

## VIOLENCE AND BIGOTRY IN WEST VIRGINIA

-A report prepared by the West Virginia Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights.

### ATTRIBUTION:

The observations contained in this report are those of the West Virginia Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights and, as such, are not attributable to the Commission. This report has been prepared by the State Advisory Committee for submission to the Commission and will be considered by the Commission in formulating its recommendations to the President and Congress.

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LETTER OF TRANSMITTAL

West Virginia Advisory Committee  
to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights  
April 1982

MEMBERS OF THE COMMISSION

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John Hope, III, Acting Staff Director

Dear Commissioners:

Enclosed is a report containing findings and recommendations derived from the West Virginia Advisory Committee factfinding meeting held September 18, 1981, in Charleston, West Virginia.

The major goal of this meeting was to determine the response of State and local officials to violence inspired by racial or religious bigotry. Secondary goals were to ascertain the nature and extent of such violence and to identify its possible causes. To supplement the meeting, materials based on newspaper accounts, MARO files, and interviews with selected persons involved in the issue of bigotry and violence have been utilized in writing the report. Speakers at the factfinding meeting included representatives of Governor Jay Rockefeller and other State government officials, State and local police officials, and citizens active in combatting violence and other hate group activity.

In general, it appears that proven hate group activity in West Virginia has been limited, occurring mainly in the northern part of the State. Sporadic incidents involving Klan insignia have

been reported elsewhere. Most activity of either type was reported in 1980.

The response of State and local officials has been somewhat mixed. The Governor's plans for a task force have yet to be fully implemented, but a local task force in Logan County is underway, and Harrison County officials have taken a strong stand against hate group activity there at the behest of local activists. The causes of such activity most frequently mentioned include racism and religious bigotry, unemployment, and insensitive media coverage.

It is our hope that this report will be of assistance to you in making recommendations to the President and Congress on this subject of unfortunately growing importance.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Donald L. Pitts". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "D" and a stylized "P".

DONALD L. PITTS  
Chairman  
West Virginia Advisory Committee

cc: Edward Rutledge, Regional Director, Mid-Atlantic Regional  
Office

WEST VIRGINIA ADVISORY COMMITTEE  
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## INTRODUCTION

In the late 1970s a disturbing resurgence of hate group activity gained public attention in various parts of the country. Violence inspired by racial and religious bigotry appeared to be a serious problem for the first time in many years. The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights asked several of its advisory committees to determine the nature and extent of the renewed violence, its possible causes, and the response of state and local officials.

To fulfill this request, the West Virginia Advisory Committee held a factfinding meeting in Charleston on September 18, 1981. Speakers at the meeting included representatives of the Governor, state executive agencies, city and county officials, police officials, educators, and citizens. (A list is appended to this report.)

Prior to the meeting, staff of the Commission reviewed newspaper accounts and interviewed knowledgeable persons on the subject. Based on this work and on the factfinding meeting, the advisory committee sent the attached findings and recommendations forward to the Commissioners. The material included below is divided into findings and recommendations on three topics: the nature and extent of violence, the response of state and local officials, and the causes of violence.

In general, it appears that proven hate group activity in West Virginia has been limited and has occurred mainly in the northern part of the State. Sporadic incidents involving Klan insignia have been reported elsewhere. Most activity of either type was reported in 1980.

The response of State and local officials has been mixed. The Governor's task force has yet to be appointed, but a local task force in Logan County is underway, and Harrison County officials have taken a strong stand against hate group activity at the behest of local activists. Hate group activity is most frequently attributed to racism and religious bigotry, unemployment, and insensitive media coverage of hate groups.

Recommendations made here include a Statewide reporting system for incidents apparently motivated by bigotry; guidelines for prosecution; implementation of a State and of local task forces on violence; public information efforts regarding affirmative action; and school curricula proposals, among other suggestions.

The West Virginia Advisory Committee intends to continue to monitor violence motivated by bigotry and to make any further recommendations it deems necessary.

