

# THE LEGISLATOR

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE NATIONAL BLACK CAUCUS OF STATE LEGISLATORS



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The Legislator is a publication of the National Black Caucus of State Legislators (NBCSL). NBCSL is the nation's premier organization representing and serving the interests of African American State legislators.

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## STAY IN TOUCH:



## FROM THE PRESIDENT



Dear Readers,

Whether you are a first-year student or a seasoned legislator, by now you know that this is hard yet incredibly rewarding work. Our work touches the lives of everyone in our respective states, from taxes and highways, education, state parks, family and social programs.

As elected officials, we fight for justice, collaborate for change in our communities and advocate for all our constituents. This is an exciting time to be a state legislator.

As a member of the National Black Caucus of State Legislators, I am proud to work in my state and leverage opportunities that not only highlight specific issues facing Black Americans but how Black state legislators are addressing those issues. If you are like me, you want to learn what your colleagues around the country are doing. You want to support them, and you also want to determine how you can leverage their legislative actions to improve the lives of your constituents. Every edition of *The Legislator* aims to do just that.

For example, voting rights are increasingly being contested and struck down. In this Summer 2024 edition, *The Legislator* highlights Oklahoma House Representative Jason Lowe's bill requiring cursive handwriting instruction for students in third through fifth grade to help future voters know how to write their signature, which is required to vote.

In addition, Indiana State Representative Robin Shackelford shares how her state has one of the highest eviction rates in the country, which adversely affects underserved and marginalized groups including Black Americans. Her proposed legislation would create a task force:

Access to Counsel in Eviction and the goal is to help provide counsel for those facing eviction.

In 1977, a group of men and women state legislators determined the needs of Black Americans were not getting the necessary attention. They formed NBCSL, which created *The Legislator* to further amplify issues of importance and how lawmakers are addressing them. From empowering black maternal health, issues addressing chronic absenteeism, creating dementia policy, and tackling the needs of disabled workers. These are just a few of the many stories featured in this magazine.

I encourage you to read *The Legislator*, reach out to fellow lawmakers and be a resource. A powerful NBCSL is an informed NBCSL.

As NBCSL President, I want to thank you for the critical work you are doing in your state and for inspiring us all to enact positive change.

Sincerely,

Laura Hall, AL  
*President*  
National Black Caucus of State Legislators

## FROM THE CEO



Dear Readers,

I write this letter as America heads into summer and later into a general election that will decide the fate of our country and the future of democracy as we know it.

Nearly 50 years ago, the National Black Caucus of State Legislators (NBCSL) was founded to help solve a critical problem: Black voices were not being heard and Black issues were not being addressed in the National Conference of State Legislators (NCSL). We remain grateful to the African American men and women who saw value in channeling their frustrations to strategically bring collective attention to important state-level issues to the national level. As a result of their fearlessness in 1977 and the 47 years of NBCSL that have followed, much progress has been made and key legislation has been enacted.

NBCSL is proud to be part of this historical narrative; still, as they say in politics, there is much more work to be done. NBCSL is poised for growth to support the continuous success of Black state legislators across the country. We have expanded our staff and are relocating our headquarters, which will allow the organization to assist our more than 700 legislative members as well as members of our Corporate Round Table (CRT) more actively. We have also reactivated and reorganized our policy committees to better focus legislative agendas and further improve the lives of Black Americans. In addition, we will be using your [survey](#) feedback to help develop new offerings that will enhance communications with constituents and the media as well as boost connections with our legislative members and CRT partners.

America's future will only be as bright as we help you—our members—make it. As your partner and trusted resource, our goal is to improve your overall effectiveness, including offering opportunities to discuss, disseminate and exchange ideas and information; providing research, training and educational services; and advocating for you and your constituencies at the federal level. How are we doing? How else can we help? If you haven't already, please make your voice heard and send us your feedback.

