is known for its high standards of education, employment and business** . But, Hassan said, when we disaggregate and look at what that's doing for our least, we have a hidden problem.

**AALF publishes reports** . In 2011, the group published *Crisis in Our Community*, which Hassan called a "seminal work" that identified five gaps in education: preparation, time, teaching, leadership and the belief gap. And he said the group is about to produce a report on economic inequality in Minnesota.

**Operating by consensus allows us to see what we have in common** . Hassan said AALF operates by consensus, rather than majority vote. "That allows us to agree on those principles or issues we all have in common," he said. "In the same way, as we look at ethnicity and race and how we govern, if we operated by consensus, we'd find we have a whole lot more in common than we have in differences."

He noted that there are more white people in Minnesota living in poverty than people of color, but the percentage of poverty among people of color is much higher.

"If we focus on issues that are common to all of us-education, health care, employment, economic development-the communities we're trying to raise up are suffering in common, no matter what their color, background or makeup," he said.

Hassan asserted that point of view reflects President Barack Obama's approach to addressing issues, which assumes that a rising tide lifts all boats. Obama has said improving conditions in education, health care and employment would have a disproportionate positive impact on African Americans and other people of color.

**A January 2016 report by the State Demographic Center described the economic status of**

**Minnesotans, broken down by 17 cultural groups** . Hassan referenced the report,  *The*

*Economic Status of Minnesotans: A Chartbook With Data for 17 Cultural Groups* . The report notes that broad racial groupings can obscure what's really happening. It offers the example of the Asian population in Minnesota, which includes both some of the highest-income and some of the lowest-income subpopulations.

- **Education levels in 2014** . According to the report, Asian Indian (85 percent) and Chinese (70 percent) Minnesotans have the highest percentages of bachelor's degrees or higher. The Ojibwe (eight percent) and Dakota (nine percent) populations in Minnesota have the lowest percentages of bachelor's degrees or higher, followed by the Lao (11 percent), Somali (11 percent) and Mexican (12 percent) populations in the state. Seventeen percent of Minnesota African Americans, 21 percent of the Hmong population and 37 percent of whites have bachelor's degrees or higher.
- **Median household income in 2014**. Minnesota Asian Indians have the highest median household income (\$89,300), followed by the state's Filipino (\$74,900), Chinese (\$71,900), Vietnamese (\$67,800) and white (\$64,100) populations. The lowest median household incomes were among the state's Somali (\$18,400), Ojibwe (\$28,100) and African American (\$28,800) populations.
- **Percent living in poverty in 2014**. The groups with the highest percentages of people living in poverty were Somalis (57 percent), followed by the state's Ojibwe (38 percent), African American (35 percent), Ethiopian (35 percent) and Hmong (27 percent) populations. The lowest percentages of people living in poverty were Asian Indians (six percent), followed by the state's Filipino (seven percent), white (eight percent), Chinese (nine percent) and Korean (nine percent) populations.

Hassan commented that because we have limited resources, we need to focus on communities where the greatest need exists. He noted that when the first wave of the Hmong population came to Minnesota, their children were among the best students. The same was true of the children of the first wave of Somalis to arrive in Minnesota. "But in subsequent generations, they've fallen back," he said.

**A terrible game has been played to separate people in the United States.** Hassan said we'd see many more commonalities and could follow the progression of healing divisions if we had

conversations among different parts of the population. "We need to break down this mythology of separation between people and get to the root of the problem," he said.

**But we must keep identifying people of different cultures when we're gathering data .** In response to an interviewer's comment that the Bureau of the Census wants to eliminate questions about race and ethnicity, Hassan said if we want to address issues of underserved communities, we must identify who those communities are, whether Hmong, Somali, African American or Native American.

As another reason for identifying race and ethnicity, Hassan offered an example of a public sector entity that last year spent \$800 million purchasing goods and services and doing construction. Only 1.2 percent went to African-American-owned businesses, he said.

And we know there is unconscious bias in the hiring process, he noted. Fifty percent of African American applicants do not make it through the employment screening process because they have African-American-sounding names. He recommended removing people's names during the early hiring process.

