

**Testimony of State Representative Vanessa Lowery Brown, 190th Legislative District
Chairwoman of the Pennsylvania Legislative Black Caucus
House Appropriations Budget Hearing
Thursday, March 10, 2016
Room 140, Main Capitol Building**

Good afternoon everyone:

First and foremost, I would like to thank Chairman Adolph, Chairman Markosek and the House Appropriations Committee for allowing me to testify today. As both an individual legislator and as Chairwoman of the Pennsylvania Legislative Black Caucus, I would like to take this opportunity to bring several specific line-items of the Governor's proposed 2016/17 Budget to your Committee's collective attention.

The first proposed line-item of importance to me is line-item 13, which involves the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission. Specifically, the Governor's proposed budget seeks to allocate a total amount of \$10,148,000, which represents an increase of \$498,000. As an entity that has been created to serve as our commonwealth's foremost agency for rooting out racism and discrimination within the workplace and in our academic institutions, a priority definitely needs to be given to the agency as over the course of the last five budgetary cycles, the Human Relations Commission has either seen its funding cut or has been flat funded. It is worth noting that the Commission has experienced these longstanding funding woes despite a spike in the overall number of cases brought before the Commission over this same time period. As Chairwoman of the Pennsylvania Legislative Black Caucus (PLBC), I have witnessed first-hand the large volume of allegedly aggrieved employees that contact our office only to be subsequently re-referred to the Human Relations Commission for redress. In summary, this is an agency whose existence is not only absolutely necessary, but an agency of which we can rest assured in the fact that our investment in it directly contributes to overall betterment of our commonwealth. Therefore, I would like to request that the Governor's proposed 2016/17 line-item for the Human Relations Commission be preserved.

The second proposed line-item of significance to me is line-item 28, which involves the Pennsylvania Board of Pardons (PA BOP). Specifically, the Governor's proposed budget seeks to allocate a total amount of \$668,000, which represents an increase of \$25,000. As the members of this Committee are probably well aware, the clemency process is currently the only form of legal recourse in Pennsylvania for an individual convicted of certain misdemeanors or any felony that seeks to officially put their past indiscretions behind them.

At this writing, the Board of Pardons has a backlog of nearly 1,000 clemency applications that need to be reviewed and processed. However, in order for the clemency process to be a viable one, the Board has to have the resources necessary to execute its administrative duties. It is my belief that the proposed increase of \$25,000 would go a long way towards enabling the agency to function in a fair and efficient manner. This year, we were successful as a legislative body in expanding the scope of expungement rights for our citizens. One way that we can continue to ride this momentum of providing a pathway towards redemption for our returning citizens is by making Pennsylvania's clemency process more efficient. Therefore, I would like to request that the Governor's proposed 2016/17 line-item for the Board of Pardons be preserved.

The third set of proposed line-items that I would like to highlight my support for are line-items 142, 143 and 144. These line-items involve Basic Education Funding, Pre-K Counts and Head Start Supplemental Assistance, respectively. While I can certainly wax eloquently about the general merits of increasing education funding in our commonwealth, I instead would like to take this opportunity to cite a recent article that most of us have read concerning a statement made by the current Secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, Mr. John Wetzel. Specifically, Secretary Wetzel has highlighted on numerous occasions the inextricable link that exists between education and incarceration and our need to make an investment in our children to prevent them from entering the criminal justice system.

Not only is it Secretary Wetzel that is making this assertion, this narrative is supported by reputable studies commissioned by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and the Correctional Education Association, just to name a few. Each budgetary cycle the members of our General Assembly express their collective ire and frustration over the level of funding that we allocate to our Department of Corrections. This budgetary cycle presents us with the perfect opportunity to take a direct and active role in curbing the overall incidence of crime and ultimately reducing our commonwealth's prison population. As such, I would like to request that the Governor's proposed 2016/17 line-items relating to Basic Education Funding, Pre-K Counts and Head Start Supplemental Assistance be preserved.

The next proposed line-item that I would like to bring to the Committee's attention is line-item 206, which involves the Higher Education for the Disadvantaged program (also known as the Act 101 program). For those of you who may be unfamiliar with the Act 101 program, the purpose of the program is to support undergraduate students whose cultural, economic and educational experiences places them at risk for degree access and completion. While I recognize that this line-item is being level-funded from the previous budgetary cycle, it is important to recognize that over the last decade this program has seen its funding cut by more than \$7 million. This program has essentially been gutted, despite data clearly exhibiting that Act 101 participants consistently earn a higher GPA than their non-participating student peers in remedial courses and that first-year retention rates for Act 101 students exceed the national average.

In other words, the Act 101 program plays a very integral role in supporting our students whose desire to pursue post-secondary education is often rivaled by the difficult societal circumstances from which they emerge. I mentioned earlier in my testimony about how an early investment in the education of our youth yields a considerable and lucrative return. The exact same thing can be said about ensuring that those who wish to pursue post-secondary education as a means of lifting themselves out of poverty are provided with the support and resources to do so. Therefore, I would like to like to request that line-item 206 (Higher Education for the Disadvantaged) be increased by at least five (5) percent, from \$2,246,000 to \$2,358,300.

The last proposed line-item of great concern to me is line-item 262, relating to sickle cell funding. As most of you may remember, the last two budgetary cycles, both I and the members of the Pennsylvania Legislative Black Caucus have been briefed on a drug treatment called Hydroxyurea, which dramatically reduces the severity of sickle cell disease by stimulating the production of HbF, also called fetal hemoglobin. As a result of this phenomenon, we have appealed to both this Committee and our fellow legislators to allocate an additional \$60,000 towards the line-item for the purposes of providing greater outreach and education on the groundbreaking treatment.

I am proud to say that over the last two budgetary cycles this Committee and our General Assembly has responded favorably in allocating this much needed funding. However, we are now at a juncture where both our Caucus and our commonwealth's sickle cell advocates are attempting to find a clearer and more effective means of ensuring that this additional allocation is disbursed for its intended purpose. At this moment, neither I nor our affiliates truly believe that we can say that we have yet met this task. It is for this reason that I would like to urge this Committee to seriously consider restoring the \$60,000 that was initially added to the 2013/14 enacted budget and is presently absent from the 2016/17 proposed budget. This would increase the sickle cell line-item in the Governor's proposed 2016/17 Budget from \$1,200,000 to \$1,260,000.

In closing, I once again would like to thank Chairman Adolph, Chairman Markosek and the House Appropriations Committee for its indulgence this afternoon. It is my sincere hope that the members of this Committee find merit in the aforementioned subjects that I have raised before the Committee today.

Thank you.

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