Greetings from the Council for Minnesotans of African Heritage,

There are five weeks left in the legislative session and the Council and out partners were able to have a good number of bills heard at the Capitol. The following is a summary of what progress the Council has made based on our 2018 Legislative Agenda at this point in session and we still have work to do.

The Teachers of Color Act of 2018 (H.F. 3594/S.F. 3263)

Did you know that in the state of Minnesota, currently there is only 4.2% teachers of color? The Increase Teachers of Color Act of 2018 calls for the state to invest $1.5 million to support more teachers of color and American Indian teachers (TOCAIT) entering and staying in the profession. It also expands options for use of existing revenue sources to districts to help retain diverse teachers. The bill was laid over and may be considered in an omnibus bill later this session. Opposition is limited and we expect this bill to keep moving. All three Ethnic Councils are supporting this bill and have submitted a joint letter as well as turned out 26 community members that attended one of the hearings (12 black educators and 38 letters of support were submitted as inclusion in an omnibus bill for further action at a later date.

In the Senate, the bill companion (S.F. 3263) was referred to the E12 Policy Committee, where a hearing was not secured ahead of the second policy deadline, March 29. The fate of the bill awaits Conference Committee meetings. The bill, like 2017 efforts, has bipartisan support and has the endorsement of over 30 premier organizations and institutions from around the state.

The African American Family Preservation Act (H.F. 3973)

This bill is intended to protect the best interest of African American children and promote the stability and security of African American families. The bill establishes minimum standards to prevent arbitrary and unnecessary removal of African American children from their families. This bill has been driven by the Minneapolis NAACP, specifically Kelis Houston who have spent lots of time chasing down legislators to build support. This bill was not heard in committee but a concept from the bill was brought into a Senate hearing by Sen. Jeff Hayden. Ultimately there is an ongoing discussion with the Department of Human Services (DHS) to address concerns in the bill. This should be considered a win since it allows the Council to flesh out issues in the public sphere for further discussion during 2019 legislative session. Ultimately, Senator Jeff Hayden and Representative Rena Moran both members of the Council, have been instrumental and driving force behind moving this bill through the Legislative process. On Tuesday, April 10, there was a press conference to elevate the need for this bill.

On March 28, Senator Jeff Hayden added an amendment to a child foster care training requirements modification bill that Senator Jerry Relph introduced. The amendment would have put in place an African American Child welfare working group taskforce that would exist within the Department of Human Services (DHS). This was voted down by opponents due to fears of adding a financial cost component to the bill. However, DHS agreed to work with Kelis Houston, who helped craft the bill, to discuss ways to address African American disparities in Minnesota's child welfare system.

Restoration of Voting Rights (H.F. 951)

Our most basic right that we have is the right to vote but there are over 51,000 Minnesotans that do not have this right. Minnesotans incarcerated for a felony or actively on probation for a felony offense are denied the right to vote until completion of their sentence. About 63,000 Minnesotans are denied the right to vote, this is about 1.5% of the voting age population. About 51,000 (81%) live in the community on probation or supervised release. An estimated 64% live outside of Hennepin and Ramsey Counties. About 70% of those disenfranchised are White, 24% African American, and 6% Hispanic and Native American. A felony is any crime that carries a sentence of one year or greater.
Minnesota’s constitution bars from voting those "convicted of treason or felony until restored to civil rights." Minnesota Statute 609.165 restores the “full right to vote and hold office” upon discharge from sentence or in other words, after felony probation is completed.

This bill earned a hearing in the Judiciary Committee, where the bill was debated. The Council turned out 12 members from the African Heritage community and Eli Darris testified. On an 8-7 vote that crossed party lines, the House Public Safety and Security Policy and Finance Committee tabled the bill, but a left a platform for discussion for a bi-partisan approach for next session. The Council will continue to follow the lead of Anika Bowie from the Restore the Vote Coalition (RTVMN Coalition) on next steps. Hopefully, there will be an opportunity to elevate this issue during the election this fall.

**Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Prevention Fund**

This bill would create a special revenue fund for the community-driven, culturally-relevant domestic violence and sexual assault prevention programs, by increasing the state marriage license fee. This was the only bill on the Council's agenda not to receive a hearing in either the Senate Human Services Finance Committee or the House Health Services Reform Committee. The Council is working to find more community support to carry the bill. Staff will continue to build a coalition of Black and African women to support this policy.

Look for more updates from the Council as we get closer to the end of session. We hope you will come out and join us as we engage lawmakers on the issues that impact our community. More details to come but for now, see what we have coming up below.