# FINDINGS: NATURE AND EXTENT OF VIOLENCE

A survey of press reports on incidents involving racial or religious bigotry reveals only moderate activity in West Virginia. However, Community Relations Service conciliator John W. Hughes cautions that an isolated crossburning on private property in rural areas "doesn't draw the attention of law enforcement or media as long as it doesn't spill over into harassment." He speculated that crossburnings were not infrequent.<sup>1</sup>

Among those events reported in newspapers during the past 2 years (mainly in 1980) were the following:

1) In October 1979 Ku Klux Klan members picketed a Howard Johnson's Motor Inn for the chain's refusal to rent a meeting room in Middletown, Ohio, to a Klan group.<sup>2</sup>

2) Three crossburnings, including two on the lawns of city councilmembers, occurred in January 1980 in West Milford, near Clarksburg. Robed Klansmen had previously attended a city council meeting, and the Klan had "investigated" the town's police force.<sup>3</sup>

3) In April 1980, a branch of the Ku Klux Klan calling itself the White Horse division applied for a charter from the Secretary of State to incorporate. After a one-week delay by Secretary of State A. James Manchin to investigate the application's legality, the charter was granted.<sup>4</sup>

4) One month later, a Mayday rally staged by members of the Revolutionary Communist Party in Charleston was attacked by counterdemonstrators. Over 2000 people used flags, two-by-fours, and sticks to harass the dozen marchers. Some in the crowd were said to have been organized by the West Virginia Moral Majority. One man who said he was a Klan leader claimed to have 200 at the demonstration. The communist group fled the scene in a pickup truck, as their literature and red flags were burned. Charleston Police Chief Harry Silverman, noting that there were no serious injuries, said, "I think it worked out very well as far as the community was concerned."<sup>5</sup>

5) A Klan rally held in Harrison County Saturday, August 2, 1980, on private property attracted 150-300 people. Following the rally, national Klan leader Bill Wilkinson claimed that local police had asked him for assistance in controlling drug traffic. He refused to name the jurisdiction involved.<sup>6</sup>



Saturday afternoon, robed and masked Klansmen leafleted the downtown area, stopping cars and openly displaying weapons.<sup>7</sup> Subsequently, the Clarksburg City Council adopted an ordinance banning the wearing of masks except under certain circumstances,<sup>8</sup> and the Harrison County Board of Education voted to oppose Klan activities in county schools.<sup>9</sup>

6) A cross was burned on the lawn of a water district board member August 10, 1980, in Racine in Boone County. The victim, a naturalized citizen of Italian descent, was involved in a drive to improve water service and combat alleged corruption. He believed the crossburning was not the work of the Klan but of local political opponents, attempting to mislead police.<sup>10</sup>

7) A black resident of Logan, West Virginia, reported that he was the victim of a series of events beginning with threatening notes and culminating in shots fired at his house. Ron Jones bought his house in July 1980 and began receiving notes telling him to leave. Before moving in, his porch was burned and the house was defaced with red paint and the letters "KKK." After he occupied the house, shots were fired at it on two separate occasions in August. According to Jones, State and local police ignored his complaints until the State's affirmative action officer contacted the State police commander. The bullets were traced to an individual and a warrant was issued for his arrest in October 1980.<sup>11</sup> The suspect was arrested in July 1981, but as of March 12, he had not been brought to trial.

Jones' report of initial police response is disputed by Col. John W. O'Rourke, Superintendent of the West Virginia State Police. Superintendent O'Rourke reported that his department "received a complaint concerning the crimes committed against Ronald Jones on September 2, 1980," and thereafter took action that resulted in a suspect's arrest (see also page 6).<sup>12</sup>

8) In October of 1980, two Klan rallies occurred in northern West Virginia and nearby Pennsylvania, accompanied by anti-Klan activity as well. A coalition of religious, labor, minority, women's, and civic groups rallied October 26 in Uniontown, Pennsylvania, to protest Klan rallies scheduled for Pt. Marion, Pennsylvania, and Buckhannon, West Virginia, that weekend. About 400 attended the anti-Klan rally held under "nonstop rainfall."<sup>13</sup> The West Virginia Klan rally, a regional event, drew 600; in Pennsylvania, 200-300 attended.<sup>14</sup> An anti-Klan rally in Charleston on October 26 drew 50 people.<sup>15</sup>

