

Members of the **Sanford Equity Task Force** on Monday presented recommendations for actions specific to Lee County Government as part of its findings in a yearlong look at community disparities.

The findings and recommendations were presented at the county commissioners meeting at the Dennis A. Wicker Civic Center.

"There were some areas that were relative to the county that were documented and made recommendations," Bishop Charles Mallette, facilitator of the **task force** that was created in 2020 by action of the **Sanford** City Council, according to the final report.

The 18-member **task force** looked at inequities in areas of concern identified by the group. They include Communication and Community Responsibility, Criminal Justice, Education, Health, Housing and Home Ownership, Leadership and Inclusion, and Wages and Income.

The areas that are open to "are relative to the services the county provides are education, criminal justice and health, Mallette said.

"Lee County students face economic disparities," said Jermaine White, assistant superintendent of the Harnett County Schools, who addressed education.

Disciplinary actions in schools should be reviewed, he said, noting that the majority of suspended students in the Lee County Schools are African American.

The Lee Promise Program offered through Central Carolina Community College needs to be more publicized, White said. High school graduates who qualify are eligible for free tuition, he noted.

The **task force** recommended hiring more minority teachers and guidance counselors. In 2020-21, White said, 78% of Lee County school employees were white.

Fred Webb, a **Sanford** attorney, addressed findings in the criminal justice area, saying it is "an important area of concern."

There is a need for mentoring and after-school programs that reduce crime, he said.

"Between 3 and 6 p.m. is when youth violence peaks," Webb said.

A big concern is the operations of the courts, he said. People are often held for 30 days or more because they are unable to afford paying traffic or court fines, Webb said.

In a year's time, more than 3,050 drivers had their licenses suspended, Webb said. Of those, 48% were Black, 21.6% were Latino and 26.5% were white, he said.

"The **Task Force** also found that in Lee County, financial bonds account for 78% of bonds issued for misdemeanor charges and 79% of bonds issued for felony charges," according to the study.

Commissioner Kirk Smith, board chair, pointed out that the county has no power to implement changes in the criminal justice area.

That's correct, Webb said, but the commissioners can have a say. "You can express your concerns to those who can," he said.

There's also a disparity in the ability to receive quality health care, said Vonda Reives, a nurse practitioner in Robbins and a member of the **task force**.

Lee County is lacking in the area of medical specialists, which means people are often referred to those in other counties, she said. Some people have no means of transportation, she said.

Another issue is the lack of facilities that specialize in the treatment of substance abuse and mental health, she said. The **task force** also recommends expanding COLTS, the county-operated transit system.

"There's a lot of work to be done, a lot of thinking to be done," Commissioner Bill Carver said.

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