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Youth of Color Struggle to Be Heard

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Stephanie Begaye, a 20-year-old Native American from Taos, says she's experienced her share of discrimination and racism in her short lifetime.

And it often stems from being stereotyped.

"It's like there are so many people stuck in prehistoric times," said Begaye, a member of the Rocky Mountain Youth Corps, a community improvement organization. "They think because I'm Native American I must not be smart, or live in a teepee, wear feathers and not speak English.

"I want people to know I grew up in the United States, and I'm no different or less intelligent than anyone else," she said.

Begaye was one of more than 300 area youth, educators, civil rights activists and juvenile justice system representatives who gathered for a conference titled "Race Matters" Tuesday at the University of New Mexico's Continuing Education Conference Center.

The conference, which was presented by New Mexico Voices for Children, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Albuquerque Human Rights Office and the New Mexico Human Rights Coalition, offered attendees a forum to find ways to help obliterate stereotypes and disparities that often plague the state's youth.

The mission of the event was to examine how public policy affects youth of color, said New Mexico Voices for Children Conference Coordinator Felicia Griffin.

"We're going to take our suggestions and new policy recommendations to our state leaders and lawmakers this summer so that they can put issues of race first," Griffin said. "I know race is a hard issue for people to discuss, but if we don't put it at the forefront, we won't be able to fix anything."

Griffin said children of color are often faced with inequities

that are embedded within social programs meant to help them. Barriers to equal opportunity exist within the state's health care, child welfare and juvenile justice programs, among others, she said.

An organizational assessment of her own group, Griffin said, found it had no vehicle for people to report racism, discrimination or other issues related to the topic.

"We're going to work on resolving that now," said Griffin, who added the conference also gave other groups the opportunity to conduct assessments of their organizations.

Gary Williams, deputy director of the New Mexico Office of African American Affairs, attended the conference and said he was impressed with how many youth participated.

"I think our area youth are very under-appreciated," he said. "Adults should start listening to what they have to say, especially because they have issues to face that many of our generations didn't."

Amy Biehl High School students Victoria Duarte, Valerie Steele and Catherine Olvera attested to just that.

"People think we all rely on government assistance, are gang members or teenage moms," Olvera said. "And that's just not true."

Duarte added, "Yeah, Hispanics are also movie stars, doctors and professionals. We're as equal and capable as anyone else."

A look at racial inequity

- Young people of color are twice as likely to be placed in the juvenile justice system than Anglo youth.
- Native Americans receive longer sentences, are denied bond more often and receive fewer suspended sentences than Anglos.
- Seven percent of African-American children have a parent in prison, compared to just three percent of Hispanic children and less than one percent of Anglo children.
- Native American youth are three times more likely to be placed in the child welfare system.

- African-American children experience longer stays in foster care (17 months) than Anglo children in foster care (nine months).
- Hispanic children are three times more likely than Anglo children to have no primary care physician.
- African Americans and Hispanics are twice as likely as Anglos to rely on hospitals and clinics rather than personal physicians for primary care.

SOURCE: Annie E. Casey Foundation's Race Matters Tool Kit. For more information visit www.aecf.org

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