9) A fire that gutted an integrated church in Charleston November 2 was blamed on the Klan by the church's pastor, the Reverend Joe West. West recounted threatening telephone calls

prior to the fire, including one in which the caller said, "Nigger lover, if you don't change your congregation, we're going to burn you." West also said the church had been visited by a couple who said they were Klan members and who disrupted a service.<sup>16</sup> The chief fire inspector does not believe the blaze was started by a firebomb.<sup>17</sup>

## FINDINGS: RESPONSE OF STATE AND LOCAL OFFICIALS

The actions of State and local officials in response to violence motivated by racial or religious bigotry have been uneven, according to those who spoke at the factfinding meeting. At the State level, the idea of a Governor's task force has yet to be fully implemented. Locally, some officials have initiated action; others have cooperated with private efforts. Some have resisted action unless subjected to considerable pressure.

### The State's Task Force

Over one year ago, the State HRC chairman, the HRC director, the Governor's legal counsel, and the State affirmative action officer met with Governor Jay Rockefeller to discuss the danger of civil tension arising from particular incidents and organizations. A network of official and unofficial contacts across the State was suggested, among other things. The Governor requested the HRC to prepare a proposal for action. In September 1980, a larger meeting of State and Federal officials and community leaders was held by the Governor. This group urged him to establish a civil tension task force. Another meeting in November to establish the task force included yet a larger group. Since then, other meetings have been held, but a formal task force has yet to be appointed. The HRC has coordinated an informal communication network and has assisted in local responses to racial and religious tension.

### Logan County

In Logan County, a local task force was formed by the county commission after three incidents of vandalism, arson, and shooting directed at a black family's home. The task force came into being after complaints of inaction against local police. Ron Jones, whose house was the target of shots after he moved into a white neighborhood, then contacted a local black group, the Logan County Minority Open Forum, whose members stayed with him overnight after he received threats on his life.

The forum's vice president, Claude Williams, led a group of blacks to see the county commission. The commission contacted various officials, including the State HRC. HRC director Howard Kenney came to Logan and assisted in the formation of the task force. Meetings were held, a steering committee elected, and bylaws adopted.<sup>18</sup>

The role of the task force is not fully developed, according to Williams, but its stated purposes are:

- 1) To combat all crime of any nature . . .
- 2) To act as liaison for the community and the legal forces of the county.
- 3) To combat harassment of Logan County citizens.<sup>19</sup>

### Harrison County

Klan activities in downtown Clarksburg, including leaf-letting cars and pedestrians on a Saturday afternoon, prompted the Harrison County Board of Education and the Clarksburg City Council to adopt anti-Klan measures. The activities accompanied nearby crossburnings.

The board of education unanimously passed a formal resolution condemning Klan activities in the county's schools. The resolution noted that recent Klan literature mentioned a Klan youth group, and stated that the board "will not tolerate any disruptive or illegal activity by any group or groups which would be detrimental to the educational process of the children of Harrison County."<sup>20</sup>

The resolution pointed out that Klan propaganda advocated boycotting classes, and that "The boycotting of classes and general disruption of the schools is contrary to the policy of the Harrison County School System." The board also suggested that the Klan's position in favor of segregated classrooms "is contrary to the law of the United States."<sup>21</sup>

Shortly thereafter, the Clarksburg City Council unanimously approved a law that bans the wearing of hoods except for traditional holiday costumes, lawful employment, sporting or theatrical activities, or for civil defense purposes.

The ordinance stated that people "are in need of protection from unwanted, nonexempted concealment of identity" and that concealing identity "may be threatening and intimidating . . . as well as a dangerous subterfuge for the commission of unlawful acts."

A Klan member called the ordinance "assinine" and stated that "Sunglasses are just as good."<sup>22</sup>

Mercer County

An incident recounted by speakers at the factfinding meeting involving black and white students at a high school assembly prompted Mercer County school superintendent John Hughes to appoint a human relations task force to seek ways to reduce racial tension. The task force involves a broad spectrum of people from the community and the school system and has received assistance from the State HRC. Public meetings on the topic are underway.<sup>23</sup>

However, the incident in question appears unrelated to hate group activity and it would probably be mistaken to place it in the same category as other incidents reported here.

