

Senate Committee on Rules
Re: Testimony on HB 2168 – Establishes Juneteenth as a legal holiday

Chair Senator Wagner, Vice Chair Senator Girod, and committee members, Senator Burdick, Senator Manning, Senator Thatcher

I am writing in full support of HB 2168.

"In 1857, as Oregon sought to become a state, it wrote the exclusion of Blacks into its constitution: "No free negro or mulatto, not residing in this State at the time of the adoption of this constitution, shall ever come, reside, or be within this State, or hold any real estate, or make any contract, or maintain any suit therein; and the Legislative Assembly shall provide by penal laws for the removal by public officers of all such free negroes and mulattoes, and for their effectual exclusion from the State, and for the punishment of persons who shall bring them into the state, or employ or harbor them therein." (The Washington Post, "When Portland banned blacks: Oregon's shameful history as an 'all-white state,' June 7, 2017)

Although the early celebrations of Juneteenth marked the "official" recognition of the emancipation of slaves in Texas on June 19, 1865, coming 2 ½ years after President Lincoln's January 1, 1863 Emancipation Proclamation, it is against this historical backdrop and Oregon's racist exclusionary laws against "technically free" Blacks that establishing Juneteenth as a legal holiday in Oregon, in 2021, is necessary, welcomed and significant.

The push to celebrate Juneteenth as a legal holiday in Oregon, the only state to be established as an all-white state in the history of United States, matters greatly. This legislative action could be precedent setting in making Juneteenth a national holiday, while bringing our state closer to dealing with the present impacts of a past rooted in white supremacy.

The history of Juneteenth, to my best knowledge, is not well known or understood with respect to how it ties directly to slavery, or to the on-going racism against Blacks in Oregon and throughout the country. The holiday is not well understood outside of the African American community, sometimes perceived by whites as a celebration of "Black culture," but not "American culture." Public knowledge of Juneteenth is lacking in that it is rarely taught as Emancipation, Freedom Day, in Oregon or U.S. History, with few references in public school textbooks. Establishing Juneteenth as a legal holiday in Oregon serves as a critical opportunity to create meaningful dialogue and understanding to overcome this circumstance. At the same time, a legal recognition of the holiday can strengthen an appreciation for why Oregon must fully embrace the ideals of freedom and equality for all.

Establishing Juneteenth as a legal holiday in Oregon can become one of its most historical moments in acknowledging the trauma of 4 million enslaved people, while trying to understand that trauma through the eyes of their descendants. It can be that moment when our state makes it clear that despite social progress for Black Americans beyond 300+ years of slavery, Jim Crow and on-going white supremacy, considerable barriers (to note a few) continue to impede true justice and equality. These obstacles include sub-standard education, discrimination in housing, lack of economic investment in Black communities, disproportionate access to quality health care, racial profiling, police violence and all too shockingly prevalent in 2021, murder by law enforcement.

Past conversations with fellow Oregonians, on the matter of establishing Juneteenth as a legally recognized holiday, has revealed that some believe this celebration, much like institutional slavery in America, are a relic of "the past" and are better off left in the past. I submit to you that Juneteenth is very much a reminder of Black America's present freedom and therefore a reminder of Oregon's and America's freedom. I strongly urge you to pass HB 2168. Thank you for accepting my testimony. Rosa Colquitt, PhD