

FR: Connie Brown Collins  
Voter Rights Network of Wyandotte County  
Date: February 15, 2023

Dear Mr. Chairman and House Federal and State Affairs Committee:

My name is Connie Brown Collins, Founder/Director of Voter Rights Network of Wyandotte County. I live in Kansas City, Kansas. We host regular meetings on voting rights and other pertinent issues to our communities with a number of participating organizations, from both Wyandotte and Johnson Counties.

I strongly support HB 2044, the Crown Act, which amends the definition of "race" in the Kansas Act against discrimination to include traits historically associated with race, including hair texture, hair color, and hairstyles.

Black women are often unfairly impacted by societal norms and corporate grooming policies, creating distractions that impact society. We know that a variety of people, cultures and ideas have a positive impact on a workplace. Moreover, companies that fire, refuse to hire or promote Black women because of their protective hairstyles can destabilize individuals, households and the broader economy. While Kansas and other nationwide workplaces may boast more working women than ever, Black women still remain pressured to conform to Eurocentric standards of appearance. Black women report receiving formal grooming policies at a rate significantly higher than White women. Natural hairstyles inherent to Black identity such as locs, braids, bantu knots, etc. are ranked the lowest for professional appearance. In addition:

- A Black woman is 80% more likely to change her natural hair to meet social norms or expectations at work;
- Black women are 1.5 times more likely to be sent home or know of a Black woman sent home from the workplace because of her hair;
- 1 in 2 Black children have experienced hair discrimination as early as five years old – and the impact can last a lifetime.

Laws in many states do not currently provide protections for race-based hair discrimination, even if the hairstyle is inherent to racial identity. As a result, Black women can be denied opportunities for employment or professional advancement. Black children can be denied entry to school or educational opportunities because of their natural hair.

Research has found that hair styles typically worn by Black women (and some Black men):

- Do not pose a safety issue. Any hairstyle, including braids, twists, and locs can be adapted for safety. They are easily put under hard hats, hair nets, etc.;
- Are not related to performance or ability to do job;
- Allow for economic prosperity for everyone;

- Afford full participation in the workforce without additional worry or consideration of hair (should I straighten my hair for this interview, meeting, job, etc.);
- Enacting Crown Act laws keep people from being singled out or isolated;
- These laws also spare black women the expense and health risks of chemical relaxers which can be detrimental to health when used as little as four times a year. Among these impacts: Black women can face increased risks of uterine and breast cancers, fibroids, alopecia, and chemical burns.

The CROWN Act and laws inspired\* by the CROWN Act have been enacted in 19 states: California (2019), New York (2019), New Jersey (2019), Virginia (2020), Colorado (2020), Washington (2020), Maryland (2020), Connecticut (2021), Delaware (2021), New Mexico\* (2021), Nebraska\* (2021), Nevada (2021), Oregon\* (2021), Illinois\* (2021), Maine (2022), Tennessee\* (2022), Louisiana\* (2022), Massachusetts (2022) and Alaska\* (2022).

In my personal experience, I have not encountered negative employment repercussions. However, my mother instilled in me the societal mores and imperatives to always be conscious of wearing and styling my hair so that it was considered acceptable and appropriate in the workplace. Other women that I know still hide their hair if they feel it does not meet Eurocentric standards. These adaptations include turbans, scarves, wraps, wigs and other forms of covering their natural hair.

I remember that my sixth-grade teacher started wearing her hair in its natural state, an anomaly at the time. She was suddenly absent from our class and never returned. I found out later that she had been fired.

In one college class as the only African American student, I rushed to be on time from a beauty shop appointment leaving my hair in a half-finished natural state awaiting a perm. It happened to be Halloween. As I slid into my seat, the professor commented, "Here's someone who is already ready for Halloween." Of course, I was very embarrassed and forced to endure the muffled snickers of class members. This should not happen. The committee can take steps to normalize natural hair characteristic of Black individuals.

In summary, please eliminate race-based hair discrimination in Kansas. The goal is to live in our state and in a world where we are all valued for who we are, where we express our individuality without any concern or consequence. No person should ever be "judged" or held back by their hair.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony to the committee.

Respectfully submitted,

Connie Brown Collins  
Voter Rights Network of Wyandotte County