## FINDINGS: CAUSES OF VIOLENCE

Those attending the factfinding meeting attributed the apparent rise of violence caused by racial and religious bigotry to several factors. Some offered specific refinements, but there was general agreement on the most important elements.

First, such violence was blamed on racism in general, and "scapegoating" in particular. Herbert Henderson, president of the West Virginia NAACP, stated:

The problems stem from white racism, which basically has its scapegoatism, as I always called it, or has its basis in hate; the theory of superior race.<sup>24</sup>

Henderson also noted that "one of the other kinds of things that causes this kind of violence is the religious bigotry, for whatever reason."<sup>25</sup>

Second, racism operating in conjunction with economic difficulties causes tension. Henderson observed: "I think it's now a matter of economic concerns on the part of many people. You have got to have somebody to keep down."<sup>26</sup>

Joseph L. Williams, a member of the Huntington City Council, added:

Many of the majority members of our Nation are resentful of minorities, especially upward mobility. And, as I said . . . unemployment will be across the board, it has been and I see no reason why it's going to change, that minorities are made the scapegoats. This, in itself, creates racial tension and the possibility of racial violence.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, a major source of tension, in the view of many, is the way in which hate groups are portrayed by the media. Martha Sanders, community relations specialist for the State HRC, reported that:

When they [the Klan] received their charter in this State, the press . . . described the Klan as being a moderate group . . . .

There has been national attention given to the Klan. There was even a debate between [Bill] Wilkinson and Jesse Jackson. It is my belief that this type of media provides an atmosphere for frustration and is sometimes overwhelming to groups, particularly minorities and other religious groups, because of the historical background of the KKK.<sup>28</sup>

Sanders cited a story about a Klan rally headlined, "Police Report No Trouble with the Klan," and added:

Let me tell you something. I had the opportunity to participate with the undergraduate chapter of the Omega Psi Phi fraternity in planning and working to have a march for the children in Atlanta. We tried to get press. We didn't get any. Because . . . I think we might have been termed as a possible "group" to do harm; and, I think the press did not know that Omega Psi Phi is a national--international--fraternity of college men across the country whose--one of their goals I would expect is to bring about better human relations in the whole United States. But they did not get any press. But the Klan continues to get press.<sup>29</sup>

One speaker observed that West Virginia's relative isolation restricted harmful media coverage. John W. Hughes, conciliator for the Community Relations Service, U.S. Department of Justice, commented:

I think that rallies and et cetera in West Virginia aren't getting big type of media attention that they would get in, say, Pennsylvania, where . . . somebody would step off an airplane, where the reporters are there. It hits the pages for 2 or 3 days. I think West Virginia is very fortunate in that way.<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps the most extensive involvement in media coverage of the Klan was experienced by Harry J. Berman, a member of the National Civil Rights Committee of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith. Berman reported that a Klan announcement that Clarksburg would become the group's State headquarters received a great deal of media attention. About 6 weeks later, the Klan decided to put Clarksburg "on the back burner," and little was heard from them. Eventually, a small group formed, and, according to Berman:

They bought their robes and they bought their masks and they went from one tiny little community around Clarksburg to the other and presented themselves. And one of our TV stations became very, very interested in this. This was fabulous news. And the first thing we knew they had staged a presentation of the Ku Klux Klan. They were going to help this one couple get electricity in their house.

The program ended with the announcer saying "The reason we are showing this is because we wanted to disspell any rumor that the Ku Klux Klan wasn't here and this certainly shows that they are here and they are here to stay."

I was quite adamant that night and that's a mild term. And I called the manager of the station. And I complained about creating news, and he put me down readily. The next morning I woke up and I found a swastika painted in front of my house by--I guess they didn't consider a cross to be quite keeping with my religion. So I got the swastika.

I called the manager's station up again. I said "I'm not calling you as a complainant, I'm now calling you as the victim. And incidently there is a swastika<sup>31</sup> and an AV 8 and I know what the swastika is; but, could you tell me what the AV 8 is?"

"Well, he says, "Why are you asking me?" I said, "Well, you, personally, and your group certainly have contact with this Klan. And I'm certain that you would be able to get the information for me." He said, "You are being hard on me." I said, "Yes, I am. I feel that you are directly responsible."