Thank you for your time, energy, and above all, your dedication to democracy. We hope you find the content of this issue of The Legislator useful in your endeavors.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "LaKimba DeSadier". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.

LaKimba DeSadier  
*Chief Executive Officer*  
National Black Caucus of State Legislators

save the date

NBCSL'S 48<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL LEGISLATIVE CONFERENCE

# *Rebuilding the American Dream*

**DECEMBER 2-7, 2024**

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# 10 YEARS OF EVERYTOWN FOR GUN SAFETY: FROM THE NRA'S GOLDEN AGE TO AN ERA OF GUN VIOLENCE PREVENTION

PHOTO: Center MD Governor Wes Moore, front seated row, second from left MD Lt. Governor Aruna Miller, Speaker of House of Delegates Adrienne Jones, Senate President Bill Ferguson and Moms Demand Action volunteers at bill signing for Maryland's Secure Storage bill.

By **Monisha Henley**  
Everytown



Just over ten years ago, Everytown for Gun Safety was founded to serve as a counterweight to the NRA and the gun lobby. We were born out of the deadly shooting at Sandy Hook School: a consolidation of Mayors Against Illegal Guns and Moms Demand Action, two groups that were formed out of anger that the same story continued to play out across the country: tragedy is met with stagnation instead of action, all because the gun lobby puts their thumb on the scale in favor of profits over public safety.

In fact, when the formation of Everytown for Gun Safety was first announced, it wasn't without [doubts](#) that our work would be in vain. But, we proved them wrong. Together, our coalition of moms, students, survivors and Mayors, alongside legislative champions like the members of the National Black Caucus of State Legislators, have changed the political calculus of gun safety in America.

Fast forward 10 years, we've made strides that many wouldn't dream of. One thing is for certain, the NRA and the gun lobby certainly couldn't have foreseen how their power would dwindle as our movement grew.

If you're looking for proof, just look at last year, where we passed more gun safety laws at the state level in 2023 [than ever before](#). Not to mention, we also blocked the gun lobby's extreme agenda in the states 95% of the time.

But, these victories aren't just ours. We wouldn't have been able to make this progress as quickly or as comprehensively without legislative champions who understand the toll that gun violence takes on our communities and so often, it's elected leaders from communities

of color, especially in the Black community, who disproportionately feel the impacts of our gun violence epidemic, that have paved the way.

- From Black leaders in New York like [Senator Zellnor Myrie](#) who have found innovative and groundbreaking ways to hold the gun industry accountable;
- To Virginia lawmakers including Senator Jennifer Carroll Foy and Delegates Nadarius Clark and Mike Jones, who have fought tirelessly to pass gun safety legislation, despite obstacles from gun lobby-backed legislators in both chambers;
- Or Tennessee Senator London Lamar, who fought tooth and nail to try to prevent the passage of dangerous legislation to arm teachers;
- In Delaware, Senator Tizzy Lockman took action in response to the devastating mass shootings in Uvalde, Texas and Buffalo, New York, supporting efforts to ban assault weapons and high capacity magazines.

Our allies in the National Black Caucus of State Legislators have been a linchpin in nearly every victory that we have secured at the state level to prevent gun violence and protect our communities.

In just ten years, we've changed the political landscape at the federal level and in all 50 states.

In just ten years, we made monumental progress and we've laid the groundwork for more, all while growing our power and putting the gun lobby on the defensive.

And, most importantly, we've done this work alongside impacted communities who have been at this fight for decades, knowing that gun violence disproportionately impacts the Black community and other communities of color, and working alongside legislators with lived experience to ensure our work wasn't just effective, it was authentic and inclusive.

This is how you build a grassroots movement from the ground up, uplifting the voices of survivors and impacted communities, and working within these communities to fight for the changes that are desperately needed.



PHOTO: IL Governor J.B. Pritzker center with IL Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton (second from right) and former NBCSL member Attorney General Kwame Raoul (not pictured) at Everytown's Gun Sense University for Illinois gun violence prevention legislation bill signing.

