SELMA

Community members in attendance:
- Judge Bob Armstrong, District Court, bob.armstrong@alacourt.gov
- John Bowman, Montgomery Police Department
- Lydia Chapman, Selma AIR
- Pastor Dion Culliver, Tabernacle Baptist Church, pastorculliver.tab@gmail.com
- Mayor George Patrick Evans, Mayor of Selma
- Malika Sanders Fortier, The Democracy Project, mfortier@chestnutsanderslaw.com
- Callie Greer, Board Member, Selma Center for Non-Violence
- Carolyn Gaines-Varner, Lawyer, Chestnut Sanders Law Firm, cvarner@chestnutsanderslaw.com
- Captain Grantham, Dallas County Sheriff Department
- Dr. Margaret Hardy, Black Belt Human Resource Development Center, Mhardy19@bellsouth.net
- Ainka Sanders Jackson, Executive Director, Selma Center for Nonviolence, ajackson@selmacenterfornonviolence.org
- Michael Jackson, District Attorney, michael.jackson@alabamada.gov
- Brenden O’Connor, Advisory Council Member for the Selma Center for Nonviolence, bhoconnor@gmail.com
- Sen. Hank Sanders (AL Sen. District 23) hank23sanders@gmail.com
- Nancy G. Sewell, Educator and Former Selma City Council Member, nancygsewell@yahoo.com
- Kashay Smith______________
- Pastor Leodis Strong, Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church, brownchapelchurch@brownchapel.net
- Geraldine Turner-Wofford, Managing Atty., Selma office Legal Services Alabama, gturner-wofford@alsp.org
- Melvin Varnes, Operation Restore
- Annette Williams, Mayor’s Office

Welcome and Purpose of Roundtable
Pastor Leodis Strong, Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church:
- We are committed to transforming the root causes of poverty. It is about bridging divides and building the community. The civil rights movement is a tool to get other things to happen. Truth and reconciliation have to take place. Poverty and racism are intertwined. Violence and poverty are prevalent in Selma.

Ted Small, Chair ABA Commission on Homelessness & Poverty:
- We need to reframe the way we address poverty. There is no simple definition, but there are a number of confounding factors (such as inadequate and unaffordable housing). This group convened around the table along with the ABA can do more by collaborating across disciplines.
- We do NOT believe we can help you solve poverty in a few hours. Instead we are here to share diverse perspectives of Commissioners and liaisons from across the nation and to exchange ideas about ways to address poverty in a holistic and interdisciplinary manner.
- Yesterday, we held a poverty roundtable in Birmingham with active community members from various service organizations. The Birmingham participants identified a need to focus on new collaborations and programs to address families and children and addressing child support arrears, as well as a need to collaborate and utilize available data collection resources at local colleges and universities in order to collect data that is useful to support advocacy for additional funding and programming for groups addressing various manifestations of poverty areas.
- We currently have 7 (of 10) blueprints for action available on our website [http://www.americanbar.org/groups/public_services/homelessness_poverty/poverty_initiative.ht]
ml] that provide best practices, strategies and information on topic such as education and employment, political involvement etc.

Ainka Sanders Jackson, Executive Director, **Selma Center for Nonviolence, Truth and Reconciliation**:

- Our mission is to promote love and transform the root causes of inequality. It is necessary that healing take place. People must learn about their history. We cannot move on unless we address the past.
- According to Bryan Stevenson in order to fight injustice we must:
  - Be in proximity to the suffering
  - Change the narrative
  - Remain hopeful in face of injustice
  - Do uncomfortable things
- For Selma to move forward, the divisions in the community have to be healed.

1. **How do your organizations, churches, the criminal justice system and lawyers collaborate to lessen poverty’s adverse impact on personal and physical safety?**

Michael Jackson, District Attorney:

- The current court system is problematic. There is a lack of information and lack of knowledge about expungements and pardons.
  - Dismissed charges are expungable in Alabama but convictions are not expungable
  - For convictions, an individual can apply for a pardon through Probation and Parole.

