

February 25, 2025

To Chair Tran, Vice-Chairs Grayber and Lewis, and Members of the House Committee Emergency Management, General Government and Veterans,

I support House Bill 2995 because it's long overdue that the effects of the institutionalized systemic anti-black animus in Oregon be examined in more depth.

I often hear opponents of reparations say, they don't own slaves and no one alive today was a slave. I think that argument completely misses the point. Those individuals seem to be arguing that after slavery ended in the United States that the country became a color blind society. However, that was far from the case.

I can give people a partial pass who think that abolishing slavery solved the racial problem in this country because the education system in the U.S. doesn't come close to fully explaining what happened to African Americans after slavery ended. In short, after slavery ended a myriad of anti-black barriers, obstacles and antagonistic policies were implemented by federal, state and local governments to prevent African Americans from fully participating in U.S. society.

I'll name just a few of the systemic anti-African American barriers/obstacles implemented after slavery ended. This list is no where near exhaustive, but just a small sample of what African Americans have had to overcome — Jim Crow, lynching, red-lining, restrictive housing covenants to prevent sales of homes to African Americans, denial of fully earned Veterans Benefits under the G.I. Bill, job hiring discrimination, eminent domain as a way to construct highways thru the middle of African American neighborhoods, excluding African Americans from FHA housing loans, police brutality, voter suppression, and the environmental attacks on the water supplies of Flint, Michigan and Jackson, Mississippi. And, the list goes on and on... Oregon's history includes the implementation of a few of the barriers/obstacles listed above.

I would also like to give a brief example of my own fight with systemic racism within Oregon that I encountered about 4 years ago. I am a retired Internal Revenue Service employee and a widower. My wife served in the U.S. Army and died on active duty.

I applied for widower's social security benefits in 2021 with the Portland Social Security Office (SSA) on SW Yamhill Street. Although people married less than 9

months are normally not entitled to SSA widower's benefits, there are 4 exceptions to the minimum 9 month of marriage requirement. An applicant only has to meet one of the 4 exceptions to the minimum 9 month of marriage requirement to qualify for SSA widower's benefits. My wife's death met 2 of the 4 exceptions. I provided the Portland SSA office with evidence to show that my wife's death met 2 of the 4 exceptions to the minimum time of marriage requirement.

I figured my case was a slam dunk. I was shocked when I received a denial letter from the Portland SSA office that stated because my marriage didn't last at least 9 months I'm not entitled to SSA widower's benefits. Due to the SSA's denial letter and my previous interactions with the Portland SSA office, I felt strongly that I was denied widower's benefits because I'm an African male. Therefore, I requested that a representative from Senator Merkley's office help me with my request for reconsideration. I also requested that the representative from Senator Merkley's office deal directly with an SSA manager.

Despite a representative from Senator Merkley's office dealing directly with an SSA manager, the Portland SSA office continued to slow walk my case. I finally sent a letter to the Portland SSA office (through my representative from Senator Merkley's office), asking the Portland SSA Office to explain why they were violating the law that was applicable to my situation. (I cited the specific law section that applied in my case.) It wasn't until the Portland SSA Office received that letter that they finally approved my application.

I tried to spare other African Americans from the hassle that I went thru with the Portland SSA office by filing a complaint with the SSA Regional Office in Seattle, Washington. An investigator was assigned to investigate my complaint.

The SSA investigator out of the Seattle SSA Regional Office determined that there was not racial discrimination in my case. She concluded that the "problem" with my case was that my application and reconsideration request were handled by a lone, inexperienced SSA trainee. Incredibly, the investigator reached that conclusion despite the fact that my representative from Senator Merkley's office dealt directly with an SSA manager with regards to my reconsideration request. Go figure!!

When I consider all the facts regarding the processing of my SSA application for widower's benefits and the so called "investigation" that followed, I think my case indicates a systemic issue as opposed to an honest mistake.

I do think it's important to research and disclose the impacts of the legacy of systemic racism and white supremacy in Oregon on African Americans.

Hopefully, the findings will lead to some form of reparations, but it's also extremely important to reveal to the public the devastating impact that systemic racism has had on African Americans in Oregon.

I want to be clear. I'm a first generation Oregonian so if the task force on reparations determined that only multigenerational Oregon residents of African American descent would qualify for any potential reparations, I am totally fine with that.

Thank you for entering my testimony into the record for House Bill 2995.

Sincerely,

Michael Franklin