

The African Immigrant and Refugee
Community in Multnomah County:
An Unsettling Profile

A partnership between



Coalition of
Communities of
Color

&

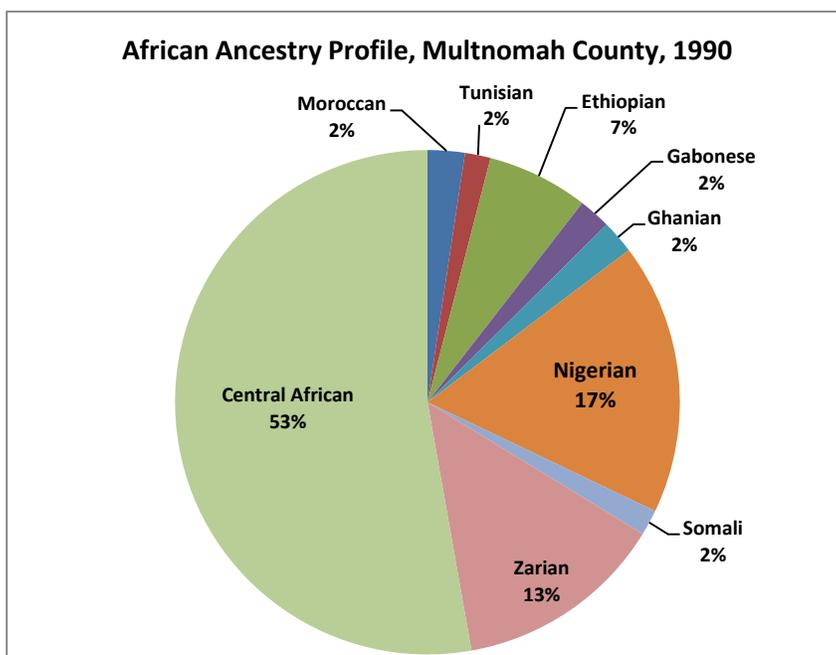


Portland State
UNIVERSITY

Executive Summary

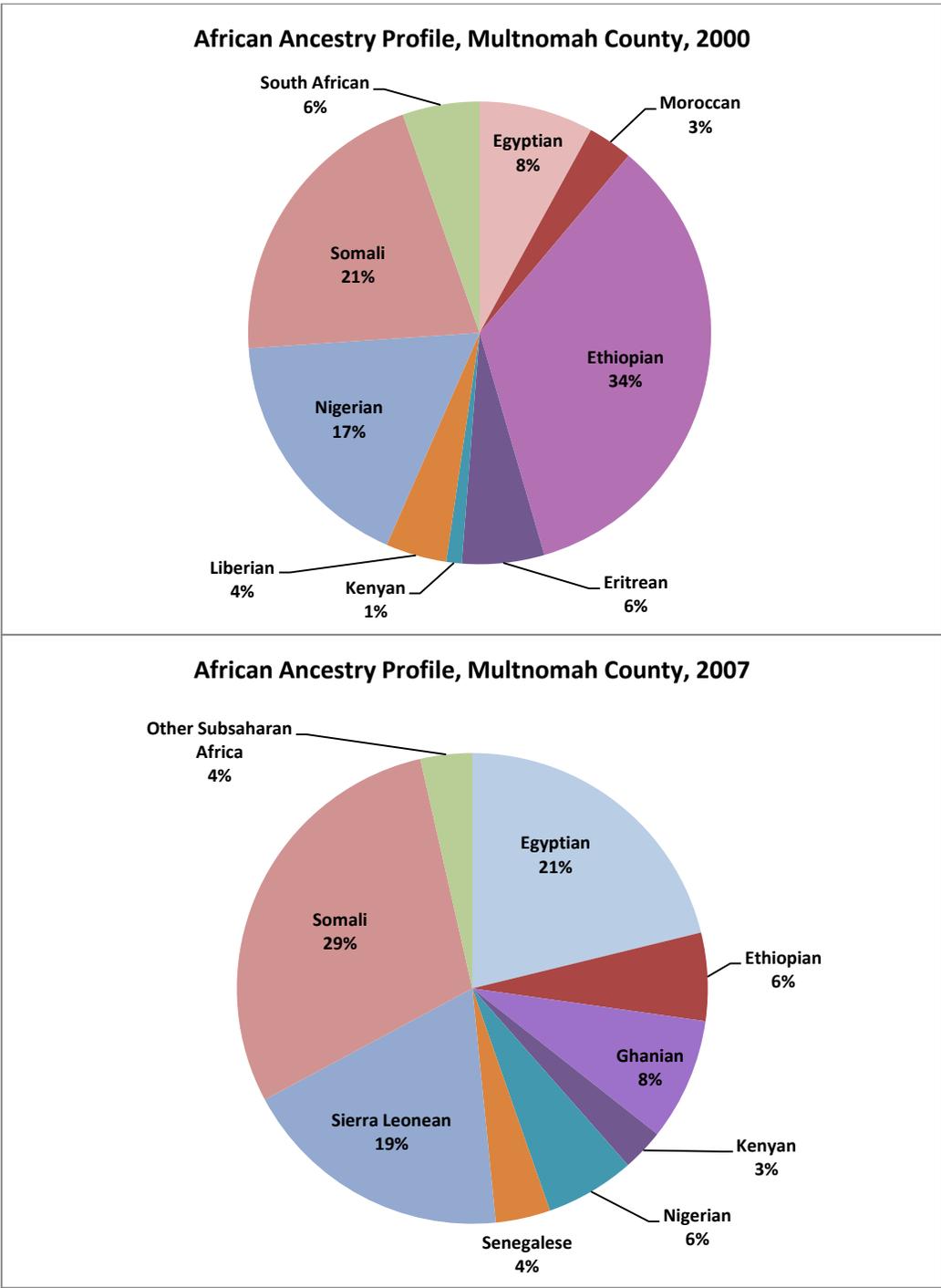
Since 1975, African immigrants, refugees and secondary migrants have been relocating to Multnomah County and now represent the fourth largest immigrant community after Latino, Asian, and Slavic immigrants. The African community here is incredibly diverse in its make-up, with over 28 different African countries and numerous ethnic groups represented. Estimates from 2003 suggest that African immigrants make up 2% of the foreign-born population in the Portland Metro (tri-county) area. Nearly half (45%) of the tri-county area's African foreign-born population is from eastern Africa, including Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Somalia, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.¹ Other countries of origin include Sudan, Sierra Leone, Angola, Mali, Liberia, Togo, Chad, Nigeria, Rwanda, Mozambique, and Democratic Republic of Congo. In 2011 alone, the USA admitted around 15,000 African refugees.

Very little research has been conducted on the experiences and challenges facing the African immigrant and refugee community in Multnomah County.² While we know that the official data sources are flawed for this community, we use these data to begin our understanding of this community and how it has changed over the years. Below is the ancestry profile contained in official sources from the Census Bureau, stretching back to 1990.



Source: Census 1990, drawing from customized data extractions by Joseph Smith-Buani, PSU.

More recently, the 2000 and 2007 data show a shifting pattern of African immigrants and refugees. Today we have an increasing concentration of the African community coming from Somalia, Egypt and Sierra Leone. There is a diminishment of the portion of the community from Nigeria and Ethiopia (as a portion of the entire African community). This does not mean, however, that their numbers are shrinking.



Source: Census 2000 & American Community Survey, 2007, drawing from customized data extractions by Joseph Smith-Buani, PSU.

In Multnomah County, African immigrants are mostly clustered in north and northeast Portland, though like other low income communities of color, are spreading further east and west in search of affordable housing.³ The further reaches of the county also offer more available housing and sometimes close

proximity to settlement services⁴ – although there remains a pronounced disjuncture between the location of service providers and where our communities of color are located, and service providers are slow to respond to these local needs.⁵

Our African social fabric is one of diversity and multiculturalism. We retain much of our national, ethnic and tribal distinctiveness and rarely combine our identities within a pan-African framework. We have built our own associations and tend to look inside our own cultures for support. While crises may send us into each other's communities, we retain a focus on building resources that are specific to our distinct communities.

