

## **Testimony Regarding African-American Affairs Commission**

Some background, first. My understanding of government is that it is meant to be “of, by, and for the people.” By that, I mean that the focus of government should be upon the individual citizen and his or her wellbeing, support, and protection. This should be true at all levels of government – federal, state, and local. The more we stray from this perspective, the more our democracy is endangered.

Unfortunately, I have been observing a shift for at least 30 years where much of the attention of government (especially the federal government) has been focused on the corporate, rather than upon the individual. We, the people, have been more and more left out of the equation.

However, over this same 30 year period, state government and local government has been sensing this shift, this dangerous shift, and each has been trying to take up the slack. My home is currently in Manchester, but I am in the process of moving to an apartment in Hartford. Since the mid-70's, a very vital cog in “quality of life issues” in Manchester has been its local conference of churches, MACC. Food banks, furniture banks, shelters, soup kitchens, programs in mental health, parole issues, elderly health and housing issues, racial issues, and other social service type activities have all been dealt with through initiatives begun, maintained, or jettisoned into new agencies, through this private/public partnership – the local conference of churches and the town of Manchester.

Just a little over 10 years ago, you (our state government) thankfully began to focus seriously on issues that confronted a specific portion of our citizenry – the African American community (a major segment of “we, the people”). And you did so by forming the African-American Affairs Commission. About that same time, in 1997, a bill was passed by the Connecticut Legislature and signed by Governor Rowland which was called the African Trade Act – Act 97:135. This was an Act which was intended to spur job opportunities (welfare to work opportunities) in Connecticut's urban areas especially.

It seemed that our state government was really on its way to reversing the federal trend of “focus on the corporation” to its own focus “on the individual” which is really what “we, the people” is all about. And not only was the African-American Affairs Commission born, but several other commissions with similar, but equally focused mandates, brought to life. We were indeed heading in the right direction.

I understand the temptation to cut these commissions for fiscal reasons. But the multiplier effect that this African-American Affairs Commission has is enormous. With not a large staff it touches numerous aspects of “quality of life” issues for many Connecticut residents. Just reflect on this year's agenda of priorities. AAAC works in concert, all across state government, with educational issues, health issues, criminal justice issues, juvenile justice issues; family and child welfare issues, business and economic development issues (which, personally, is an area I strongly support through the hoped for enactment of a Connecticut-Africa Exchange Commission by this current legislature), but also, its work- force development, and its energy, housing, and civil rights initiatives. For really a financial pittance (when viewed against the overall state budget) this African-American Affairs Commission is making sure that our state government is appropriately focused on “we, the people.”

I would respectfully suggest and highly recommend that the African-American Affairs Commission be maintained, that its reason for existing, its mission, is as important as ever, maybe even more so in these times. Democracy is democracy only as it deals effectively with the individuals within its structure and purview. This commission does that. We must maintain it and not cut it off.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.

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