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Testimony before the Appropriations Committee

Wednesday, February 11th, 2009

3:00 – 3:30 PM in Room 2C of the LOB

Good afternoon/evening, Chairpersons and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Glenn Cassis the Executive Director of the African-American Affairs Commission (AAAC) a non-partisan state agency. Created by the Legislature in 1997, the Commission represents a voice for the African-American community and accomplishes its mission primarily through research, policy analysis, advocacy and outreach.

We recognize the harsh times this state is currently facing, the economic uncertainty and difficulty in balancing a state budget with limited resources, yet we also realize that disparities in educational achievement, access to affordable health care, housing, economic opportunities, environmental justice persist and are prevalent particularly in the African-American community. As a reminder please consider these facts. As it relates to children in 2007, 21 percent of children living in poverty in our state were African-American, yet make up only 12 percent of children in the state.¹

¹ Kaiser Family Foundation, *Poverty Rates by Race and Ethnicity*

For women mortality rates are highest for African-American women than any other racial or ethnic group for nearly every major cause of death, including breast cancer. Black women with breast cancer are nearly 30% more likely to die from it than white women and are less likely to receive treatment for this disease.² For men, African-American males are expelled at 4 times the rate of their white counterparts and make up roughly 30 percent of the juvenile justice population.³

Overall in terms of the economy, the unemployment rates for all racial/ethnic groups has worsened but for African-Americans joblessness has consistently tipped the state average for at least the last three years. In 2008 the unemployment rate in our state was 5.7 percent whereas the rate for African-Americans was 12.8 percent.⁴ This is just a snapshot of the conditions facing this population segment.

This Commission serves in a myriad of ways to address these socio-economic disparities. While there are other equally important state agencies, coalitions, advocacy groups and partners involved in advocacy that benefit the African-American population, this Commission undoubtedly has the greatest stake and commitment for the welfare of African-Americans in our state. Our commitment and relationship with this community is an uniquely special one. While this Commission has the potential to accomplish more, with a staff of merely 4 dedicated workers we maximize efforts to yield the best possible results.

First, we serve as a watchdog agency by monitoring, influencing and shaping policy that impacts African-Americans across the state. Second, we serve in the unique role of being a bridge between the legislature and the community by presenting issues from diverse groups of constituents to the state legislature.

Third, we serve as a vital resource for residents searching for information and on matters pertaining to employment, housing, predatory lending to name a few. The Commission researches, collects and directs the public to the appropriate sources for assistance.

² Institute of Medicine, *Mammography and Beyond*

³ Connecticut State Department of Education, Bureau of Educational Equity, *Expulsion and Suspension Rates*

⁴ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *State Unemployment Rates*

The Commission is currently working on a number of policies and initiatives. In the area of business and economic development, the Commission is working in partnership with the Minority Construction Council on a number of concerns relating to bonding requirements, licensing and matters regarding oversight. In its role as a connector the Commission is assisting the Council to present its issues to the legislature and is providing the support needed to navigate the legislative process for a successful outcome.

Similarly the Commission is providing support for other groups such as the African Trade and Information Center (ATIC) to advance their cause for the betterment of the state. The Commission is offering direction and legislative guidance to resuscitate and strengthen a trade initiative between Connecticut and Africa. The ultimate goal of this initiative is to create jobs in the state through new opportunities in certain parts of Africa.

In the area of criminal justice the Commission is assisting a number of advocacy groups. In one instance to protect the safety and rights of the prison population and in another instance to enhance the employability of ex-offenders upon release.

The Commission is also supporting legislatively the efforts of the Department of Education to expand a promising mentoring initiative statewide. This initiative is designed to divert youth into productive ventures and improve their academic performance. The Commission recognizing the need to strengthen multicultural education in school curricula, is leading the effort in mobilizing and organizing groups committed to increasing awareness on this issue. The Commission was also very involved with the Department's redesign of secondary education.

The Commission is also advancing programs such as Know How to Go-CT and College Goal Sunday-CT. More than 15,000 middle and high school students in the state have benefited from these programs, that prepares students for higher education through a web and multi-media based approach. This program is an ongoing effort spearheaded by the Commission and supported by the Department of Education and Higher Education key stakeholders. The aim is to ensure that anyone

in our state who needs help in accessing post-secondary education is not denied for lack of knowledge of the application process.

Healthcare has been at the forefront of this Commission's set of legislative priorities. To this end the Commission is now as it has for the past several years joined with the Department of Public Health, the American Heart Association and the National Kidney Foundation, Donate Life, the Lupus Foundation and many others to increase awareness and prevention of chronic ailments such as diabetes, stroke, kidney and cardiovascular disease through informational forums and public media. The Commission plays a vital role in establishing protocols for outreach and standards for culturally competent service delivery to communities of color through its active participation in a number of joint ventures including the Connecticut Multi-cultural Health Partnership, Comprehensive Cancer Partnership and Sexual Violence Prevention Partnership. The AAAC currently serves on the newly formed Commission on Health Equity (CHE) to help eradicate health disparities for all residents of the state.

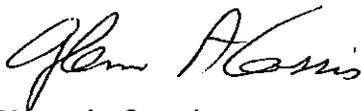
As I mentioned earlier in my testimony this list is by no means exhaustive. There are other initiatives, programs, and outreach that are in progress. Much has been accomplished since the creation of this Commission, with obviously more challenges ahead, however for the sake of time I recommend visiting the Commission's website for an even more comprehensive and detailed report on the Commission's involvement in shaping policy and community outreach. Here our annual reports will provide an in depth overview of this Commission's charge. The African-American Affairs Commission website has become a modern tool for effective communication and linkage for all citizens of Connecticut but in particular the African-American community.

Final points that must be considered:

- With the severity of the racial disparities in Connecticut, the African-American Affairs Commission is not a luxury it is a necessity in order to reduce this divide.

- In order for our great State to achieve its potential in human capital, partnerships established by the AAAC between African-Americans and agencies, foundations, other commissions, businesses and community and faith based organizations must be allowed to continue.
- What state agency will insure that African-American students in particular and all students in general have access to a clear road map to higher education and financial aid?
- What state agency will take the initiative and responsibility to outreach directly to the African-American community on issues of health, education, environmental justice, criminal justice, economic development and other important issues?
- The State of Connecticut has the opportunity to wisely invest \$478K annually that will go beyond the lives of the approximately 329K Africa-Americans and become an investment that multiplies for all in Connecticut.
- Ladies and Gentlemen your task will not be easy but be certain that your decision to return the African-American Affairs Commission to the budget will help make Connecticut achieve its full potential. To choose otherwise will signal to the citizens of this state that you will hear from later today and tomorrow, that Connecticut's vision is short-term.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.



Glenn A. Cassis

Executive Director