

COMMISSION ON RACE & ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITY

Minutes of the 1st Meeting of the 2021 Interim

July 20, 2021

Call to Order and Roll Call

The 1st meeting of the Commission on Race & Access to Opportunity was held on Tuesday, July 20, 2021, at 3:00 PM, in Room 169 of the Capitol Annex. Senator David P. Givens, Chair, called the meeting to order, and the secretary called the roll.

Present were:

Members: Senator David P. Givens, Co-Chair; Representative Samara Heavrin, Co-Chair; Senators Karen Burg and Whitney Westerfield; Representatives George Brown Jr., Nima Kulkarni, and Killian Timoney; OJ Oleka, and Erwin Roberts.

Guests:

LRC Staff: Alisha Miller and Elishea Schweickart

Overview

Co-Chair Givens began the meeting by explaining that he and Co-Chair Heavrin will be chairing each meeting together rather than chairing meetings in rotation. He also stated the meetings may be informal, will cover a lot of different processes, be productive, and also efficient.

Co-Chair Heavrin explained how she hopes Senate Bill 10 and the bipartisan nature of the commission will greatly benefit all of Kentucky. Senate Bill 10 establishes the Commission on Race and Access to Opportunity, which is created as part of the Legislative Department of State Government to research issues where disparities may exist. These issues include educational inequity, child welfare, economic opportunity, health, criminal justice, juvenile justice, and any other sectors found relevant in an effort to improve opportunities and services for minority communities. The commission is made up of members of the House and Senate, along with members from the private and non-profit sectors. Senate Bill 10 allows the commission to hold monthly meetings, seek testimony, and propose policy changes when areas of improvement are identified.

Introductions

Senator Westerfield expressed his appreciation for being a member of the commission. He stated that while he expects to find the government can remedy many of these disparities, there may be disparities that the government cannot fix but they deserve attention nonetheless. His hope is that the commission can come up with specific legislative

objectives, like every other legislative committee. Responding to a question from Senator Givens, Senator Westerfield explained that his children are both biracial, and he wants to be sure these disparities are addressed so that his children, and children who look like them, do not have to suffer because of their race.

Representative Brown expressed his joy about being a member of the commission. He spoke about how important the work if this commission is considering the 400 years of disparity for people of color, and that legislative members have a charge to deal with racial disparities that exist within society. He spoke of the importance of people who consider themselves in the majority to address their issues and understand that America is where it is because of things that have happened in our society.

Representative Kulkarni expressed her appreciation for being a member of this bipartisan commission. She stated that she is looking forward to discussing and debating many issues that, while they may be painful and difficult, need to be addressed and changed. She is hopeful the commission can come up with solutions that will address the systemic issues that have affected many minorities in Kentucky for generations.

Representative Timoney expressed his appreciation for being a member on the commission. He hopes the commission comes up with actionable objectives and looks forward to celebrating success when the commission reaches those objectives. He does not believe there is a topic in America right now that is more deeply felt or even feared than the topic of race, and that is why he appreciates the energy going into addressing the issues. In response to a question from Representative Heavrin, Representative Timoney explained that any steps taken to move forward is progress, and all students in Kentucky deserve the same chance. The committee has to take action and not just talk about the issues.

Dr. OJ Oleka expressed his appreciation for being on the commission and explained his background. Dr. Oleka is the president of the association of independent colleges and universities, a qualitative researcher, and someone who is the child of Nigerian immigrants. He believes the commission is one of the most important works that could be done in Kentucky, and that every Kentuckian deserves equal opportunity at a quality education and a good job. The American Enterprise institute put out a report on race and poverty that stated the one in one hundred white families can have a third generation of poverty, but for black families it is one in five families. He hopes the commission can find tangible solutions to move Kentuckians forward.

Erwin Roberts expressed his appreciation for being on the commission. He stated that he is looking forward to working in the criminal justice areas, along with education and healthcare. On a personal level, Mr. Roberts has had many opportunities as an African American citizen of Kentucky but has also experienced many inequities. He hopes his children, and all children, get to experience the opportunities that he has had. He stated the

commission has quite the undertaking, but there is no better time to start than the present and he is looking forward to working with everyone.

Senator Berg expressed her appreciation for being on the commission. She stated that access to opportunity is one of the most important goals of government, and that everyone should have a chance to succeed and grow. Senator Berg, who is the only Jewish member of the General Assembly, shared a quote from a holocaust survivor. She believes everyone has an obligation to know our country's history but must work together to improve the future.

Co-Chair Givens expressed that it was an honor to be on the commission, to sponsor Senate Bill 10, and to work with members in both legislative chambers. He stated his children have given him perspective around conversations like the commission will be having. There is a generational change, a way younger people view issues surrounding race, and that perspective has allowed him to have conversations that he would not have had previously. He also shared that one of his guiding principles will be around policy. While the commission will spend a fair amount of time talking about issues, he hopes the commission has an impact on policy that drives outcomes.

Co-Chair Heavrin expressed her appreciation for being on the commission. Co-Chair Heavrin stated that as one of the younger members of the General Assembly, she looks at things differently, and race is an issue that needs to have conversations. She spoke of her friendship with Dr. Oleka, about the many conversations they have had, and how he has touched her life. She finished by pointing out that she is on this commission, despite how uncomfortable and emotional conversations may be at times, because everyone in Kentucky deserves to be understood and treated equally.

Closing Remarks

Co-Chair Givens spoke briefly about the commission, stating that it will run just as a regular committee. This means if a member of the commission wishes to be recognized, they will need to alert staff or one of the Co-Chairs. Members will also be expected to be respectful, even when the topics being discussed are emotional, and if a member needs to take a pause they just need to let the chairs know. The first couple of commission meetings will include presenters chosen by the chairs, and will include topics they want to share with the commission. He also stated that the chairs plan to reach out to someone who has a national policy perspective to invite them to come speak about their experience with other states, reaching the goal of forward-thinking policy changes.

Representative Timoney quickly commented that he hopes for a better world for his children and all children, so he appreciates the goal of forward-thinking policy changes.

Co-Chair Heavrin briefly spoke about her plan to invite several groups to speak to the commission, including an academy in Owensboro who focuses on young black men. She also stated that she believes it is important that the commission stays focused on the

duties they have been assigned by Senate Bill 10. She invited the members to let them know if they have speakers they would like to have testify before the commission.

Co-Chair Givens pointed out that there are still three member appointments that need to be filled before the next meeting. He also spoke of action items to be completed before the next commission meeting, including; member requests for presenters and/or topics, adding the August 18, 2021 meeting to calendars, and for staff to send out member contact information to all the commission members.

Responding to a question from Representative Brown, Co-Chair Givens stated that commission members can request topic discussions, and those topics may be approved by the chairs and added to a future agenda.

Responding to a question from Senator Westerfield, Co-Chair Givens stated that the August 18, 2021 will take place at 3:00 PM.

With there being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 3:52 PM.