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ELECTION VICTORIES! See Durham Committee Report Page 3 NAACP LDF Files Suit Against Florida Voting Officials over Illegal Procedures

Black Farmers Say Fight With Government Is Over Discrimination

RALEIGH (AP) - A \$1 billion agreement directing the U.S. Agriculture Department to compensate black farmers who suffered lending discrimination was hailed in 1999 as a civil rights watershed.

More than two years after the consent decree was signed, only about half of the more than 21,000 farmers who filed claims have gotten their checks of at least \$50,000 dollars.

Some farmers have been told they are approved for payment but have waited more than a year for their checks. Some legal experts also contend the settlement did little to solve the problem of discrimination against black farmers when it comes to USDA loans.

"I'm ashamed my name is on this case, considering the way it has turned out," said Timothy Pigford, 49, a former Columbus County farmer who was the lead plaintiff.

Pigford received a settlement payment but is still battling the USDA over past loans the agency is still trying to collect.

Of more than 1,430 cases filed by North Carolina farmers, a little more than half have been paid so far, 90 are waiting for checks and 20 have had their cases put on hold. The remaining claims in North Carolina either have been denied or still are being processed.

About 8,300 black farmers had their claims denied by court-appointed judges, about 40 percent.

One reason the denials have been so high is that the settlement requires individual farmers to produce specific evidence they were turned down for a federal loan while a similarly situated white farmer was approved.

"The individual farmers are naturally having a hard time obtaining that kind of evidence for their cases," said Jerry Pennick, director of the land assistance fund at the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, an Atlanta group working with black farmers in the case. "You are talking about discrimination that occurred under the radar for decades."

One expert on class-action lawsuits said the requirement appears onerous.

Black farmers "are being asked to prove something that happened years ago when the information isn't readily available," said Thomas Metzloff, a Duke University law professor who has worked on a number of big class-action suits, including the Dalkon Shield contraceptive case.

While the discrimination continued, more black farmers were forced off the land.

In the early 1990s there were nearly 1 million black farmers nationwide; now there are less than 18,000. Black farmers represent less than 1 percent of active farmers today.

USDA officials say the agency is doing its best to make reparations.

"It hasn't been perfect, but I don't think there is anybody at USDA who thinks this process isn't working as well as it can under the circumstances," said J. Michael Kelly, the agency's acting general counsel.

The settlement grew out of a lawsuit filed in August 1997 on behalf of black farmers, primarily from the South, who alleged discrimination in the handling of government loan applications.

USDA officials and Alexander Pires, the lead Washington lawyer representing the farmers, signed the consent decree just before the case went to trial.

The agency acknowledged liability for past discrimination and agreed to a settlement. Farmers who filed discrimination complaints between 1981 and 1996 could accept \$50,000 in tax-free payments, plus debt relief and other financial benefits, or seek more money in further legal proceedings.

In May, Pires' 14-member firm and several others missed a deadline for processing the claims. Pires told the court his firm has been overwhelmed by the volume of the claims it has had to process, as well as thousands of appeals.

U.S. District Court Judge Paul Friedman extended the deadline to Sept. 15, but he also imposed a

schedule of stiff fines should the lawyers miss any future deadlines.

Friedman also asked about a dozen big Washington law firms to take on some of the most complicated claims without charging fees. The law firms agreed to handle about 100 of the most-complicated cases.

At the level where loans are ap-

proved, little has changed.

Unlike most government programs, USDA loans are administered by nearly 3,000 county offices scattered across the country. Decisions involving those involving farm loans are made by committees elected by the county's farmers. The committees hire a lo-

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Former New York City Mayor David Dinkins acknowledges the audience at the Human Relations forum held at Hillside High School. (Photo by Lawson)

Census Shows Wide Racial Disparity in Prisons In Connecticut

By Diane Scarponi

NEW HAVEN, Conn. (AP) - At the Church Street South public housing project, two children play with a yellow puff of insulation. Skinny old men sit in the shade of the squat, cement buildings.

Lorraine Stanley, a resident of 13 years, takes a drag from a cigarette. She recalls a decade ago when a drug gang called the Jurgle Brothers terrorized the neighborhood. Police eventually busted up the gang, and now a police substation in the neighborhood keeps crime down.

"Things have gotten a whole lot better," Stanley said. Connecticut's war on drugs has made the streets safer. But it has exacted a price on minority families: One in 11 black men in Connecticut between the ages of 18 and 64 is behind bars.

Although these black men make up less than 3 percent of Connecticut's total population, they account for 47 percent of male inmates in that age bracket in the state's prisons, halfway houses and local jails, Census 2000 reported.

Similar racial imbalance can be seen around the country. Final figures from the census are not yet available, but the U.S. Department of Justice reported that 12 percent of all black men between the ages of 20 and 34 were locked up last year.

This trend exists to a lesser extent among Hispanic men. Nationally and in Connecticut, about 4 percent of young Hispanic men are in prison or jail.

Less than 1 percent of Connecticut's white men between the ages of 18 and 64 are locked up, compared with about 2 percent nationally.

A combination of drug laws, poverty and racial bias has put a large number of minorities behind bars, experts said.

