

Testimony on behalf of the African American Affairs Commission
Public Hearing
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Legislative Office Building, Capital Avenue
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Submitted by:
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"Last hired, first fired." Remember that? The last with representation, the first tagged for elimination – the African American Affairs Commission (AAAC) was not created until 1997. It's needed now more than ever.

History shows that local elected officials too often consider the interests, well being, desires and rights of African Americans optional in hard times. State-wide perspective and advocacy on our behalf is essential. Local budgets are balanced on our backs. City governments - panic-stricken by budget shortages, unable to compensate for past mismanagement and neglect - make policy choices that have a disproportionately negative impact on our communities and vulnerable populations.

History tells this story again and again. And without the actions of an enlightened state legislature gains will be lost. Let's take a quick trip back in time. After all, the Commission lent its support to a Bridgeport historic site.

Estevanico – Black, free, brave – explored the land that became the U.S. In 1539. Three hundred years later, in 1857, the US Supreme Court ruled that Blacks were not citizens - despite the labor, contributions, and sacrifices made by millions of us. An enlightened legislature came to the rescue. No state could restrict the right of Black Citizens to testify in court, own property, or vote.

So why, in the 1960's, did Congress have to guarantee these rights all over again? They banned job discrimination ("last hired, first fired"), desegregated public accommodations, no more housing discrimination. Congress passed the voting rights act to guarantee blacks the right to vote, again.

So why in 1997, was the African American Affairs Commission founded by the Connecticut General Assembly? Why are we here again today? Because in our state, in Connecticut, disparities between African Americans and their neighbors persist. Racial disparities in jobs, voting, education, housing, and judicial reform remain. We are here today because the past and the present show that in hard times the interests and rights of African Americans are considered optional. The votes we cast, the taxes we pay... sometimes mean very little.

In Bridgeport, when we found out that the Mary & Eliza Freeman houses – the oldest, existing homes built by African Americans in the state – could fall victim to demolition by the City, the voices of supporters (as diverse as Bridgeport itself) at first went unheard. People saw this historic site as a source of pride for all. They saw the restoration and adaptive reuse of the houses, as symbols of unity and healing - as cornerstones for neighborhood revitalization, magnets for tourism, the source of local jobs and vocational training.

The AAAC supported our efforts. We need their continued leadership and expertise. Problem-solving and negotiation are still needed. The Freeman Houses, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, are the only surviving homes of Bridgeport's "Little Liberia" - a seafaring community of free people of color that thrived from the 1820s to the 1850s. Before Bridgeport was chartered, before US slavery ended, before women and blacks could vote - free blacks, runaway slaves, and members of Indian tribes in Connecticut lived and worked together in Little Liberia.

In these challenging economic times, as cities and towns explore unknown territory – funds for the African American Affairs Commission must be retained since their reach will certainly need to be extended.