Ainka Sanders Jackson:

- Legal Services has some legal clinic sessions, but there needs to be more. SCNTR sponsors “know your rights” clinics to educate communities about the pardon process and other legal processes. We must come to the people in need and meet them where they are.

Pastor Dion Culliver, Tabernacle Baptist Church:

- To combat poverty we must show compassion. We have to put Matthew 25 into practice. We must educate people to empower them.
- Pastors and churches must work together collaboratively in order to effectively fight poverty.

Hon. Elizabeth Finn, Presiding City Judge:

- In Arizona, we have self-service centers, where volunteer attorneys, the Department of Motor Vehicles, the Police Department and judges work together to overcome obstacles that prevent those that are homeless or experiencing poverty from moving forward (i.e. identification issues).

Brenden O’Connor, Advisory Council Member for the Selma Center for Nonviolence:

- We have to ask who is coming together. We can’t authentically be together unless we allow one another to be different. We need to have “separateness” in order to have genuine togetherness.

Craig Baab, **Alabama Appleseed**:

- How does your community partner with law enforcement?

Michael Jackson:

- There is no homeless shelter in Selma. There have been discussions about creating a shelter, but nothing has been done. This has resulted in conflict between the homeless people of Selma and the police. Police do more “clean-up” than prevention.

John Bowman, Montgomery Police Department:

- In Montgomery, the police department works in collaboration with non-profits. The most effective programs are those that teach those experiencing homelessness how to come out of poverty and stay out of poverty.

Captain Grantham, Dallas County Sheriff’s Department:

- We acknowledge the need to return to community policing and need for police training on rehabilitation as an alternative to incarceration, so officers appreciate how rehabilitation programs can aid their work.
ABA Commission on Homelessness & Poverty

- However, such community policing and training efforts are frustrated by the fact that the Department only has 27 officers to cover 900 square miles. This staffing level only allows for “weeding” without any seeding.

Ainka Sanders Jackson:
- We need community policing. We could do “walk and talk” programs to build trust between community members and the police department. There are community members in Selma that have never seen a police officer until after a crime occurs.

**ACTION ITEM:** Michael Jackson will speak with the Selma Mayor Evans to encourage community policing.

Judge Bob Armstrong, District Court:
- One strategy is to deal with some root problems in court. Recently, there has been a 65% drop in violent juvenile crime, a 92% reduction in juvenile incarceration. This progress has occurred because of collaborations in association with community programs involving job training, art/music, and mentorship in schools.
- We should facilitate a dinner at St. James Hotel to enhance and continue collaboration and then designate an ad hoc group to go see Mayor Evans with proposed solutions.
- One program we have is called “Workforce Investment” which focuses on helping 16-24 year old young adults with education and employment through diploma and GED classes, as well as vocational training and employment.
- Another program is the Fatherhood Initiative, which deals with child support arrears. Not all non-paying dads are “dead beat dads.” This program teaches dads parenting skills, as well as soft skills to assist in finding work.

Lydia Chapman, Selma AIR:
- Selma has a leadership deficit. There are 43 churches in Selma. Each church could take responsibility for those who are homeless in a two-block area around the church. Religion can be used to connect people. Abandoned properties could be rehabbed to provide housing for homeless people or be used as halfway houses.

Melvin Varnes, Operation Restore, formerly homeless, gang member and ex-convicted criminal:
- Oftentimes, a lack of hope inspires the killer instinct.
- Selma needs more alternative justice programming in order to decriminalize homelessness and effectuate positive change.
- School children need safe bus transportation to schools.

- Reflection on the distinction between his generation where people were poor of things and circumstances, but not of the spirit.
  - We need to utilize the resources we have in order to reconnect the poor with desire/spirit to get out of poverty.
  - We used to ask “what’s your name?” and “who are your folks?” and “what’s your church?”, whereas now we ask only “what’s your job?”
  - We need to find ways to make it possible for people to find work.
  - Reflection about the effectiveness of the Black Muslim Movement in addressing this issue during the 1950-60s.

