

NAACP leaders tour Boston's majority-Black neighborhoods, talk civic engagement

By [Maliya Ellis](#) Globe Correspondent, Updated July 28, 2023, 9:52 p.m.



Lavonta Williams, of Wichita, Kansas NAACP Chapter, arrives at the "community activation" event for NAACP convention held at the Freedom House in Dorchester. VINCENT ALBAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

More than 50 Black leaders from NAACP chapters across the country took a tour of Mattapan, Dorchester, and Roxbury Friday afternoon, to show them the complicated history and the current success stories of Boston's majority-Black neighborhoods.

The Day of Activation involved a three-stop journey: to Cote Village, an affordable housing complex in Mattapan; Freedom House, a nonprofit in Dorchester; and Frugal Bookstore, a Black-owned business in Roxbury, before returning to the convention center.

At each stop, attendees heard from local grassroots organizations about issues facing Boston's Black neighborhoods, including housing justice, environmental justice, and youth empowerment. And they sampled dishes from local Black-owned restaurants along the way.

“Black excellence isn't just going to a convention downtown in the Seaport — this is Black excellence right here,” Tanisha Sullivan, president of NAACP's Boston branch, told the group at the Freedom House stop. “I hope you are really getting a sense of who we are here in Black Boston.”



Representative for the fifth district of Suffolk County Christopher J. Worrell shakes hands with attendees. VINCENT ALBAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

At the Dorchester stop, activists of all ages, most of them sporting NAACP T-shirts, filed off a coach bus into the Freedom House auditorium. Eagerly awaiting them was a panel of a dozen young Black leaders from community organizations like the Center for Teen Empowerment, Madison Park Development Corporation, and Greatest MINDS Boston, among other groups. As the audience snacked on local-made teriyaki chicken, the youth gave speeches highlighting their organizations' work, to applause and affirmative shouts from the crowd.

“People actually took time to sit down and hear them, and that meant something,” said Matt Parker, executive director of the Union of Minority Neighborhoods, who was the emcee for the Dorchester stop. “Hopefully it resonates and it carries over, and people take it back to their communities and effect change, too.”

“This work is not perfect, and we need to be networking and talking to each other as much as we can,” said Mimi Ramos, executive director New England United 4 Justice, who helped organize the event. “I’m hoping that folks take the time to build some new relationships.”

The event was a continuation of Thursday’s civic engagement boot camp, when a group of Black leaders convened at the Boston Teachers’ Union for a day-long workshop on mobilizing voters of color.



At the boot camp, speakers emphasized the importance of building activist networks between disparate regions and states, and of staying united in the face of an increasingly polarized political climate. VINCENT ALBAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The boot camp included intensive sessions on topics like voter registration, voter protection, and digital organizing, with an eye toward the high-stakes 2024 presidential election.

“We all know that 2024 is coming up, and so what better place to have all of our leaders from across the country coming to convene and prepare and learn tactics,” said Dominik Whitehead, the NAACP’s vice president of campaigns. “But most importantly, for folks to be in fellowship and community with each other.”

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“In 2023, they’re coming after me today, but you [are] on the menu for tomorrow,” Leon W. Russell, the chair of NAACP’s national board of directors, told the group, warning

them to be on guard against divisive rhetoric. “We have to know what our power is and how to collectively use that power.”

The boot camp was intended to equip participants to organize more effectively in their home states, Russell said. “We need to create recruiters from these ranks,” he said. “These are the disciples, if you will, who have that responsibility to go back out into their communities and send the message that civic engagement, that political participation, is exceedingly important.”



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Holding the boot camp at the BTU was an intentional effort to align Black leaders with grassroots labor organizations like the Greater Boston Building Trades Unions, which had representatives at the event.

“There are so many forces that are trying to divide us,” Jessica Tang, president of the BTU, told the attendees. “None of us are liberated until all of us are liberated.”

The boot camp's location abutting Carson Beach — the infamous site of racial violence in 1975 — and Friday's tour of majority-Black neighborhoods were part of an effort to reckon with Boston's history of discrimination, but also dislodge its racist reputation.

“This whole notion that Boston is racist — my hope is that they get to see Black Boston in a different light,” said Julia Mejia, an at-large city councilor who helped organize both events. “They get to see that we have evolved — while yet there's still a lot of work to do in regards to race relations.”

Maliya Ellis can be reached at maliya.ellis@globe.com. Follow her [@EllisMaliya](https://twitter.com/EllisMaliya).

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