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Panelists call for affirmative action initiative's defeat

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Outsiders say Nebraska has a problem with affirmative action when, in fact, no such problem exists, panelists said Saturday in Omaha.

The forum at Morning Star Baptist Church in northeast Omaha featured four pro-affirmative action speakers who hope the Nebraska Civil Rights Initiative is defeated in the Nov. 4 election.

The initiative, promoted by Californian Ward Connerly, would ban most forms of government-sponsored affirmative action in the state.

Speakers said the title of the initiative and the ballot language itself are deceptive. The language describes the need to ban discrimination and preferential treatment based on race, sex, ethnicity and national origin.

"Now, that language is fantastic, folks," said David Kramer, whose Nebraskans United opposes the initiative. "Unfortunately, I think it's being used as a wedge as opposed to a bridge."

Thomas Warren, chief executive officer of the Urban League of Nebraska, said representing the measure as a civil rights initiative is fraudulent because it would impede programs that give minority students access to college.

The initiative would bar public agencies, such as local government and colleges and universities, from considering race and gender when allocating scholarships, hiring workers or selecting construction contractors.

Proponents of the ban say the time for such programs has passed. Connerly, leader of the California group funding the anti-affirmative action campaign, has said such programs are racially divisive and that people should be judged solely on their merits.

The Midlands Bar Association, an organization of black attorneys, put together the forum. About 30 people attended.

One member of the audience, William King of Omaha, told the panelists that affirmative action has been ineffective. There are far too many black men in jail, he said.

"Affirmative action is a mirage," said King, who is black. "It has not helped us - zero. . . . Nothing has changed."

He said people need to "stop asking for handouts."

Warren, former Omaha police chief, responded that incarceration often is a consequence of poverty. Affirmative action is merely "equal access and opportunity," he said, not preferential treatment and quotas.

He said many minorities have enjoyed greater opportunity because of affirmative action.

Between 1970 and 1980, Warren said, the Omaha Police Department hired only one or two black police officers. Affirmative action must be available as a strategy to overcome discrimination, he said.

Rebecca Gould, executive director of the Nebraska Appleseed Center for Law in the Public Interest, said the opportunity to attend college is crucial to getting out of poverty.

Close to 90 percent of impoverished people who earn two-year college degrees do not return to public assistance, Gould said.

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