Annette Williams:
- As leaders, we need to set the right example and shouldn’t worry about who gets credit. It is necessary that we combine our resources. We need leaders to teach our community to invest in individuals. Education is what brings about positive change.
- Today not all parents are supportive of their child’s advancement to the next level.
I grew up with brothers who were gang bangers (one of her gang banger brothers was once an honor student), while her mom was working three jobs to support her eight children. But, because I was mentored with hope by good people, I was able to retire as a major, US Army.

We can’t just change the circumstance (shelter them), but we need to collaborate on how to change the mindset as well in order to be effective.

Divisions within the Selma community impair our ability to be effective in bringing about change.

We need to avoid allowing such discussions to be a mere “Good Idea Ferry” without follow-up action.

2. What racial and economic challenges impair your ability to collaborate with each other and regional state partners for the better?

Education:
Ainka Sanders Jackson:
- We need a survey of what is being provided in the community. We need to organize this community to meet our needs, and then look systemically for ways to improve.
- We need parental involvement in children’s school experience. Parents need to attend City Council meetings and school board meetings.

Faya Ora Rose Touré, Chestnut, Sanders & Sanders L.L.C.:
Transportation is a major problem. There is no busing system, so kids are forced to walk 4-10 miles every day.
- Idea suggested by Lydia Chapman: We could divide the city into 8 wards and get volunteers from churches to drive the children to school.
- The school board is receptive to providing transportation, but the community hasn’t made the effort to push this project forward.
- There is a great disparity of very high bonds in court for poor children charged with a criminal offense, compared to the low bonds set for middle class children charged with a criminal offense.

Reverend Berry, moved to Selma about 2 years ago:
- Noticed lack of involvement of parents in school board meetings
- Problematic that school board meets at the same time as city council meeting.
- Suggestion that at least 10% of pastors show up at school board and also city council meetings as a coordinated strategy to always have some participation.
  - Pastors who cannot make the commitment themselves should at least challenge a few of their members to represent their church community.

ACTION ITEM: Ainka Sanders Jackson will speak with Mayor Evans about changing the dates of City Council meetings, because currently City Council meetings are held on the same day as school board meetings, so parents can’t attend both meetings.

Shelter and Housing:
Kashay Smith, reflection on growing up in Selma and coming back to hometown
- Selma does not have adequate education opportunities
  - I made it, but so many that I grew up around did not make it
- We must develop a community council where all groups are constituent members to advocate collectively.
  - Describes the frustrations she experienced with attempting to obtain buy-in from leadership in past effort to obtain funding for a homeless shelter.
- We must conduct needs assessments. We must have churches available in cold weather. This could give churches a chance to “touch” the lives of homeless community members.
- We need to find a location for a homeless shelter and figure out how to get it started with the limited resources we have now.

Craig Baab, Alabama Appleseed:
- In Montgomery, we have a program called “Family Promise,” where churches collaborate to take responsibility for supporting those experiencing homelessness.

Rutledge Simmons, NeighborWorks America:
- We have a similar program in Northern Virginia, where 75 churches collaborate to provide shelter for those experiencing homelessness on the coldest nights of the year, as well as other holistic support services.

Mayor George Patrick Evans, Mayor of Selma:
- We have attempted to get a grant for a homeless shelter in Selma in the past and have not yet succeeded. We have worked with the United Way. We have issues with funding, as well as liability issues.

Ted Small, Chair ABA Commission on Homelessness & Poverty:
- After welcoming the Mayor and thanking him for his personal presence and greetings at last evenings gathering at the St. James and at today’s roundtable, Small summarized the earlier discussions about the Selma community’s need to establish a homeless shelter, Small asked Mayor Evans whether he would be willing to convene a follow-up meeting on this specific issue. Mayor Evans agreed to do so within the next month, but he did not want his involvement to be perceived as pandering for votes in an election season.

**ACTION ITEM:** Mayor Evans will take responsibility to lead the initiative to establishing a homeless shelter in Selma.