And yet, while our differences may be pronounced, we hold a shared identity as African that results in a pronounced need for culturally-specific services for African immigrants and refugees. Africa House has responded well to this need, providing for us (and with us) a wide-ranging array of services. Features of this service that need replicating throughout the state of Oregon include: diverse language capacity, staff to have experienced being refugees, understanding what we have lost through moving away from our homeland, affirmation of our identity and our experiences of racism, cultural supports so that our heritage is not lost, education for our children to both support their US experiences (particularly in schooling) and also in learning their own native languages. The importance of culturally-specific services cannot be stated strongly enough – for issues of trust, understanding, compassion, and acceptance are the foundations of real help and support.

Universally, the community desires for others to know of our history and the legacy, and particularly of the experiences that carry with us as we arrive in the USA. This next section details the African context and experience with an effort to educate others who might better understand us and who might thus be able to be more sensitive to our needs, strengths and priorities. Know that this history is not complete, as there are many regional variations among us, and local heritage that is not shared. Think of this contribution as the larger and more holistic vision of our history and one that still needs to be supplemented by local histories and contexts.

Some of Africa's history shows community growth that is similar to the USA – with the development of robust and thriving urban centers, rich culture and heritage, and with the development of strong centers of industry, education and trade. Anti-colonial movements led to the expulsion of many colonial governments and recent history (post-1950) saw the independence of many African nations that stretched into the 1990s. Gaining independence, coupled with the rise of South African anti-apartheid and emancipation gains have been good for the dignity of us all.

With this growth and with independence movements, we have been developing our nationhood across the continent. It has not been an easy time, however, as this era has also been a time for a different form of profiteering on the backs of our peoples. Most African nations have faced pronounced increases in international debt – with debts soaring as lending practices and forced restructuring of many of our economies through “structural adjustment programs” of the IMF and World Bank have decimated many

of our economies. In the wake of impoverishment, lasting drought, new nation formation, and the emergence of AIDS, there have been crises in many nations, and in numerous countries leadership has been contentious as military regimes have often stepped into governance voids.

As a result, many countries have been infused with conditions that have been violent and persecutory for many of our peoples. The last generation has been characterized by much civil strife, violence, upheaval, illness and death. And many of our people have been forced to flee their homes and, ultimately, have had all paths towards the future curtailed by forces beyond our control. Forced into refugee camps and surviving much trauma, many among us have sought to find shelter and a new life in foreign countries, including the USA and approximately half of Africans in this region are believed to be refugees or former refugees.⁶

While we as a people are grateful to escape such strife, deprivation and violence, our settlement into US society has been difficult. Details of our settlement experiences help illuminate the ways we have been challenged in the USA. We have been supported by numerous organizations in the region, with the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization (IRCO) being the largest, and also with support from Catholic Charities and Lutheran Family Services. These services help us find housing, offer employment supports, provide English language training, skills recertification, translation services, transportation, and provide financial supports for our first 8 months in the country (available through the federal government's Office of Refugee Resettlement). The emphasis of these programs is to ensure rapid settlement, rather than secure and promising settlement – not due to the fault of our local service organizations, but through federal government policies which aim for self-sufficiency as quickly as possible.

As a result, we are required through policy to take the first jobs offered to us. Such practice forecloses our professional futures, as many of our African credentials are not recognized in the USA, including our non-USA work experience. It is time to modify these practices so that the best of what we can offer US society can manifest in our work and in our lives – continuing this practice of “take the first job offered” will take a huge toll on our social and economic inclusion in the fabric of American life.

