



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
January 11, 2022

For more, including full audio, video clips & b-roll, contact Tony Hernandez
Communications Manager
Cell: 503-997-4660 | comms@ulpdx.org

New Board Chairman: Staff, Programs Empower Communities Across Oregon

Key Highlights:

- Urban League honors former **Chairman Michael E. Lewellen's** years of leadership, leaving the organization in its best position in decades, and celebrates new **Chairman Eric Olson**.
- Salem business owner Olson starts his leadership term during **growth and increased services into Marion County by the Urban League of Portland**, including youth programs, food assistance and more, while also offering employees the state's "Number 1" nonprofit workplace, according to annual survey by Oregon Business.
- **President Nkenge Harmon Johnson** and Olson commemorate former Chairman Lewellen's legacy with stories of empowerment among Black youth leaders, renters looking to better understand their rights, and the League's growing service and advocacy footprint in Oregon and Southwest Washington.

SALEM, Ore. — The more than 75-year leadership and representation of Oregon's Black families by the Urban League of Portland is as strong and expansive as anyone can remember, said outgoing Chairman Michael E. Lewellen on Tuesday during a celebration of his leadership term on of the Board of Directors.

The *Chairman's Breakfast*, an event to celebrate the League's leadership, featured a bite to eat with a heaping side of organizational pride and personal connection between supporters, staff and community leaders. Newly elected Chairman Eric Olson told supporters, who gathered at Elmer's Restaurant on Market Street NE, that the day's location symbolizes the service growth beyond the Portland metro area to meet the challenges and disadvantages that families, individuals and small businesses face statewide.

"Our organizers and volunteers have fought at the State Capitol against job and housing discrimination since the 1940s. The League's advocacy has made life better for Oregonians across the state through policies such as Ban the Box on employment applications and raising the minimum wage. These days our team is growing direct services for Salem residents from Urban League staff," Olson said before the event. "We owe that growth into Marion County to the leadership from both Chairman Lewellen and President Nkenge Harmon Johnson. Our youth are becoming leaders after school. They organize events that give food boxes to help families sustain the financial stress of pandemic life. At home, mothers, fathers and individuals have learned better money habits and financial management through the League's services that, by the way, also help them find employment to pay for today's bills or help find the education needed for the job of their dreams in the future."

Chairman Olson grew up in Oregon City and Lincoln City. After studying at Chemeketa Community College, he earned his degree at Brooks Institute of Photography in California. As a Salem-area business owner, Chairman Olson has prioritized quality service to his guests and good jobs for his employees. Whether spending free time at home with his wife and six children or volunteering, he believes that everyone has their part to play to make their lives and our community better. Chairman Olson also served on the Oregon State Contractors Board, in addition to his dedicated volunteerism with the Urban League.

Former Chairman Lewellen's commitment to the Urban League movement is longstanding, having first served as Chairman of the Portland affiliate in the early 1990s while employed at Nike, Inc. His decorated career in public relations, marketing and corporate communications for other iconic brands carried him to a half-dozen cities around the country, including Orlando where he also served as Board Chairman of the Central Florida Urban League for three years. An executive position with the Portland Trail Blazers brought him back to the Willamette Valley in 2012, and it wasn't long before Lewellen reconnected with the Urban League effort in Oregon as Chairman once again. His leadership and dedication have helped advance the mission of the Urban League across the region while also serving on the boards of the Legacy Health Foundation, All Hands Raised, Trail Blazers Foundation, Oregon Association of Minority Entrepreneurs and the University Club of Portland.



At the breakfast, which included local leaders from government, business and academia, Lewellen praised President Harmon Johnson and program directors for creating a workplace environment that was named the “Number 1” nonprofit to work for in the state by Oregon Business Magazine in September.

“Hundreds of employees from employers across Oregon shared their views about life at work, and no other set of employees spoke better about their bosses and workplace than our own Urban League staff,” Lewellen, who now works as Vice President for Marketing and Communications at the University of Portland, said before the event. “That pride of working at the Urban League fuels the empowerment that our program participants benefit from on their journeys toward success. I leave this role with tremendous confidence that the League will continue to lead and help Oregon families for as long as we are needed. I’m pleased to pass the gavel to Chairman Olson who will continue to support the terrific staff.”

Chairman Olson recently rose from Vice Chairman to lead the board. The Urban League’s Board of Directors is comprised of community leaders of different backgrounds from across the region. Founded in 1945, the League is one of the Pacific Northwest’s oldest civil rights and social service organizations. Its mission is to empower African Americans and others to achieve equality in education, employment, health, economic security and quality of life. This happens by investing in stable housing; through workforce development; and promoting community health, education and well-being for our youth, adults, and seniors. The League’s culturally specific programs and services — combined with powerful advocacy and civic engagement — empower Black communities and other to thrive across Oregon and Southwest Washington.

“We recently helped an expecting mom, who was unlawfully evicted by her landlord and facing homelessness,” said President Harmon Johnson before the event. “Our team moved her into housing, and then, we successfully sued the landlord to get the eviction removed from her record. We know it’s not just Portland-area communities that face unfair barriers, but all over the Northwest. We’re ready and eager to continue growing the League’s capacity to deliver services and advocacy that foster equity and justice in Marion County and beyond.”