We've gotten a lot of work done, but we won't stop until we end gun violence in every community in America.

Now, we've set our sights on the next decade where we'll continue to engage with our gun-sense champions to pass common sense gun safety legislation and to pass innovative legislation to hold the gun industry accountable for the outsized role they play in this epidemic.

As we look ahead to the next ten years of fighting to end gun violence, we're committed to continuing this work in partnership with champions like our allies at the National Black Caucus of State Legislators because we know, that's how we win.

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*Monisha Henley is the Senior Vice President of Government Affairs at Everytown leading her team with a passion for advancing gun safety measures. Before joining Everytown, she honed her expertise at the American Nurses Association, in healthcare policy and advocacy. She also gained valuable insights into corporate strategy and governance through her tenure at PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC).*



# INDIANA TAKES STEP FORWARD IN DEMENTIA POLICY AND OUTREACH TO UNDERSERVED COMMUNITIES

PHOTO: Indiana Capitol Building

By State Representative  
Gregory Porter  
Indiana House District 96



Through community and government, Indiana has taken huge steps to improve the state's response to Alzheimer's and other dementia. Legislative action and community partnerships are bringing more education and awareness around dementia to address the disproportionate number of African Americans and Hispanics impacted by this terrible disease.

In an effort to jumpstart Indiana's lacking response to Alzheimer's, I authored legislation in 2021 that required Indiana's Family and Social Services Administration to create a new dementia state plan. Since the authorization of the new state plan, the legislature has worked to implement several recommendations to better support Hoosiers who are living with dementia and their families and care partners.

To improve the quality of care Hoosiers living with dementia receive, in 2022 Indiana enacted legislation establishing basic dementia-specific training requirements for home health aides. In 2023 I authored legislation that made Indiana the third state in the nation to establish a statewide Dementia Care Specialist Program (DCSP), including \$3 million in the state budget to fund the program. This program supports the placement of a dementia care specialist in each of the state's 16 Area Agencies on Aging, focusing on outreach, education, and care partner support. This program, modeled on similar programs in Wisconsin and Georgia, aims to bring more dementia-focused resources to local, and importantly underserved, communities.



This session I co-sponsored legislation that ensures access to biomarker testing for all Hoosiers, regardless of whether they have a private pay or publicly funded insurance plan. Within the next few years one or more blood-based biomarker tests that can detect Alzheimer's disease are expected to come to market. This represents one of the most promising advancements to the detection and diagnosis of Alzheimer's to date, a true game-changer, especially for our constituents who cannot afford the out-of-pocket costs for more expensive tests.

However, we cannot make all of the changes we need to see, through legislation. This is why community organizations like the Alzheimer's Association are stepping up to address health equity issues related to dementia. Knowing that African Americans are twice as likely, and Hispanics are 1.5 times more likely, to have Alzheimer's disease than our white counterparts, as community leaders we need to foster the growth of local coalitions to ensure the older adults we serve who are living with this disease have access to the support they need.

Underrepresented and underserved communities are disproportionately impacted by dementia, and yet they are less likely to be diagnosed; less likely to be recruited to participate in research; and less likely to have access to care and support services. We must change this.

The Alzheimer's Association and Gdavis Productions and Films, LLC, have partnered to bring "Unforgettable," a dynamic and emotional stage play that showcases the effects of caring for a loved one with Alzheimer's, cities across America in 2024, free of charge to the constituents who attend. The play sheds light on the importance of recognizing the early warning signs of Alzheimer's, early diagnosis of the

disease and the importance of underrepresented communities participating in clinical trials.

Since July 2022, "Unforgettable" has played in several cities reaching more than 10,000 individuals and allowed the Alzheimer's Association to engage 150 national and local partners, enabling an extended reach into underserved communities, including my hometown when "Unforgettable" premiered in Indianapolis in April.

