



*State of Connecticut*  
*African-American Affairs Commission*

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Good afternoon Members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Glenn Cassis and I am the Executive Director of the African-American Affairs Commission. The mission of the Commission is to improve and promote the economic development, education, health and political well-being of the African-American community in the State of Connecticut through support, information sharing, cultural awareness, community networking and influencing legislation. Established in 1997 by Public Act 97-11 Section 24 by the General Assembly and approved by the Governor, the African-American Affairs Commission provides voice to policy and legislation that impacts the African-American community in Connecticut. Equally important the Commission partners with community organizations, businesses and non-profits to insure that public policies serve to help eliminate the disparities between a large percentage of the African-American community and the rest of the State

A little more than a year ago I came before you requesting that you sustain the Commission's budget. At that time the AAAC was reeling from the loss of half its staff. The remaining staff accepted significant salary reductions but with prayer, your decision to allow the AAAC to continue its work, the support from the Commissioners, the collaboration with other legislative Commissions, and by establishing partnerships with other state agencies, numerous community based organizations, friends and citizens throughout the State, the AAAC has been able to steady itself.

With a reduced budget the AAAC has had to work twice as hard and has made progress on its mandate. I will be the first to tell you that AAAC has not completed all of its priorities but it is not due to a lack of effort. The Commission has been understaffed for much of the year and only recently during the current session been able to do what is necessary to improve the quality of life for all citizens in Connecticut. The Commission wants to continue to be responsive to the more than 365,900<sup>1</sup> African-Americans in Connecticut and to the rest of this state's citizens.

### **Education**

The AAAC is acutely aware that the state's budget is in the worse condition it has ever been. A three billion dollar deficit is a huge budget gap to bridge. We understand that expenditures must be reduced in order to make ends meet. It is also clear that when funding is not available, we must adapt. For the past year and a half, the AAAC has made it a priority to secure non-state funding to support part of its mandate, specifically education. Through grant writing to national foundations and educational associations, the AAAC has brought \$219,000 into the state for programs that helps make it possible for first generation and low income students to go to college. As a result thousands of Connecticut students have and will continue to be better prepared for post secondary education and also be able to afford to go to college. It is all about graduation and there is no argument when it comes to the economic and social rewards that a college degree can afford individuals and society. In the coming weeks, the Commission will convene a black leaders policy roundtable for public education reform. We will also convene a meeting for school districts and higher education partners seeking to apply for federal funds through GEAR-UP<sup>2</sup> to help low income students from urban and rural districts prepare for college. GEAR-UP only comes around every 7 years and will identify 6<sup>th</sup> graders and follow them to their

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the 2010 US Census report

<sup>2</sup> US Dept. of Education – Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs

freshman year of college. Connecticut has a modest history of successful GEAR-UP applications and there is the potential of receiving several hundred thousand dollars of education funds that will directly improve the lives of thousands of Connecticut students. The AAAC plans to remain vigilant by assisting the state to go after these dollars and making sure that they are used wisely to improve the lives of our future leaders.

### **Health**

Health disparities in the African-American community continue to be an important issue. The Commission currently serves on the Commission on Health Equity, the Hartford Comprehensive Cancer Control Task Force, the Red Cross Diversity and Inclusion Committee and the Health Equity Leadership Council (CT Health Foundation and the Conference of Churches – Hartford). The Commission was asked to be a part of these organizations due to our ability to provide voice on the issues. The Commission has strong partnerships with the American Heart Association, Donate Life Connecticut, the National Kidney Foundation, the Health Education Lead Poisoning, Cancer Task Force (Hartford Hospital), the Southern Regional Sickle Cell Association, the American Cancer Society, the American Diabetes Association, the Lupus Foundation of Connecticut, the Foundation for Educational Advancement and others. Each relies on the assistance from the Commission to help disseminate information, provide testimony and assist with screening opportunities statewide in the African-American communities. The Commission continues to support HB 6305 the Sustinet Plan that ensures that the underserved populations have access to affordable quality health care.

