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**Re: MA Senate Bills S.994, S.1049 and House Bill H.1907**  
“An Act prohibiting discrimination based on natural hairstyles”

Dear Honorable Members of the Massachusetts Senate and House of Representatives:

I am a Master of Public Health Student in Behavioral and Community Health Sciences at the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health. I am also a data analyst for the Mid-Atlantic Regional Public Health Training Center (MAR-PHTC), the President of Leaders in Intersectional Public Health and Equity (LIPHE), and a Health Justice Scholar. My master’s thesis examines natural hair discrimination as a public health issue. I would like to share research and personal experience supporting **Senate Bills S.994, S.1049 and House Bill H.1907**, “An Act prohibiting discrimination based on natural hairstyles,” sponsored by Senators Sal DiDomenico, Adam Gomez, and Representatives Steven Ultrino and Chynah Tyler, respectively and to strongly urge you to vote in favor of this important legislation.

Black hair politics impacts the physical, mental, and social health of Black youth. For 400+ years, Black people have been punished and socialized to believe that their natural hair - the unaltered state of hair growing out of the scalp - is not acceptable. Despite the fact that evolution and genetics establishes the curl as the first hair type, Eurocentric and colonized beauty standards have erased this narrative<sup>1,18</sup>. Originating from the time of enslavement, Black hair has long been denigrated as dirty, messy, and lesser as compared to straight hair<sup>5,9,16,21</sup>. The socialization and harassment of Black hair has resulted in discrimination, self-dissatisfaction, texurism (the preference for looser curl patterns), and has normalized traumatic hair care practices within the Black community (i.e., straightening, relaxers)<sup>7,8,10,17</sup>. The politics surrounding afro-textured hair is a social justice issue; and because hair discrimination is a threat to Black identity, physical hair health, social interaction, and life opportunities, it is a public health and equity concern as well<sup>9</sup>.

The trauma is multi-dimensional and can lead to adverse health outcomes. One specific focus on this issue is an intersectional lens on physical inactivity in Black adolescent girls. Although afro-textured hair and harassment is a valid issue for all genders, girls suffer much of the burden due to socially constructed ideas of beauty, femininity, and professionalism<sup>5,16</sup>. Schools are the primary site of victimization and contribute to dissatisfaction and lower physical activity levels<sup>5,15,16,22</sup>. In addition, the medical field is an overlooked source of harassment. Research indicates that traumatic interactions in clinical encounters between children and their providers related to their hair such as culturally insensitive procedures, non-inclusive devices for neurological tests, and little knowledge on the toxic components of Black hair products<sup>2,3,6,11,12,13,14,20</sup>.

Controlling how Black individuals wear or style their hair jeopardizes their overall health and wellbeing. It attacks their self-identity, emotional investment, and cultural expression. Yet, legislation that holds racism-rooted ignorance accountable would not only protect their health, but it would also establish a society where the beauty of afro-textured hair is acknowledged and appreciated.

As I reflect on my last 22 years, legislation such as this one would have allowed me to thrive in the face of Eurocentric beauty standards. And I know I’m not the only one. When subject to intrusive and

dehumanizing verbal interactions (i.e., “Can I touch your hair”; “Your hair is difficult”; “Is that your real hair”; “We don’t know how to do ethnic hair here”; “Did you cut your hair), individuals may have the strength to call out the inappropriateness of such phrases. In terms of non-verbal communication (i.e., touching of hair without consent; stares; change of tone with hair style), individuals will have the agency to call in discrimination. Lastly, and perhaps the most damaging issue, is the societal disregard, dehumanization, and dissatisfaction of natural hair. If **Senate Bills S.994, S.1049 and House Bill H.1907 are passed into law**, individuals will have the power to challenge and eradicate racist dress code policies, non-inclusive clothing or media, and toxic hair care products.

While still healing, I have re-directed this trauma into a commitment to action. I have the desire to re-frame Black hair in public health literature and implement holistic interventions. My goal is to help provide more empowering spaces for natural hair in schools, workplaces, and health care by ensuring accountability for hair harassment and educating others about the unique needs and beauty of Black hair. This can only be done with the support of legislation that bans natural hair harassment and discrimination and, in turn, instills an accepting and celebratory culture around afro-textured hair.

Action must be taken to protect Massachusetts youth, employees, and citizens from an attack on civil rights and racism in practice. State governments have the right and responsibility to act, and fourteen states have already passed legislation that bans race-based, natural hair discrimination. **Senate Bills S.994, S.1049 and House Bill H.1907** give Massachusetts lawmakers the opportunity to take action to protect Black children and families from harassment. This bill would (1) include natural hair as a physical trait salient to one’s identity, (2) consider natural hair discrimination racial discrimination, and (3) make it illegal to discriminate against Black students, employees, or people in public spaces due to their hair texture or style.

**Senate Bills S.994, S.1049 and House Bill H.1907** is not without room for improvement. Language must be amended. Massachusetts would be the only state to not call the legislation its rightful name: The Create a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair (CROWN) Act. It is this name that carries the universal significance and public support for natural hair across the nation. In addition, the bill must be strengthened at the committee level. It is missing civil rights protections as well as civil enforcement.

We must act now to make natural hair discrimination illegal to not only protect our citizens, but ensure they have an equitable chance at opportunities, safe spaces, and livability. I urge you to vote in support of **Senate Bills S.994, S.1049 and House Bill H.1907**. Thank you for your time and leadership on this important issue.

Sincerely,

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