In 2024, the Alzheimer's Association will work to extend the impact of these partnerships through the creation of **ALZ Health Equity Coalitions**. These grassroots coalitions composed of national and local partners are tasked with building on the momentum created by "Unforgettable" in local communities. Coalitions will work with the Alzheimer's Association to ensure greater health equity by improving the state of diagnosis and care for underserved and disproportionately affected communities facing Alzheimer's and other dementia.

For more information about the "Unforgettable" initiative, upcoming shows, and disease-related information highlighted in "Unforgettable" visit [alz.org/unforgettable](http://alz.org/unforgettable). To learn how you can support the enactment of dementia-specific policies and support the creation of ALZ Health Equity Coalitions in your state, visit [alzimpact.org/state](http://alzimpact.org/state).

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*[Gregory W. Porter](#) is serving his 15<sup>TH</sup> term in Indiana's General Assembly and is currently ranking minority member of the Indiana House Ways and Means Committee. He is a voting member of the State Budget Committee as well as the Public Health and Insurance committees, and from 2017-2018 served as the 12<sup>TH</sup> President of the National Black Caucus of State Legislators (NBCSL).*

# EMPOWERING BLACK MATERNAL HEALTH

By State Senator  
Rosalind Osgood  
Florida Senate District 32



A reality confronting us today is the alarming rate at which Black women are dying from pregnancy-related complications. According to CDC data, Black women are two to three times more likely to die from such complications compared to their white counterparts, with many of these deaths deemed preventable. This harsh truth highlights the systemic barriers Black women encounter within traditional healthcare systems. Yet, among this crisis, there's a beacon of hope: the pivotal role of midwives and doulas in bridging the gap and ensuring equitable care for all.

Midwives and doulas offer a unique blend of compassionate and culturally sensitive support throughout the childbirth journey. Their presence serves as a reassuring anchor, especially for Black women who have often endured discrimination or mistreatment in traditional healthcare settings. By providing personalized care and advocacy, these professionals empower Black women to navigate pregnancy and childbirth with a sense of assurance and respect.

In endeavors to strengthen the Black maternal health community in Florida and address existing disparities, the appropriate solution involves legislative initiatives and innovative strategies to enhance access to maternal health services. Recognizing the need for systemic change in tackling these disparities head-on, championing policies that prioritize equity, and leaving no woman marginalized. Collaborative efforts and legislative advocacy is the way for a future where every mother receives the care and support necessary for her well-being.

The time for action is now. By amplifying the voices of Black women, advocating for policy reforms, and fostering partnerships across sectors, we can effectuate tangible change in maternal healthcare. Let us seize this moment to reaffirm our commitment to empowering Black mothers and ensuring that every woman, regardless of race or background, has access to the quality care she deserves. Together, we can build a more inclusive and equitable future for maternal health.

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*Dr. Rosalind Osgood serves as a member of the Florida State Senate, representing District 32. She has over 22 years in nonprofit management and has served as CEO of the Mount Olive Development Corporation (MODCO), Associate Minister at New Mount Olive Baptist Church, Former Adjunct Professor at Nova Southeastern University Huizenga School of Business, and member of the Broward County School Board's District 5 representative where she served as Chair twice. Her leadership advances to the Boards of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., Fort Lauderdale Chapter of the Links, Inc., and the Broward Behavioral Health Coalition Board. Her motto remains, "Overcome Obstacles by Optimizing Opportunities".*

# TOMORROW'S CONVERSATIONS TODAY: WHY LAWMAKERS MUST LEAD IN END-OF-LIFE HEALTHCARE

By Brandi Alexander  
and Dr. Elisha Hall  
Compassion & Choices



When we travel the country, talking to community members from senior centers and [barber shops](#), we find people who want to know how to have open and honest conversations about end-of-life care. We focus on the benefits that discussing and planning can have on our lives—and our deaths.