"I don't think anyone intended it to be this way, but if you were trying to design a system to incarcerate as many African-American and Latino men as possible, I don't think you could have designed a better system," said state Rep. Michael Lawlor, co-chairman of the Connecticut Legislature's Judiciary Committee.

From the late 1980s to mid-1990s, violent drug gangs prowled the streets of New Haven and other impoverished cities around the country.

In Hartford, a 7-year-old girl was killed in a botched gang hit as she sat in her father's car. A young man was shot to death by a gang member because the victim unwittingly wore a rival gang's colors.

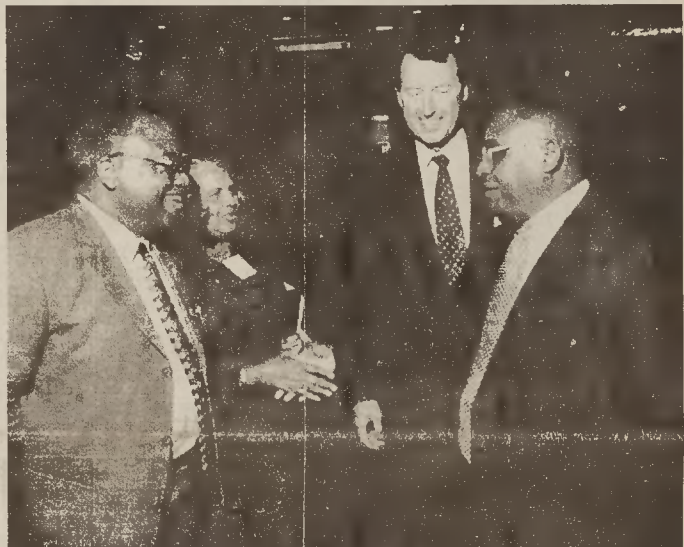
Outraged citizens demanded action. Lawmakers and police delivered.

Federal agents and state police, using racketeering laws, herded up the gangsters and sent them to prison. Police departments added to their ranks, with the goal of sweeping the streets clean of drug dealers. The state built 11 new prisons to hold them all.

Anyone caught selling half a gram of crack cocaine - less than 1/50th of an ounce - faced a two-year prison term, the same penalty for sale of a whole ounce of powdered cocaine.

A mandatory, three-year prison term was passed for anyone selling drugs within 1,500 feet of a school, day care center or public housing project. In densely settled New Haven, that meant virtually everywhere except the Yale University golf course and the Tweed-New Haven airport runway.

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The Legislative Black Caucus held its annual conference in the Research Triangle Park. On hand for the event from left to right are: Senator Frank Ballance, Ms. Delilah B. Blanks, Rep. Bob Etheridge, and Utility Commissioner Ralph Hunt. (Photo by Lawson)

Baptists Ignore Heat, Traffic to Enjoy Fellowship at Convention

By Paul Nowell

CHARLOTTE (AP) - Ignoring temporal problems such as 90-degree temperatures and long traffic jams, thousands of delegates gathered at the National Baptist Convention USA to attend classes on everything from gospel hymns to teaching Sunday school.

"We get a lot of information here that we can bring back to our churches," Belva Armour, an associate minister from Memphis, Tenn., said outside a lunchtime gospel music service. "But we're here mostly to share God's word."

The Nashville-based convention has about 33,000 churches and up to 8 million members, making it the country's largest black religious group.

Some 50,000 people were expected to attend its 96th annual Congress of Christian Education, according to the Charlotte Convention and Visitors Bureau.

The Congress is a school with 250 classes covering everything from how to preach to how to deal with those who have AIDS.

"We have a lot of good fellowship with other pastors and delegates," said Rev. H.T. Frazier, pastor of St. Thomas Baptist Church in Jackson, Miss. "This meeting is for the teaching process."

He attended the convention with his son-in-law, John Patrick, an assistant dean at the Birmingham Theological Seminary in Birmingham, Ala.

"This is the teaching wing of the Congress," Patrick said as he looked at the sea of delegates walking down the corridors on their way to other workshops or to lunch. "In September we have our business meetings."

Delegates cheerfully put up with long foot lines inside the convention center and traffic jams outside on the streets. Many stayed in

hotels an hour's drive outside the city because of the sheer number of visitors to Charlotte. Hotels as far away as Salisbury were full and restaurants and shops were reporting brisk business.

The convention was expected to pump \$9.5 million into the area's economy, officials said.

After the morning sessions ended, some delegates went downstairs to a large hall where scores of vendors had set up booths to sell clothing, books and religious items.

Others went to a large ballroom to sing along with the Rev. Haywood Robinson of Calvary Baptist Church in Baltimore, who led them in prayer and a selection of gospel hymns and spirituals.

In an adjacent meeting room, the Rev. P.W. Harris, pastor of Mount Zion Baptist Church in East Moline, Ill., was setting up a workshop for some of the teen-age delegates, using his book "The Sonship of Jesus" as a Bible study tool.

"Isn't it interesting that the most popular book in the world is a mystery to most of its owners?" he said. "We all know stories from the Bible, but few of us know their context. If we better understand the teachings of the Bible, its lessons will be more easily available to us for use in our daily lives."

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