Our African immigrant and refugee community is diverse, as the region routinely accepts refugees from approximately ten African nations, who join another ten African ancestry groups from around the continent. We are a community who are youthful, bringing with us very high levels of education and experience that are typically ignored by mainstream society in the region. For while we have graduate and professional degrees that are almost double the level of White communities, and four times that of other communities of color, we access much less than our fair share of good jobs and have alarming rates of poverty, particularly among our children. Furthermore, our incomes are very low, as our households attempt to make ends meet on incomes that are half that of Whites. Overall, our economic situation is grave and, in today's recessionary climate, precarious. When community members were asked about top priorities that must be acted upon by elected leaders, they universally said their priorities were jobs, education, housing and health care.

Data on our experiences are lacking, as all conventional databases subsume our identity within that of the African American community. While there may be strength in numbers and a shared legacy of oppression, our experiences are profoundly different and are overshadowed by the larger numbers within the African American community. Eclipsed are our experiences with settlement issues, language barriers, lack of recognition of foreign credentials and foreign work experience, health issues related to refugee traumas, lack of knowledge of American society, and under-developed networks and community-based organizations that would flourish if we had the time and resources to nurture their development.

Also missing from view are the racial disparities that exist within our institutions. It is impossible to gain information on our people, as it would require researchers to disaggregate the racial grouping of “black” by country of origin, length of time in the USA, ethnicity, language, and/or refugee status. It is essential that our research practices begin such disaggregation and allow our collective experience as African immigrants and refugees to be more clearly understood, for our racial disparities to be identified and for progress to be monitored. This omission in research practices means we cannot explore racial disparities in the following institutions: higher education (and several important dimensions of public education), child welfare, juvenile and adult justice, social services, public service, voting, health, public housing, and homeless services.

With this invisibility comes powerlessness. While policy makers turn to us for advice on immigration and refugee matters, we are left out of more conventional policy practices in mainstream health and human services. This culture of omission serves to leave our voices out of the debates and all of us lose ground when we engage in practices that center the needs of a more limited set of communities of color. With this pervasive pattern of omission comes a price – for as the reader will see, we are one of the most vulnerable communities of color, and failing to promote our inclusion and to build meaningful supports for our people will harm all of us. For our futures are intertwined, and success for the region will ultimately depend on success for all of our communities of color.

This report has drawn upon a customized data extraction from the 2008 American Community Survey by extracting data for those who have identified their ancestry as African (and excluding those who defined it as African American). These data include insights on education, occupation, housing, demographic composition, unemployment, poverty and income. Updating on some measures was recently conducted, allowing a limited set of experiences to be captured up to 2011. These include unemployment, health insurance, poverty and income levels. This report marks the first comprehensive address of these issues – as the standard practice is to integrate African experiences within the African American profile.

We are able to supplement these data with information about the sub-Saharan community. The American Community Survey has additional information on some social and economic conditions, and made these results available by averaging a full five-year spread of dates (2006-2010). We share these

data by infilling them into this report, filling in gaps in our knowledge with this more limited geographic region, and this five-year composite figure. These figures are to be used with some caution, as they include both a recovery and recessionary period of time. But, as noted above, such minimal data is available that we have elected to include these sub-Saharan experiences. On the positive side, these data points take us to 2010, even though the data are averages over five years. They are supplemented with a more limited set of data for 2011 (as noted in the prior paragraph). Appendix #3 details the countries included in this sub-Saharan region.

Here are the findings as to the nature of racial disparities facing our community:

- We are a highly educated community, with ¼ of us having attained a graduate or professional degree. Mostly, these degrees are earned overseas, and recognition of them here in the USA is minimal, leading to poverty and low incomes.
- We have the highest child poverty rate in the region – at 66.6% of our children. When we include all people in our communities, we have a poverty rate of 51.4%, more than one-in-two people. This rate is significantly worse than when we measured these rates three years ago.
- Our household income is half the size of Whites, at \$32,584 per year, compared with \$53,225 per year. For those of us able to find full-time, year-round work, we are able to bring home only \$28,888 while Whites in the region earn on average \$45,087 per year.
- One-in-three of us (who are employed) hold jobs in management and professional roles. While this is stronger than other communities of color, it is significantly less than the 43.6% of Whites who hold such jobs, and certainly not illustrative of the very high levels of graduate and professional degrees we hold. We are also over-represented in production and transportation fields, with the narrative here being that we are likely to be driving taxi cabs for a living, and likely to hold higher educational degrees than those who are passengers in our cabs.
- Our unemployment rate is 80% higher than Whites, at 13.5% compared to 7.5%. Unemployment levels have fluctuated significantly over recent years, with the community being hit hard in this past recession and recovery to prerecession levels still not in evidence.
- 82.7% of us speak a language other than English, and more than ⅓ of us do not speak English very well. Given the limited availability of English language classes for adults, coupled with the emphasis on speedy self-sufficiency as refugees and immigrants, we have narrow opportunities for learning English. This poses an ongoing barrier for employment and also for engaging with our children’s teachers and advocating for our children and ourselves when necessary.
- More of our community is unable to secure health insurance. The size of our community that does not have health insurance is 42% higher than Whites, at 13.5% compared with 7.5% for Whites.
- There are few of us able to purchase our own homes – at 38% of the community, while the level is 62% for Whites. Given that we have few assets since many of us arrived as refugees, and we have short credit histories in the USA, this is not surprising. But given that other communities of color have low homeownership levels as well, it is not likely that we are going to be able to access this wealth-generating asset in large quantities even as our length of residency in the USA expands. Remember as well that people of color are over-involved in the subprime lending

industry (at 55% of mortgages compared with 18% involvement for Whites⁷) meaning that we are at high risk for foreclosures and bankruptcy in today's economy.

- When we do own homes, 62.4% of us spend more than 30% of our incomes on rent, much higher than the 40.6% rate for White homeowners.

As a result, our legacy as a people who have migrated to the region within the last generation or two, coupled with the trauma that many of us bring as refugees, bringing with us racial and linguistic identities that are discriminated against, creates an unsettling profile of experiences. Our economic situation is precarious as noted above.

Policy barriers intersect with cultural barriers (such as knowing the local norms and conventions), linguistic barriers, and various dimensions of institutional racism, and a "perfect storm" brews that renders our foothold in US society precarious.

Our social situation is similarly dire. As refugees, many experienced deep trauma, violence and retain these experiences in their bodies. The following words of this community were prepared in 2003 by the Coalition of Communities of Color and these words retain power and significance today:

Before coming to the United States, many African youth and families spent years in refugee camps living in unthinkable conditions. Many have been profoundly affected by the civil war, have lost family members, and now suffer from related adjustment and psychological disorders. Here in Multnomah county, African youth now find themselves in an unsupported environment faced with significant cultural and language barriers. For example, some African girls are negotiating around what they see as restrictive roles in the traditional family structure. Many youth are illiterate in English and their native language, are dealing with newly broken homes, and have accents that set them apart from the mainstream. African Coalition members unanimously agree that we have reached a crisis point with our youth. Recently, the school and criminal justice systems have expressed difficulty dealing with African youth ages 13-21. Many African juveniles are already imprisoned in Oregon. With this growing reality, the community is in a state of shock.⁸

The evidence before us in this report must give rise to action. Simply, inaction is impossible in the face of injustice of this magnitude and this severity. Inaction will sentence us to a future of social exclusion, political isolation, and impoverishment that will not be good for any of us.

A total of nineteen African-specific policy recommendations are forwarded in the text of this report that are priorities for the African immigrant and refugee community to address the forms of marginalization that we experience in the region. Listed below, they hold potential to increase our community's wellbeing, the lives of our families and the futures of our children.

