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HB2044 CROWN Act: Proponent Testimony: Oral in-person testimony

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To Chairman Carpenter and members of the Committee:

My name is Stacey Knoell, and I am the Kansas African American Affairs Commission executive director. I am here to strongly support the passage of HB2044, also known as the CROWN Act. As an acronym for Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural hair, the act seeks to address the discrimination that many feel for their hairstyles that are often associated with Black culture. This includes braids, twists, locs, or afros.

This bill is needed as it expands the definition of what is considered “normal”. The unfortunate truth is there have been many examples of hair discrimination across the country. You may have seen the case of the wrestler in California who had his locs cut to participate in a match but there are examples of students not being allowed to walk for graduation ceremonies or being cut from cheer squads, not because they failed to meet any academic or athletic benchmarks, but the negative outcomes were based solely on their hair.

Not surprisingly, there are examples right here in Kansas as well. A February 10, 2022, report on KCUR references a “lawsuit, filed in federal court in Kansas City, Kansas, last week, says that Highland Community College in northeast Kansas conducted a concerted campaign to discourage African Americans from attending the school, intimidated Black student-athletes into leaving and told its coaching staff to refrain from recruiting African Americans.” The original complaint filed referenced the school administration’s comments on the athletes’ hair, specifically locs.

Dress codes or standards of appearance that appear normal to one group of people can be, and often are, painfully unaware of how those codes impact other populations. Including language to protect hairstyles that are most used by the Black community will ensure that no dress code or standard of appearance would be used against another person in a discriminatory manner.

Beyond that, passing HB2044 will send a positive message that Kansas is taking a step in the right direction to be a more welcoming state – and that will benefit us well into the future.

I urge you to pass HB2044 and expand the non-discrimination act to include the language that protects hairstyles that are commonly found in the Black and African American communities.