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Testimony in Support of HB 178  
Before the House Civil Justice Committee

**YVONNE CHERELL**

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SIGMA GAMMA RHO SORORITY, INC.***

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Chairman Brett Hudson Hilyer, Ranking Member Dani Isaacssohn and members of the House Civil Justice Committee.

My name is Yvonne Cherell, and I am a very busy person. I am proud of my work in our state and beyond as, wait for it – the CEO for the Ohio Urban Community Action Network which is comprised of Ohio’s 10 urban community action agencies providing housing, workforce development and childhood education and care for Ohio’s 56% low-income households.

As a solopreneur, I manage my own consulting company, Freeman Focus Management, Inc. and am a member of the National Association of Women Business Owners in Columbus, where I am also the Vice President of our DEIB Committee.

One more, I proudly serve my community through volunteerism and civic engagement as Life Member of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc., one of four African American sororities with a global membership of more than 100,000 collegiate and professional women from every profession. In this space, I am pleased to be trusted as the International Nominations Committee Chairwoman.

My capacity and reason for sharing my associations with you is the core of who I am, how I identify myself in various spaces and how I show up in multiple leadership roles.

This screen grab was captured in March 2021, during my last testimony at the statehouse. Hopefully, you will see a stark difference in my hair texture and style from the photo and as I stand before you today. In March 2021, I was on the road to becoming a cancer survivor, after being diagnosed with stage 1, grade 3 breast cancer during the peak of the pandemic in 2020.

During my cancer treatment that included chemotherapy, radiation and two lumpectomies, I lost all my hair. Now, what you do not know about me is, I am super vain. Like most women, my hair is my crown. I love doing different things with my hair whether it is wearing new curls or twits and trying different products to add a little flare to my styles.

Losing my hair was another unfortunate part of reliving my diagnosis and my journey to survivorship. I was concerned about how I would be perceived by my colleagues and clients and fear of rejection.

With my leadership roles in the community and healthcare being what it is, I still had to work through my journey. That meant presenting before the board of directors, facilitating workshops and training, testifying before Ohio's Senate Committees, and still showing up for doctor appointments and family functions. I was not always comfortable showing up without my hair, without my crown.

I am happy to report that my fears of being discriminated against or not being accepted never materialized. I continued to thrive during that period because I was surrounded by people who celebrated me – with or without hair.

I share my testimony with you today as a proponent of HB 178, also known as the CROWN Act. The CROWN acronym stands for, Create a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair. The CROWN Act was created in 2019 by Dove and the CROWN Coalition, in partnership with then State Senator Holly J. Mitchell of California, to ensure protection against discrimination based on race-based hairstyles by extending statutory protection to hair texture and protective styles such as braids, locs, twists, and knots in the workplace and public schools.

The CROWN Act was born out of research that tells us:

- Black women's hair is 2.5x more likely to be perceived as unprofessional.
- Approximately 2/3 of Black women (66%) change their hair for a job interview. Among them, 41% changed their hair from curly to straight.
- Black women are 54% more likely (or over 1.5x more likely) to feel like they must wear their hair straight to a job interview to be successful.

While thriving during my survivorship, straightening my hair, or wearing a style deemed professional wasn't an option since I lost my hair. And even while it was growing back, it would have been difficult to meet mainstream's idea of professionalism and beauty. Instead, my clients, my board of directors, sorority sisters and colleagues saw me as a professional. They did not discriminate against me for my natural born hair choices or the unfortunate period of losing my hair.

Ohio's passage of the CROWN Act in solidarity with 23 neighboring states demonstrates the leadership's commitment to diversity and inclusion and by ensuring that hairstyles historically associated with race, such as afros, braids, locs and natural hair are protected in public schools and workplaces.



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Natural hair and protective hairstyle are more than vanity or preference. It is also about healthcare prevention and healthier outcomes. In October 2023, Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley from MA and Congresswoman Shontel Brown from Ohio applauded the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) proposed rule to ban certain harmful chemicals in hair smoothing or hair straightening products because these products have been linked to cause cancer and other poor health outcomes.

In addition to healthier outcomes, the overall benefits of Black people and/or people of color with textured natural hair, levels the playing field across all industries – sports, business, public relations, government, and more. More than 30 cities here in Ohio have adopted protections against these discriminatory practices including Akron, Cincinnati, Columbus, and Cleveland Heights. The Crown Act recognizes:

1. Versatility and freedom of self-expression.
2. Allows people to embrace their individuality and sense of pride.
3. Self-acceptance and loving yourself. We are witnessing the emergence of generations who are teaching us all a new level of being yourself.

They say the third time is a charm and with bi-partisan leadership of Representative Juanita Brent and Representative Jamie Callender, we can provide all Ohioans the freedom of individuality and success without fear of losing their job, being sent home from school, or dehumanized because of how they wear their hair. Everyone deserves to live their authentic selves without fear of retaliation.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of HB 178 to ban hair discrimination.

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