Education Reform

1. We aim to end the inappropriate mainstreaming of our children and youth. We need to make an intensive year of support available for our youth, and to sustain them in a culturally-specific environment without the pressure to fit into a specific grade.
2. Accurate assessments of the achievements of students who come to the USA are needed. It is essential to determine the exact differences, in terms of credits, between various diplomas and certificates.
3. We need accurate and routine information on how our children and youth are doing in school. Accordingly, we ask all school boards and the Oregon Department of Education to ensure that our community can be differentiated from African Americans. We ask that these institutions be guided by the recommendations contained within the Coalition of Communities of Color's *Research Protocol*.
4. Our children need to enter schools where teachers and staff look like them and understand their culture and the conditions of their arrival in the USA. Improved recruiting and hiring of African teachers must be made a priority, as well as equity efforts inside each school board to retain and promote these teachers through the ranks.
5. All teachers who engage with our children need to understand the history, the challenges and the conditions in which our children encounter their world. Understanding will provide an important link to reducing the isolation and vulnerability of our students.
6. We press our school boards to build rapid systems for recognizing African professional and experiential credentials so that we can be hired into the schools to both increase racial equity in hiring, and also to create a more welcoming, affirming and culturally-responsive academic environment.
7. Finally, many of our children are in Limited English Proficiency programs. It is imperative that this program be of the highest quality and that we as parents and consumers be assured that all school boards will meet federal regulations in LEP programs.

Employment

8. It is time for a robust, welcoming and easy to access system for recognizing foreign credentials. For the regulated professions, concrete, transparent, appropriate and low-cost equivalence measuring must be made available.
9. Provide paid skills training programs of short duration that prepare workers for specific occupations and/or jobs. These could be informed by local employers' needs and technological expectations.
10. Provide on-the-job training for the first month of employment for immigrant and refugee workers that subsidize employer's wages paid to workers and that would be rebated if the worker successfully transitions to become a regular employee. This would enable our community to be more rapidly employed (and not delayed for a training period) and provide supports for employers to hire our community members.
11. A workers' rights information campaign is needed to advise workers of their entitlements on working conditions, the rights to unionize, and the programs and services available to them for both prevention and for intervention when things go wrong.

12. To support employment, keeping public transportation costs low and routes accessible and convenient is essential.

Unemployment

13. It is essential that employment be considered a human right. African community members are exhausted with lengthy job searches and low prospects for finding living wage jobs. Providing real options for a positive future is essential for improving the well being of the community.

Remittances

14. It is well beyond time for international aid of sufficient size and quality that supports African development and peacemaking across the continent. Residents and policy makers in Multnomah county can advance a shifted discourse about the responsibility that those in the USA hold for real reforms in Africa. An end to exploitation, harmful structural adjustment programs, and mere crumbs of international aid are essential dimensions of such reforms.

Housing

15. It is imperative that solutions be found to the African housing crisis that is unique for many features: the intersection of language difficulties, cultural norms of occupancy that differ so much from that in US society, low incomes, vulnerability due to poverty, racism and bias of those involved, and the absence of culturally-specific services to assist us outside Multnomah county with housing.
16. The supply of subsidized housing must be increased immediately. We also seek for an expansion to occupancy standards to better reflect our cultural norms.
17. We highlight the necessity for expanded access to translators and policy that requires landlords and housing managers to ensure that conflict and disputes are comprehensible to African tenants.
18. It is important that housing is understood as a human right instead of a consumption item to be purchased in the private market and vulnerable to the practices of landlords.

Health and Human Services

19. All Africans need access to accurate information about the resources available, the conditions for accessing services, the pathways to citizenship, advocacy practices for supporting our children, and options for involvement in building social justice and racial equity for our community.

To advance racial equity for the community, and to continue solidarity among all communities of color, we also affirm these eleven priorities advanced in the earlier work of the Coalition of Communities of Color.⁹

- 1. Reduce disparities with firm timelines, policy commitments and resources.** Disparity reduction across systems must occur and must ultimately ensure that one's racial and ethnic identity ceases to determine one's life chances. The Coalition urges the State, County and City governments, including school boards, to establish firm timelines with measurable outcomes to assess disparities each and every year. There must be zero-tolerance for racial and ethnic

disparities. Accountability structures must be developed and implemented to ensure progress on disparity reduction.