And he said, "Well, Harry, I'm going to promise you one thing. In the future, unless the Klan--their mere appearance will not mean that they are going to be news unless they do something. We are not going to have any publicity."<sup>32</sup>

Three or four months later, Berman heard from an NAACP member that another feature program on the KKK was planned. When Berman called the station, the manager offered to have the show previewed by a group of "responsible citizens."



This was probably one of the best services that he has given to us; because he had myself, he had Martin,<sup>33</sup> he had the superintendent of schools, the president of the Ministerial Association there and the U.S. District Attorney. And we saw the show. It was certainly offensive. The most frightening thing was just seeing them in their costumes. They had nothing too much to say, except they weren't against the coloreds or the blacks or the Jews--this is their terminology. They were just against drugs . . . .

Everyone of us at that table [except the U.S. Attorney] agreed that [the show] should be quashed, that there was no reason to have that foisted on the community.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, Berman said, he and the local NAACP official decided to organize other groups in the community besides minorities.

We have the president of the chamber of commerce. We have the political powers, the city--the mayor, the city manager, the sheriff, the prosecuting attorney, commissioners from the county. We had the superintendent of schools there, the board of education, the AFL-CIO represented us. And, of course, the ministerial association. And, together, we formed a group and we appealed to the press.

We said, "Please give us some help here. Don't overemphasize what's happening with this particular group. We realize it's news and it's novel, but, it's hurting our community." And we had a lot of objections. I was accused of trying to suppress the news and said that really what we were after was that they would not create the news.

And after a while, it sort of sunk in. Now we did have our problems. Wilkinson came to Clarksburg and that was certainly news. There was no way to suppress this. But by this time we had lined up enough resolutions from all of the powers of respect within the community, that he only appeared once. And he appeared no more.<sup>35</sup>

While racism, economic difficulties, and media coverage were seen as the major causes of violence motivated by bigotry, many speakers took the opportunity to point out that the dire economic

straits of blacks, police brutality, and difficulties in the schools are problems equally if not more disastrous for minorities. One speaker summed up this view:

It is apparent that the most far reaching and damaging violence occurring from racial and religious discrimination does not occur from the hate messages and threats of individuals in organizations that are highly identifiable, such as the Klan. The most far reaching and damaging violence occurring from racial and religious discrimination is caused by an enemy that is not as highly identifiable and it occurs on the economic front.

The enemy that can not be readily identified is the combination of joblessness, economic deprivation, frustration, and anger. These are more serious problems for black Americans, the Vietnam veterans, Spanish Americans, handicapped individuals, senior citizens, females, and others. These problems have a more severe consequence than the message of hate and the threats of violence expressed by hate groups. 36

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Nature and Extent of Violence

1. The State police should establish a system of reporting all criminal activity that appears to be motivated by racial or religious bigotry.
2. The State attorney general should issue guidelines for the prosecution of such criminal activity, including applicable laws, to local law enforcement officials. To the extent possible, a statewide policy emphasizing that crimes with racial or religious overtones should not be treated as pranks, even when committed by juveniles, should be communicated to local law enforcement officials.

Response to State and Local Officials

1. The Governor's Task Force as originally conceived should be activated forthwith. The Task Force should build on local efforts to encourage community response to violence, and assist the Governor in determining other appropriate action.
2. Local officials should respond quickly and publicly to violence motivated by bigotry, making it clear that community norms cannot tolerate such activity. Mechanisms appropriate to each community, such as task forces and city or county council resolutions, should be adopted.
3. An ombudsman within the State police should be established to take complaints concerning lack of response by police to violent incidents. The availability of the ombudsman should be widely publicized.
4. School curricula should include material on the role of hate groups, racism, and bigotry in American history. School officials should make it clear that Klan activity in the schools is banned.

Causes of Violence

1. Public officials should attempt to dispel myths regarding minority groups and government efforts to assist them, particularly myths about social service programs and affirmative action.
2. Public officials should make a special effort to provide accurate information about hate group activities to the media to prevent distortion of such activities.
3. FCC licensees should examine their treatment of violence to ensure that they meet their responsibility to be fair and accurate in news and public interest programming, and that the public is adequately consulted concerning such programming.

