

11/22/2021

Dear Honorable Members of the Massachusetts Legislature,

My name is Kenny Nguyen, a Masters in Public Health student at Harvard University. Prior to entering the Harvard, I worked as a behavioral therapist for immigrant and low-income individuals with autism spectrum disorder. My experiences as a therapist showed me the importance of compassion and advocacy in improving the lives of children and adolescents with disabilities. I ask that the Honorable Members of the Massachusetts Legislature demonstrate this same care and support for the rights of Black adults, adolescents, and children in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. I write to you today to testify in support of H.1907 (sponsored by Reps. Tyler and Ultrino) and S.1049 (sponsored by Sen. Gomez), acts endorsed by the CROWN Coalition that will prohibit discrimination based on natural hairstyles.

For the Black population, their hair is their crown and the celebration of it is deeply woven in Black culture. However, it is currently legal to discriminate against Black people for proudly wearing their natural hairstyles in the Commonwealth. These racist and discriminatory practices are often observed in the workplace and targeted at Black women.ⁱ

- Black women wearing their natural hairstyles, including Afros, braids, and twists, are perceived to be less competent, less professional, and less likely to be recommended for a job than Black women with straight hairstyles and White women with either curly or straight hairstyles.ⁱⁱ
- Black women are also 50% more likely to report being sent home or know of a Black woman who was sent home from the workplace because of their hair.ⁱⁱⁱ
- 8 out of 10 black women are more likely to change their natural hair to meet social norms or expectations at work.^{iv}

Racism and hair-based discrimination is also a huge issue for children and adolescents of any gender attending schools.^v

- In August 2018, 6-year-old Florida student Clinton Stanley was sent home from school because of his dreadlocks. Clinton's father was told that the school's handbook states that dreadlocks on campus are not permitted.^{vi}
- In December 2018, 16-year old Black New Jersey high school student and wrestler Andrew "Drew" Johnson was given a horrific and impossible ultimatum by a white referee during the state champion wrestling match: "cut your dreadlocks in 90 seconds or forfeit the match."^{vii} Though he was extremely proud of his hair, Drew did not want to throw away his chances of a medal as a champion wrestler after months and years of rigorous training. Feeling pressured and humiliated, Drew chose to let the referee cut his hair.
- In January 2020, 18-year old Texas high school student DeAndre Arnold was suspended from school for his dreadlocks.^{viii} He was facing the possibility of missing his high school prom and graduation if he did not cut off his dreadlocks. He subsequently withdrew from the school district and enrolled elsewhere.

Hair discrimination remains a source of racial injustice in MA with serious mental health consequences for Black people.

- Exposure to discriminatory practices is associated with poor mental health outcomes, including anxiety and depression symptoms for Black children and adolescents.^{ix}
- Discrimination is also positively associated with depression, anxiety and stress symptoms in Black adults.^x

Honorable Members of the Massachusetts Legislature, I urge you to pass this legislation to promote a safe, equitable and non-discriminatory environment for all Black children, adolescents and adults in the Commonwealth. The passing of H.1907 and S.1049 is an important step forward to establishing societal norms in MA that inhibit inhumane discriminatory practices. The CROWN act has passed into law in 12 states, which include California, New York, Washington, Colorado, Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, New Jersey, Connecticut, Nebraska and Nevada. In addition, the CROWN act legislation was introduced in 25 other states. Black people of all genders and ages should be able to express their culture openly and proudly and wear their hair naturally. These individuals should not be suspended from school, pressured at sporting events, denied job opportunities or terminated just because they present their hairstyle naturally. They should be allowed to be themselves and feel safe. This is why banning hair-based discriminatory behaviors in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts is imperative.

Sincerely,

Kenny Nguyen, MPH candidate

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Works Cited

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