- 2. *Expand funding for culturally-specific services.*** Designated funds are required, and these funds must be adequate to address needs. Allocation must recognize the size of communities of color, must compensate for the undercounts that exist in population estimates, and must be sufficiently robust to address the complexity of need that are tied to communities of color. Culturally-specific services are the most appropriate service delivery method for our people.
- 3. *Implement needs-based funding for communities of color.*** This report illuminates the complexity of needs facing communities of color, and highlights that Whites do not face such issues or the disparities that result from them. Accordingly, providing services for these communities is similarly more complex. We urge funding bodies to begin implementing an equity-based funding allocation that seeks to ameliorate some of the challenges that exist in resourcing these communities.
- 4. *Emphasize poverty reduction strategies.*** Poverty reduction must be an integral element of meeting the needs of communities of color. A dialogue is needed immediately to kick-start economic development efforts that hold the needs of communities of color high in policy implementation. Improving the quality and quantity of jobs that are available to people of color will reduce poverty.
- 5. *Count communities of color.*** Immediately, we demand that funding bodies universally use the most current data available and use the “alone or in combination with other races, with or without Hispanics” as the official measure of the size of our communities. The minor over-counting that this creates is more than offset by the pervasive undercounting that exists when outsiders measure the size of our communities. When “community-verified population counts” are available, we demand that these be used.
- 6. *Prioritize education and early childhood services.*** The Coalition prioritizes education and early childhood services as a significant pathway out of poverty and social exclusion, and urges that disparities in achievement, dropout, post-secondary education and even early education be prioritized.
- 7. *Expand the role for the Coalition of Communities of Color.*** The Coalition of Communities of Color seeks an ongoing role in monitoring the outcomes of disparity reduction efforts and seeks appropriate funding to facilitate this task.
- 8. *Research practices that make the invisible visible.*** Implement research practices across institutions that are transparent, easily accessible and accurate in the representation of communities of color. Draw from the expertise within the Coalition of Communities of Color to

conceptualize such practices. This will result in the immediate reversal of invisibility and tokenistic understanding of the issues facing communities of color. Such practices will expand the visibility of communities of color.

- 9. Fund community development.** Significantly expand community development funding for communities of color. Build line items into state, county and city budgets for communities of color to self-organize, network our communities, develop pathways to greater social inclusion, build culturally-specific social capital and provide leadership within and outside our own communities.

- 10. Disclose race and ethnicity data for mainstream service providers.** Mainstream service providers and government providers continue to have the largest role in service delivery. Accounting for the outcomes of these services for communities of color is essential. We expect each level of service provision to increasingly report on both service usage and service outcomes for communities of color.

- 11. Name racism.** Before us are both the challenge and the opportunity to become engaged with issues of race, racism and whiteness. Racial experiences are a feature of daily life whether we are on the harmful end of such experience or on the beneficiary end of the spectrum. The first step is to stop pretending race and racism do not exist. The second is to know that race is always linked to experience. The third is to know that racial identity is strongly linked to experiences of marginalization, discrimination and powerlessness. We seek for those in the White community to aim to end a prideful perception that Multnomah county is an enclave of progressivity. Communities of color face tremendous inequities and a significant narrowing of opportunity and advantage. This must become unacceptable for everyone.

The needs of our community are deep and profound. While only slices of data are available today on the experiences of the African community, we remain dependent on the narratives of experience to help illustrate that, indeed, racial disparities are pronounced across institutions and systems. It is imperative that we work together across the divides of race and ethnicity to build a positive future for all of us.

A Note about Data

The conventions for data on the African community is to aggregate all those who define our racial identity as Black into the category of “African American or Black.” What this means is that our experience is subsumed under a larger category of people of color and, thus, our experience diffused. This convention means that uniqueness of our challenges disappears. The decision of the Census Bureau to drop the long form of data collection in Census 2010 narrows further the possibility to provide “hard” data on the experiences of Africans in the region.