



JUDGES LOOK TO BROADEN THEIR PERSPECTIVES BY ENGAGING AFRICAN NOVA SCOTIAN COMMUNITY LEADERS

Friday, June 8, 2018 (Cherry Brook, NS) – Judges from all the Nova Scotia Courts spent the past two days listening and learning from legal experts and community leaders about the challenges facing the African Nova Scotian community, particularly in the context of the justice system.

The engagement session, held at the Black Cultural Centre in Cherry Brook, was also an opportunity for African Nova Scotian community leaders to gain a greater understanding of the legal system and the roles and responsibilities of the judiciary.

“This is another step to help us become better judges,” said Michael MacDonald, Chief Justice of Nova Scotia. “We all carry with us lived experiences that shape who we are and what we believe, and those experiences help guide the decisions we make. But it is important that we also take time to better understand the world view of those who turn to us for relief, particularly when those individuals come from a background different than our own.”

The idea to meet with the African Nova Scotian community emerged from earlier sessions between the judiciary and First Nations leaders. Those meetings focused on the challenges facing the Indigenous community, particularly the issue of child protection.

To plan the program for this conference, African Nova Scotian community leaders from across the province were asked to identify what they think are the most pressing legal issues currently facing their communities.

“From street checks and traffic stops to incarceration in provincial or federal institutions, African Nova Scotians are statistically over-represented in the justice system,” said Robert S. Wright, a well-known forensic social worker in Halifax. “But equally pressing is the differential treatment they experience when encountering the justice system, including harsher sentences, higher security incarceration, less access to programming, and longer periods of custody before community release.

“It is great to see that judges are coming together to better understand these issues. I am hopeful that their leadership will result in other sectors holding similar conferences to deeply probe the social inequities experienced by African Nova Scotians.”

“We have a real opportunity here to challenge the existing narrative, including how the justice system in this province treats African Nova Scotians,” Karen Hudson, President of the Black Educators Association, said after attending the conference. “Judges are at the very top of that system; it is important they hear directly from community leaders about the racism we encounter daily and the stereotypes affecting our community. But it’s also important they hear our ideas on how to move from the negative stories to the more positive ones. That’s been a big part of the discussions this week.”

The two-day program began with a session for judges only, led by Kimberly Papillon, Esq., an internationally recognized expert on medical, legal and judicial decision-making. Ms. Papillon focused on how emerging research in neuroscience can help decision-makers better understand the effects unconscious processes can have on legal decision-making.

Other sessions engaged both judges and community leaders, and looked at African Nova Scotian history and related contemporary legal issues, the distinct cultural context and needs of African Nova Scotian families and children, and the unique concerns that can arise when working with African Nova Scotians in the criminal justice system.

The judges also took part in a guided bus tour of African Nova Scotian communities, led by Dr. Carolyn Thomas, owner of Black Heritage Tours Inc. They visited the area known as Africville, Lake Loon, Cherry Brook, East Preston and North Preston.

Chief Justice MacDonald has made access to justice for African Nova Scotians a priority of his, in part because of his work as Co-Chair of the province’s Access to Justice Coordinating Committee.

“This work is too important for it to end here,” the Chief Justice noted in his closing remarks Friday. “That is why I will establish a committee to oversee African Nova Scotian community engagement for the entire judiciary, and to carry out the next steps we have identified here.”

The Supreme Court of Nova Scotia (Family Division) has already agreed to set up a liaison committee involving lawyers, judges and community leaders that will advise the Court on access to justice and other related issues facing families and children in culturally diverse communities.

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