**AALF has identified five gaps in education that must be addressed in order to have an effect on the achievement gap. Hassan listed them as follows:**

1. Preparation for school;
2. Time in school or other programs;
3. Teaching: He said with the best teachers, as in any field, kids would do better. But in urban schools in poor areas, we have younger teachers with the highest turnover.
4. Leadership: He asserted that these schools do not have the best leaders, either.
5. Belief Gap: He noted that Minneapolis chartered school founder and executive Eric Mahmoud says this is the main reason for the achievement gap.

"How to address those gaps is the \$64,000 question," Hassan said.

In discussing the belief gap, Hassan offered the example of a recent survey of teachers and parents about how they identify engagement. A question on the parent survey asked how confident they are in making educational decisions on behalf of their children. Sixty percent of parents said they were somewhat or mostly confident.

But when teachers were asked whether they were confident that parents were able to make good educational decisions on behalf of their child, only 20 percent responded that they were. "If you're a teacher and you believe parents can't make good educational decisions on behalf of their child, it's a problem," Hassan said.

In response to an interviewer's question of how to get kids to have higher aspirations for their futures, Hassan said that's also part of the belief gap. "How do we get out of this mindset we're in that the AFDC mother or person on welfare is part of the African American community?" he asked. "The reality

is that the largest public health dollars are going to white people in nursing home care. Historically, African Americans have kept their elders at home. We don't talk about those things. We just talk about the AFDC dollars going to the African American community."

**There are structural and institutional reasons why the education gap and income gap persist between whites and African Americans.** Hassan stressed the impact on African Americans of 242 years of slavery in the United States, followed by 100 years of Jim Crow laws enforcing segregation in the southern states. Redlining in northern cities also supported segregation of neighborhoods. He noted that prisons are housing predominantly people of color.

An interviewer agreed with Hassan's point. "We often forget the impact that history has had on people," the interviewer said. "We started out with a group of people who were enslaved. They were below human, not the equal of white people. When that happens, I've already reduced you to something less than myself. So almost anything I do to you is acceptable."

"People are doing the same thing today," the interviewer continued. "They identify by their source of information, thinking 'Everybody I listen to thinks the same way I do.' The view that blacks are not equal to other people gets reinforced over time."

The interviewer said he always encounters white people in positions of power, but it's easy for white people to go without seeing a person of color in a powerful position. "Your world view becomes what is around you, where you live and where you worship."

**We've studied problems to death, but solutions aren't easy .** Hassan made that comment in response to an interviewer who asked how we can make something good come out of studies that have been done. "We have enough research; we need to focus," Hassan said. "We're deluged with so much information. It's hard to focus our attention on dealing with these issues." He noted that there are over 400 gap-closing initiatives in Minnesota right now.

**Help young parents complete their education.** Hassan said AALF has applied for a grant dealing with parent engagement in education. The initiative would work with young parents 18 to 35 who didn't finish their education and help return them to education themselves. "Our theory," he said, "is that if parents can complete their education or go to tech education or take advantage of an employment opportunity, it will have a positive effect on their children."

**We should be focusing on the family.** An interviewer asked how we can intervene on the household level, which is the source of the problem. "Many households are unable to deliver the support a child needs to flourish," the interviewer said. He also wonders if we've defined the job of schoolteachers wrong, so that it's school-focused, rather than kid-focused.

"In Minneapolis, we're spending \$20,000 per kid, per year to try to solve the problem, but we should be focusing on the family," the interviewer said. Another interviewer said the current Legislature is not sympathetic to the problems of inner-city schools.

**Criminal justice reform.** An interviewer said that there would be a lot of support for focusing on criminal justice reform. Hassan said that when AALF started, the organization decided to focus on education, health and employment. When a question was raised about the criminal justice system,

Minnesota Judge Pamela Alexander said if we focus on those three things, criminal justice will take care of itself.

**Unemployment.** Hassan noted that the level of unemployment in African American communities is at least three times that of the state as a whole.

**Teaching and learning.** Hassan said kids are in school for five hours a day for 176 days per school year. But he said the actual learning time each day is probably two or three hours. Teacher surveys show, he said, that when a student has a behavior problem, teachers inform the parents 90 percent of the time. But teachers only contact parents 20 percent of the time when their students are doing well.

He noted that the Minneapolis Northside Achievement Zone (NAZ), whose president and CEO is Sondra Samuels, is focused on a holistic view of the student and the importance of working with families.