

## Testimony in Support of SB 130 the CROWN Act / Thursday, March 10, 2022

I'm Dr. Shannon Portillo and, for eighteen months, from June 2020 through December of 2021, I have co-chaired Governor Laura Kelly's Commission on Racial Equity and Justice. The Commission, which has brought together 15 Kansans with backgrounds in law enforcement, education, advocacy, health care, and local government, was tasked with identifying ways to address racial disparities in criminal legal systems across Kansas in its first year.

In our second year, we focused on the social determinants of health. The social determinants of health are the conditions where people live, learn, work, and play that affect a wide range of health and quality of life outcomes. We divided our work into three subcommittees focusing on economics, education, and health care. I had the responsibility of chairing the economics subcommittee. While we did not discuss the CROWN Act directly, so many of the recommendations we presented focus on ensuring that our state is one where everyone can thrive economically—one where everyone has equal opportunities at school and at work.

Many of the ways that discrimination shows up in the workplace are not necessarily malicious. I know this because I am a professor whose research focuses on how identity shapes the ways in which public servants experience, interpret, and implement policies within their organizations. For example, my research with the U.S. Army Special Forces explored the potential of women entering the Green Berets. Often, the military is seen as a meritocracy--the type of organization where you are recognized for talent and hard work, regardless of background. However, our research showed that there were a number of policies and practices that unfortunately relied on outdated stereotypes. We refer to this phenomenon as organizational obliviousness. That is, the ways that stereotypes and norms can get taken for granted or normalized in ways that can ultimately—inadvertently—harm people, specifically people of color and women. Often, the only way to combat this kind of covert discrimination is to shine a light on it.

This Act does just that. It brings attention to ways that Black people can be discriminated against, both unintentionally and intentionally, because of their natural hair or protective hair styles. Current racial discrimination laws do not recognize hair as connected with race, but we know that natural hair and protective hair styles are inextricably connected to race and cultural identity. This law asks us to recognize that we must be explicit about legal protections against discrimination based on natural hair and protective styles, and it ensures that we're conscious of this fact and not perpetuating stereotypes and discrimination knowingly or unknowingly.

Bringing awareness to this type of discrimination is important for our workforce. Our economy is growing, and we must live up to our values of being the kind of state where everyone has an equal chance to develop the skills and experiences that allow them to succeed. When we have laws on the books like the CROWN Act, we signal that we're committed to that goal. We signal that we are creating and maintaining healthy workplaces, and our businesses can continue to grow, recruit, and retain talent—right here at home.

Thank you for your consideration of the CROWN Act and your commitment to hearing from constituents throughout the state. I am happy to answer any questions the committee may have.

Respectfully submitted,

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