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Ways and Means Committee
Education Subcommittee



The Maryland House of Delegates
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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Chairwoman Pendergrass, Vice Chairwoman Pena-Melnyk and Members of the House Health and Government Operations Committee,

Good afternoon to Members of the House Health and Government Operations Committee. Today, I ask for your favorable consideration of HB 1444 to prohibit the discrimination of natural hairstyles in places of employment and public accommodation. Ideally, legislation like this would not be necessary.

However, hostility towards blackness and attendant attributes have faced hostility since the first enslaved Africans arrived on our shores in 1619. Natural black hair has been demonized, derided and held out as a symbol of inferiority. Afros, locs, braids, twists and all manner of traditional black hairstyles were deemed unprofessional and the antithesis of “neat.” In order to conform to European standards of beauty, black women and men have used heat, chemicals and extensions to alter or mask their natural air texture. The emotional, financial and health costs of conforming black hair to Eurocentric standards of beauty often go unnoticed.

As black Americans fought for and gained civil rights protections through the middle of the 20th century, there was a movement to reclaim black hair and grooming standards as not only beautiful but innately appropriate at all times. Constitutional scholar and Drexel University law professor Wendy Greene has developed a body of scholarship on what she coins “grooming discrimination codes” that are an extension of generations of civil rights advocacy to prevent racial/ethnic discrimination. Currently, our nation continues to grapple with the acceptance of ever-growing numbers of people of African descent choose to wear hairstyles that reflect black hair textures and heritage. This bill tackles our nation’s

legacy of marginalizing the humanity of black people through policies that discriminate against black hair, beauty and professional grooming standards.

With your support, Maryland can come one step closer to better protecting its residents from discrimination. I hope HB 1444 earns a favorable report.

Sincerely,

Delegate Stephanie Smith

Chair, Baltimore City Delegation