



Maine Women's Lobby

THE VOICE OF MAINE WOMEN

Testimony of Whitney Parrish

Maine Women's Lobby

In Support of LD 777

An Act To Establish the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial and Ethnic Populations

May 2, 2019

Senator Bellows, Representative Sylvester, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing: I am Whitney Parrish, Director of Policy and Program for the Maine Women's Lobby. The Maine Women's Lobby is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, statewide organization devoted to raising the economic, social, and political status of Maine's 678,000 women and girls.

I am pleased to speak to you today in strong support of LD 777, *An Act To Establish the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial and Ethnic Populations*.

From available data, we know that significant disparities in poverty, wealth, income, and rates of incarceration exist for African Americans, Latinx people, Indigenous and Native Americans, immigrants, and other non-white populations in our state. For subsets of these groups, specifically women and female-identified individuals, harmful disparities run deeper and wider.

Despite driving growth, women of color face persistent challenges to full participation in the economy. Working women of color tend to be concentrated in lower-wage sectors including clerical, retail, food service, and home health care, and this impacts their ability to transcend poverty and the systemic, structural barriers that prevent them and their families from fully thriving.

Although women in general face a continuing pay gap compared to their male counterparts, the gap is even larger for women of color. Equal Pay Day for 2019, which is the date that symbolizes how far into the year women must work to earn what men earned in the previous year, is April 2. For Black women, that date is August 22.ⁱ For Native women, it is September 20.ⁱⁱ And for Latinx women, it is November 20.ⁱⁱⁱ These are shameful statistics, rooted in systemic racism that leads to discrimination, bias, disadvantage, and lack of opportunity. Because of lack of data in Maine, we cannot even calculate these statistics for women who live and work here. Without the ability to capture this important data, we

ⁱ National Women's Law Center. Equal Pay & the Wage Gap. 2019. Retrieved from <https://nwlc.org/issue/equal-pay-and-the-wage-gap/>

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

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cannot truly begin to formulate solutions to inequities faced by Maine women of color. LD 777 is a critical step toward ameliorating the myriad injustices faced by women of color.

Increasing the economic opportunity of women of color will give more opportunity to their children and continue to increase opportunity for generations to come. Further, economic security is connected to access to health care and critical social services that lead to improved health and wellness outcomes, access to family friendly workplace policies that honor changing family structures, increased educational opportunity, decreased contact with the criminal justice system (which is wildly disproportionate for people and women of color), and the list goes on.

The commission proposed by LD 777 will look at these issues, investigate and identify solutions, decide which ones are right for directly impacted Mainers, and work to make lasting, substantive, healing, and long overdue changes in the lives of Mainers of color that are also good for our entire state. We strongly urge you to vote ought to pass on LD 777. Thank you for your time.

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