

## **State of Connecticut**

**African-American Affairs Commission**

**State Capitol**

**210 Capitol Avenue – Room 509**

**Hartford, CT 06106**

**860-240-8555**

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Good morning members of the Appropriations Committee. I am Glenn Cassis, Executive Director for the African-American Affairs Commission (AAAC). The Commission began in 1997 by legislators including Senator Eric Coleman, Rep. Kenneth Green and others who believed it was important to address the issue of young black males who were failing in the educational system and over-represented in the criminal justice system. It became evident that the problems were systematically rooted in how we as a society struggle to address the issues of race and poverty.

The disparities in the social and economic determinants have led the AAAC to address a wider scope, expanding its mission to promote and improve the educational, health, economic and political well-being of the African-American community in Connecticut. As an arm of the General Assembly, the Commission accomplishes this by collaborating with the public, governmental agencies and representatives from businesses to find solutions to help improve the quality of life for residents of Connecticut. The AAAC believes very strongly that by reducing racial disparities, the entire state is rewarded with stronger communities.

The right of all students to have access to a first class education in spite of an ever widening achievement gap continues to be at the heart of this civil rights struggle. The AAAC continues to work with educators and parents to help improve student achievement. We have been at the table recommending policies that will insure culturally competent services reach the classroom, that more people of color are attracted to the teaching profession, that students are academically

### *Our Mission*

*To improve and promote the economic development, education, health and political well-being of the African-American community in the State of Connecticut*

prepared for post-secondary advancement and careers and that students have the financial aid and assistance to afford college. Since 2008 the AAAC coordinated fifteen campus sites around the State and obtained or leveraged outside funding (\$75,000) enabling 3,564 first generation and underserved high school seniors to complete their FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid), the gatekeeper for financial aid. The cost to local school districts and the state has been zero! This would not have happened without the grant writing skills of the AAAC. I am proud to acknowledge that more than a 1,000 students and their parents benefited from College Goal Sunday again this year (January 27, 2013) and Connecticut continues to receive national praise for this work. The Commission works closely with the Greater New England Association of Black School Educators (GNEABSE the only such professional association in the state) keeping them abreast on educational issues, including educational reform.

The AAAC has been a voice at the table addressing the many health disparities in the African-American community. The Commission's active involvement with the Commission of Health Equity, the American Red Cross, the City of Hartford Cancer Task Force, DPH, the Connecticut Health Foundation, American Heart Association, Donate Life, American Cancer Society and the local grass roots organizations that address obesity and mental health issues continues to make a difference. Our collaborative campaigning to bring attention to the need to increase blood donors in the African-American community, urging black men to participate in health screenings and health fairs at Hartford Hospital, and coordinating Public Voice Forums around the state to get feedback on health disparities, demonstrates the energy and influence the AAAC has leveraged in public health.

For the past two and a half years the Commission has opened doors to African nations. Although in 2009 Connecticut signed into law Special Act No. 09-14 – An Act Concerning Trade with Africa, the State has done very little to increase business and trade opportunities with Connecticut businesses in Africa. Despite no State funding, the AAAC has assisted the United States And Africa Development Organization (USAADO) become established and form a non-profit corporation. The AAAC has also hosted three visits by the Nigerian National Assembly Service Commission to Connecticut. National Senators, Representatives and key staff from Nigeria have meet with the Office of Legislative Management, the Commissioner for the Department of Economic and Community Development, the Governor and Lt. Governor, members of the Black and Puerto Rican Caucus, members of the Legislature (Rep. Penny Bacchiochi), Mayor Segarra and Wayne

Benjamin, Dir. of Economic Development for the City of Hartford. This has established the platform for future dialogue for economic opportunities including an international conference in the fall of 2013.

In 2003 the AAAC was given the herculean responsibility of overseeing and reporting on racial profiling in traffic stops per Public Act 03-160 known as the "Alvin W. Penn Racial Profiling Prohibition Act". A total of \$10,000 was allocated to the AAAC staff (at the time just 4) by the Legislature to collect, analyze and report findings on tens of thousands of traffic violations annually issued by more than 150 law enforcement agencies in Connecticut. When it was clear that one legislative commission did not have the resources to do justice to the Penn Act, the AAAC moved to have the Act amended by Public Act 12-74. As a result the Racial Profiling Prohibition Project was formed. The AAAC identified \$1.2 million dollars in federal funding thus giving the Racial Profiling Prohibition Advisory Board the resources to address the issue of racial profiling in traffic stops. The progress report was recently released to the legislature. The AAAC is a member of the Advisory Board and is an active member of the Public Awareness, Data and Training Working Groups. More importantly the Commission has helped insure transparency by inviting community groups to participate in public forums, view the proceedings on CTN and providing opportunities for input from the public.

The Commission continues to recognize the achievements of African-Americans and the contributions we continue to make locally and nationally. For thirteen years the Commission has celebrated the achievements of African-Americans in business, government, life time achievers and college bound students. The AAAC has provided more than \$30,000 in scholarships to deserving students through the Classic Awards. The Commission also publishes the most comprehensive college scholarship booklet in the state which has given students a source for finding scholarships and financial aid. The AAAC recognizes the importance of history and helped hundreds of residents understand the importance of the 150th Anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation and the Civil War.

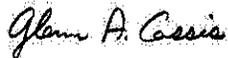
I bring this to your attention so you will begin to understand what the Commission does and more importantly, what will be lost if the AAAC must consolidate. Three years ago the AAAC sacrificed two full time positions (Special Events and Legislative Analyst) which continues to negatively impact the influence we have across the State. Two full time staff are challenged to balance tooting

our own horn or doing the work necessary to make a difference. The AAAC is making positive changes in the quality of the lives of all people in Connecticut. Consolidation into a Commission for Citizen Advocacy would weaken and erode the mission and mandates established by the General Assembly. Eliminating the Commission on Aging by removing it from the Legislature would also create a void in another significant portion of the population that has growing numbers and growing needs.

The budget as presented by the Commission is flat when compared to the last biennial budget. The only increase is to restore one of the two positions eliminated three years ago, Legislative Analyst. The void in that area presents our biggest challenge. Understanding the gravity of the budget crisis, the AAAC would have to continue to absorb the absence of that position versus consolidation.

The African-American Affairs Commission urges the Appropriations Committee to weigh the value that the Commission brings to Connecticut. The Commission has a viable and respected presence throughout the State. With the very limited resources provided by the budget - \$209,800 annually – the AAAC has done more of its share of lifting. The Commission wants to continue to serve the residents of Connecticut to the best of its ability. Respectfully, this can best be done as the African-American Affairs Commission.

Thank you for accepting my testimony.



Glenn A. Cassis  
Executive Director