The Commission enthusiastically supported Governor Malloy's appointment of Dr Jewell Mullen as the Commissioner of the Department of Public Health and testified on her behalf. We believe her appointment provides a clear message to reducing health disparities.

### **Economic Development**

Last year I came before you to inform you of the steps the Commission was taking to ensure that Senate Bill 880 Special Act No. 09-14 – An Act Concerning Trade With Africa was living up to its intended purpose. The Commission continued to convene group of citizens and assisted them in establishing a non-profit corporation that is seeking its 501 (c) 3. Soon the United State And Africa Development Organization (USAADO) will begin sponsoring education and business forums targeted to businesses interested in trade with Sub-Sahara Africa. Connecticut has the industries and manufacturing that many African nations need. Trade with African countries would help boost the state's economy. The Commission brokered a meeting with USAADO and elected officials from Nigeria who spent two weeks at Central Connecticut State University.

The AAAC is monitoring bills that will impact business development. HB 5663 – An Act Encouraging Business Development in Distressed Municipalities and SB 736 – An Act Concerning a Surety Bond Guarantee for Emerging Contractors are examples of proposed legislation that could assist minority businesses get their feet in the door to business opportunities. The Commission is also speaking with MBE's concerned with the state's set aside programs. Not enough Black and Latino businesses are being awarded contracts to satisfy the goals of the program.

### **Political Well Being**

The African-American Affairs Commission is the only agency in state government that is dedicated to aggressively address the concerns of the African-American community. We help keep government accountable that all citizens are afforded their civil rights under the Constitution. We serve as the bridge that fosters and encourages the flow of information to and from the Capitol to the communities. We support efforts that offer citizens access to legislators and state agencies. Regularly we receive requests from citizens on issues they believe involve civil rights, discrimination, prejudice and racism We respond to inquiries regarding

services available to begin minority businesses. The AAAC helps ex-offenders secure employment and direct them to programs that combat recidivism. We partner with the Connecticut Pardon Team by informing ex-offenders of their services. The Commission is a member of the Commission on Racial Disparities in the Criminal Justice System. Annually the Commission provides access to non-profit agencies and CBO's to become visible to Legislators and the public during the month of February. Currently the Commission has introduced a bill that will address some of the shortcomings of the Penn Act on Racial Profiling. We expect the Judiciary Committee to hold public hearing on a bill this session.

The AAAC's RBA continues to be a live working document that measures our progress. Significant progress is being made in education and getting first generation students through college. We are making progress by convening key African-Americans in policy decisions. In health progress is being made to reduce disparities although far from being completed. We are not done.

The Commission has asked for restoration of its budget to levels of FY2008-09. By managing the current year's budget the AAAC was able to return our Legislative Analyst to a part-time status during session. This has had a huge positive impact. Having staff during the coming years will help insure that the Commission achieves mandated expectations. As referenced earlier, the Commission successfully secured grants from outside sources for education programs. The grant funds will be reduced and finally end by 2013. In order to sustain these programs for students preparing for a successful post secondary experience, the Commission is requesting \$180,000 annually to continue to administer college access and success programs and College Goal Sunday.

### **Summary**

There is no doubt that the road ahead will be challenging for Connecticut and the Commission. Utilizing funds from sources outside the state to fill gaps in our budget has been challenging. The Commission remained steadfastly committed

to improving the lives of African-Americans in pivotal areas of education, economic development and self sufficiency, health and political well-being. The Commission has become the convener, collaborator and has taken the lead in what has provided voice and action for African-Americans. We have demonstrated progress in addressing the elimination of the achievement gap in education, taken steps to establish innovative ideas to bring economic development to an international platform, pressed for solutions on issues of health disparities and championed having the underserved counted and visible. The Commission has made these priorities the centerpiece of our RBA and we are working towards turning the curve. Thank you for providing this time to address you. We will continue to afford the African-American community and all other citizens with a great investment.

Thank you for providing me this opportunity to speak on behalf of the African-American Affairs Commission.