

Blacks in the military and the voting rights of District citizens appeared to generate the most interest among a series of workshops held Sept. 22 during the Congressional Black Caucus's Annual Legislative Conference at the Washington Convention Center.

Rep. Allen West (R-Fla.) led African Americans in the Military: The Past, Present and the Future, which attracted nearly 100 people who heard about the need for more blacks to pursue careers in the Armed Forces.

"There is a great history and legacy of African Americans in uniform," West, 50, said. "We need our young people to understand that it's a privilege to wear the uniform."

West's panelists included Lt. General Thomas Bostick and Brig. Gen. Marcia Marian Anderson who talked about life for blacks already enlisted in the military and opportunities that exist for those considering a military career.

Terri Dickerson of Arlington, Va., said she found West's workshop to be both informative and inspiring.

"I am a civilian working in the military and this was a topic that interested me professionally," she said. "Blacks have a lot of misconceptions about military service and I was gratified to see that this session was offered."

Later, D.C. Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D) presented a workshop on a topic that she 's championed since her election to the Congress in 1990: D.C. statehood. Dozens of people showed up to learn the latest surrounding the District's quest to become the 51st state in the Union.

However, some came just for clarification on what D.C. statehood means.

"I am a political scientist from Indianapolis and I wanted to know the criteria for [the District] being a state," said Ramla Bandele, who teaches at Indiana University. "I think that D.C. should have voting members in both houses of Congress."

Norton, 74, moderated the event with statehood activist Anise Jenkins, Ilir Zherka, executive director of DC Vote and Johnny Barnes, executive director of the Washington area chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union.

Zherka said that tactics used in the past -- such as peaceful marches, high-profile arrests and information sessions -- will have to change in order for statehood to be a reality.

"We have to use the power of resistance," Zherka, 44, said. "We have to take civil disobedience to another level."

Norton said the movement for D.C.'s full representation is an "over 200-year struggle." She added that "it has been difficult for me because most of my time in Congress has been under Republican rule."

By James Wright, September 22, 2011