



The Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee  
Sen. William C. "Will" Smith Jr., Chair  
Miller Senate Office Building, 2 East  
11 Bladen Street  
Annapolis, MD 21401

February 18, 2020

Re: Support for Senate Bill 531

Good afternoon distinguished committee members and attendees,

My name is Orlena Nwokah Blanchard. I am the President of JOY Collective, a poly-cultural marketing and creative agency incorporated in this great state of Maryland. We are also a certified women-owned, minority-owned small business. I am, as is my co-owner and founder Kelli JOY Richardson Lawson, a proud Maryland resident and have been for over two decades.

For those who don't know us, our team at JOY has been working behind the scenes for almost two years now, on behalf of the CROWN Coalition, to lead the nationwide effort to advance hair discrimination legislation. The CROWN Coalition is an alliance of organizations committed to inclusivity and racial equity and was founded by DOVE, The National Urban League, Color Of Change, and Western Center on Law & Poverty. The primary mission of the CROWN Coalition is to raise awareness for the injustice of hair discrimination and advocate for legal protections through the CROWN Act. The Coalition is now supported by over 60 over community and advocacy organizations including the NAACP, NAACP Legal Defense Fund, National Council for Negro Women, Delta Sigma Theta, and many more. We are proud to have facilitated the CROWN Coalition's sponsorship of the inaugural CROWN Act introduced in the state of California by Senator Holly J. Mitchell and signed into law by Governor Gavin Newsom on July 3 2019. We also proudly supported Assemblywoman Tremaine Wright in the state of New York and Senator Sandra Cunningham and Assemblywoman Angela McKnight in New Jersey; both bills signed into law in 2019.

Last year we conducted research that revealed the burden Black women face trying to conform to Eurocentric standards of beauty and the microaggressions we are subject to that ultimately impact our opportunities for social and economic advancement. As an African immigrant who came to this country as a middle schooler over 35 years ago, I have spent the better part of those years putting painfully toxic chemicals and endless hours into manipulating my hair to appear in a way I believed would be perceived as beautiful, and thus acceptable. Calling it a long, arduous, expensive, and often painful journey would be an understatement. That is why I personally, as a Black woman, as the mother of three Black sons, and as a Maryland resident, am particularly encouraged that the very space in which I live and work will ensure a respectful and open world for me, my family, and my community. Thank you Senator Will Smith. On behalf of the CROWN Coalition, we stand with you, your brilliant team and fellow distinguished leaders in Maryland in support of this bill.

Kind regards,

Orlena Nwokah Blanchard  
President, JOY Collective