**Mental Health, AIDS, and Other Healthcare:**

Callie Greer, Selma Community Member:
- My daughter Venus received substandard medical care that led to her eventual death at a young age. Venus started seeking medical care when she noticed a lump on her breast but because she didn’t have any public or private health insurance, she was given only pain medication and sent away from medical facilities without proper testing, diagnosis or treatment for months. By the time she finally received proper testing and diagnosis of her breast cancer at a hospital in Mobile, the smell of her rotting breast got the immediate attention of doctors entering her room. At that point, it was too late.

Ainka Sanders Jackson:
- We need to always involve the homeless people themselves in the planning of these programs. It is a great idea to involve those in the faith-based community and have them prepare a meal and eat with those in need, so as to build critical relationships within the community.

Renato Izquieta, Legal Aid Society of Orange County:
- We need to encourage those that have the DNA, a heart for community work to be involved in the fight against poverty and homelessness.

Brenden O’Connor:
- Alabama has one of the highest suicide rates in the nation. In Alabama, there are statistically more suicides than murders. We need to expand our advocacy against violence to encompass suicide prevention.

Amy Horton-Newell, Director of the ABA Commission on Homelessness & Poverty:
- Hospitals may be willing to pay for health outreach team because it saves the hospitals money in the long term.
3. **How can we collaborate across racial lines to better educate the public and public officials about the reality of race and poverty today?**

**Pastor Dion Culliver:**
- Racism is entrenched in Selma, more overtly than elsewhere.
- Selma businesses try to keep other businesses out of Selma to stop competition, which stifles growth.
- Those in power, both white and black, are not interested in giving up their power.
- “Community division is violence as well.”

**Brenden O’Connor:**
- Selma could host collective discussions about race and poverty issues.

**Lydia Chapman, Selma AIR:**
- I suggest cross-racial dinners, as panels might result in “preaching to the choir.” We should utilize media partnerships (i.e. radio station). We must overcome those who benefit from our poverty. We need to have difficult conversations with those who have wronged us. We can reach across racial boundaries by using stories. The message and the messenger matter. Selma had changed the world before, it can do it again.

**Pastor Leodis Strong:**
- I see a lack of honesty and transparency in our community. We need to break down barriers. We are all pieces of the puzzle. There must be on-going dialog at a level that values each person.
- Reflection on how his wife reminded him when they moved back to Selma from Boston that in a town like Selma, “Relationships are not disposable.” We must treat everyone we meet with respect.

**Ainka Sanders Jackson:**
- We must first educate the public and public official about the interconnectedness of race and poverty.
- We need a “cease fire between our leaders.”

**Pastor Dion Culliver:**
- Programs are good, but people in poverty need “heart” and relationships most. We must have a large, welcoming table of different individuals. Sometimes it’s best for me to be a good cheerleader.

**Ted Small:**
- In his closing remarks, Small assured the roundtable participants that we aren’t going to forget your stories. He described how in his hometown of DeLand, Florida, a group of community leaders decided that the best initial step to address poverty was to increase public awareness and build a constituency for other action steps. Their public awareness project is called *Humanizing Poverty Panels* and is available for download from the Commission’s Anti-Poverty Quilt “patch” webpage, [http://www.americanbar.org/groups/public_services/homelessness_poverty/poverty_initiative/quilt.html](http://www.americanbar.org/groups/public_services/homelessness_poverty/poverty_initiative/quilt.html). The Humanize Poverty Panels seek to offer individuals like Ms. Williams, Ms. Greer, Mr. Varnes and Ms. Smith to humanize poverty by telling their stories as a part of a structured panel discussion at community meetings (i.e. Rotary, church, and various board meetings).

**Next Steps:**

**ACTION ITEM:** Judge Armstrong will host an informal dinner on community policing.

**ACTION ITEM:** Mayor Evan’s committed to organize a meeting with interested roundtable participants to discuss the process of establishing a homeless shelter in Selma.

**ACTION ITEM:** A follow-up dinner and collaborative group meeting with be hosted by Selma Center for Nonviolence, Truth and Reconciliation will be held May 16th at 6:00PM.