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<sup>1</sup>Telephone interview with Suzanne Crowell, MARO staff,  
 December 4, 1981.

<sup>2</sup>Clarksburg Exponent, October 3, 1979.

<sup>3</sup>Charleston Gazette, January 19, 1980.

<sup>4</sup>Charleston Gazette, April 25, 1980.

<sup>5</sup>Charleston Gazette, May 2, 1980.

<sup>6</sup>Charleston Gazette, August 4, 1980.

<sup>7</sup>Clarksburg Telegram, August 4, 1980.

<sup>8</sup>Charleston Gazette, August 31, 1980.

<sup>9</sup>Charleston Gazette, August 29, 1980.

<sup>10</sup>Charleston Gazette, August 11, 1980.

<sup>11</sup>Transcript, Meeting of West Virginia Advisory Committee,  
 Charleston, West Virginia, September 18, 1981, pp. 302-305.

<sup>12</sup>Col. John W. O'Rourke, Superintendent, West Virginia Department of Public Safety, letter to Edward Rutledge, Director, MARO, U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, March 12, 1982.

<sup>13</sup>Atheneum, October 26, 1980.

<sup>14</sup>Parkersburg News, October 27, 1980.

<sup>15</sup>Beckley Post-Herald & Register, October 26, 1980.

<sup>16</sup>Charleston Gazette, November 10, 1980.

<sup>17</sup>Charleston Gazette, November 19, 1980.

18 Transcript, p. 312.

19 Letter to Members of Human Rights Task Force, from O.H. Dameron, County Administrator, September 11, 1981 (MARO files).

20 Richmond Afro-American, September 6, 1980.

21 Ibid.

22 Charleston Gazette, August 31, 1980.

23 Transcript, pp. 160-161.

24 Transcript, p. 108.

25 Transcript, p. 108.

26 Transcript, p. 108.

27 Transcript, p. 180.

28 Transcript, pp. 91-92.

29 Transcript, pp. 94-95.

30 Transcript, p. 126.

31 Transcript, p. 140.

32 Transcript, p. 141.

33 Martin Cox, President of the Clarksburg NAACP.

34 Transcript, p. 142.

35 Transcript, pp. 143-144.

36 Transcript, p. 294 (Kevin J. Knight).

WEST VIRGINIA ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING

September 18, 1982

List of Speakers (in order of appearance).

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George Carenbauer, Legal Counsel to the Governor, Office of the Governor.

Curtis E. Price, Affirmative Action Officer, Office of the Governor.

Howard D. Kenney, Coordinator, Governor's Civil Tension Task Force and Executive Director, West Virginia State Human Rights Commission.

Dr. Roy Truby, State Superintendent of Schools, West Virginia State Department of Education.

John M. Pratt, Deputy Secretary of State.

Eunice Green, Assistant Attorney General, Office of the Attorney General.

Martha Sanders, Community Relations Specialist, West Virginia Human Rights Commission.

Herbert Henderson, State President, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

John M. Hughes, Community Relations Service, U.S. Department of Justice.

Reverend Walter J. Mycoff, Chairman, Charleston, Human Rights Commission.

Mr. Harry Berman, Member, National Civil Rights Committee, Anti-Defamation League, B'nai B'rith.

Donald A. Haskins, Superintendent of Schools, Marshall County Schools.

George Erps, Administrative Assistant for Special Projects, Mercer County Schools.

Joseph L. Williams, Member, Huntington City Council.

Manuel M. Cartelle, Director, Housing and Community Development and Affirmative Officer, City of Beckley.

Phillip W. Carter, Jr., Assistant Professor of Sociology and Anthropology and Director, Social Work Program, Marshall University, Huntington.

Lt. Col. H.C. Beverely, Deputy Superintendent, Department of Safety (State Police).

Ottie Adkins, Chief of Police, City of Huntington.

Paul L. Connerty, Administrator/Investigator, Huntington Human Relations Commission.

Kevin J. Knight, Executive Director, Wheeling Human Rights Commission.

Ronald Lee Jones, Member, Minority Open Forum, and member of the Logan County Civil Tension Task Force.

Claude Williams, Vice President, Logan County Minority Open Forum.