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GUEST SPEAKER—From left: Doris Carson Williams and Sam Stephenson welcome EEO Commissioner Christine Griffin as the Chamber's PowerBreakfast speaker.

EEO commissioner updates Chamber

by C. Denise Johnson
Courier Staff Writer

While much attention is being paid to a perceived decimation of the hard-fought gains from the civil rights era, the same focus should also be placed on the plight of Americans with disabilities. An Equal Employment Opportunity commissioner shared statistics that underscored the backpedaling of the federal government in implementing and enforcing the Americans with Disabilities Act.

U.S. Commissioner of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission Christine Griffin, was the featured speaker at the African American Chamber of Commerce of Western Pennsylvania Power Breakfast last Friday at the Rivers Club in Down-

town Pittsburgh.

Griffin updated attendees on the Commission's activities within Pennsylvania and offered a national perspective on the EEOC. Commissioner Griffin was nominated by Senator Ted Kennedy and appointed by President George Bush in 2005. She will retain her position throughout the tenure of the next administration. Commissioner Griffin is the head of the LEAD Initiative, which stands for Leadership for the Employment of Americans with Disabilities.

With 18 months completed in her tenure, Griffin detailed the sobering statistics as she outlined some of the efforts to employ the disabled. "It is estimated that over 54 million Americans have disabilities; an estimated 30 million of that 54 are of working age. Half of that

are made up of individuals with what we would call significant disabilities who make up about 15 million people or five percent of the overall population. You would expect to see people with severe disabilities employed at about a five percent rate; well, we're not even close."

"For example, in the federal government alone, people with disabilities are employed at under one-percent. We are now at .95 percent of the federal work force," she elaborated, citing 2006 figures.

Griffin said there has been a steady decrease in the employment rates of the disabled in the past 15 years.

The numbers are even bleaker when racial demographics are used in closer

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scrutiny of the statistics of employment, discrimination and compensation.

"No matter what anyone may try to claim, race discrimination is not a thing of the past; it's alive and well and we at the EEOC see that every day. The most frequently filed claims are allegations of race discrimination, harassment and retaliation. In the fiscal year 2006, 27,238 charges for race-based discrimination account for 36 percent of all the private sector charges filed for that year in the workplace.

Griffin also cited disparities in compensation due to race, including instances of compensation being linked to whether or not the worker is light-skinned or dark-skinned.

Griffin shared some of the initiatives being underway to address these inequities including LEAD and E-RACE (Eradicating Racism and Colorism from Employment).

Joyce Bender and Bender Consulting Services, Inc., a local firm that specializes in assisting and referrals for the employment of the disabled, sponsored the chamber session.