Imagine the impact it would have, if our communities received the same quality of care or made decisions about our care before an emergency? What if it was the norm to have information and complete an advance directive, which designates the care you want and who will speak for you if you can't speak for yourself? Communities and individuals would be so much more empowered to take agency.

According to a recent study conducted by the Commonwealth Fund, health disparities persist across every US state. Institutional racism, socioeconomic barriers and lack of representation in healthcare contribute to health disparities across the lifespan. These disparities extend to the end of life.

In a 2023 study, [Respecting Faith, Hope, and Miracles in African American Christian Patients at End-of-Life: Moving from Labeling Goals of Care as “Aggressive” to Providing Equitable Goal-Concordant Care](#), researchers outline how Black wishes are often not honored at the end of life. While all people of color face multiple underlying contributing factors leading to these findings, the research suggests that medical racism leads to provider–patient mistreatment in Black and Brown communities.

Education efforts with clinicians and the Black community nationwide are turning the tide on how we talk about death—and how we die. National organizations focused on our betterment like the NAACP and the Center for Black Health and Equity have shared their commitment to empower our communities with information about planning for the end of life—from financial planning, organ donation to dementia care and end-of-life options, like hospice. It's time for our lawmakers to ensure that everyone receives compassionate and equitable end-of-life healthcare. We are doing our part and need legislators to do the same.

As leaders in our community, there are so many ways to bring awareness to the importance of end-of-life care, as it impacts us all. From National Healthcare Decision Day (April 16<sup>TH</sup> annually) proclamations, or hosting educational events in your districts to introducing and supporting legislation that improves care, are all ways we care counting on our elected.

Legislators are uniquely poised to act as leaders in healthcare—from legislation that addresses access and inequities to listening and being the voice of community members. We challenge lawmakers to elevate equity-centered end-of-life healthcare for the benefit of their constituents.

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*Brandi Alexander is Chief Engagement Officer at Compassion & Choices. The organization improves care, expands options and empowers everyone to chart their end-of-life journey. In this role, she leads the organization's outreach to priority populations, including engaging with clinicians, African American, Latino, Faith, Disability, LGBTQ+ and Asian American Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander communities.*

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# OKLAHOMA GOVERNOR SIGNS BILL MAKING CURSIVE WRITING MANDATORY

**By State Representative  
Jason Lowe**  
Oklahoma House District 97



“I am very pleased that my legislation, [House Bill 3727](#), is now law,” Lowe said. “Elementary students from 3rd through 5<sup>th</sup> grade will now benefit from learning to write in cursive. This important skill will help them in many ways throughout their lives. Learning cursive handwriting is proven to improve students’ neural and motor function, as well as their grammar, handwriting, and spelling. It can also assist them with reading historical documents.”

The bill requires cursive handwriting instruction for students in third through fifth grade. As of 2024, America has 24 states that require cursive handwriting instruction. The ability to write in cursive is important for many different reasons, but one of the most important is the ability to form a signature. In order to register to vote, individuals must sign their name. This goes for many other important documents, such as a driver’s license or signing employment contracts.

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*Jason Lowe is a criminal defense attorney practicing law in the State of Oklahoma. He received his Bachelor of Arts in Political Science at Virginia State University and continued his education at Oklahoma City University School of Law.*

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# ADDRESSING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM: HOW STATE LEGISLATORS CAN LEARN AND TAKE ACTION

By **Funsho Owolabi**  
HopSkipDrive



Chronic absenteeism is at a crisis point and it requires urgent attention due to its negative impacts. The White House [recently reported](#) that when a student is considered chronically absent—missing at least 15 days of the school year—it can lead to a host of troublesome outcomes, from academic declines and missed ongoing connections with school support staff, to poor health and involvement in the juvenile justice system.

Evaluating the data at population levels is startling. In [2022](#), 16 percent of Asian students and 24 percent of white students were chronically absent, compared to 36 percent of Hispanic students and 39 percent of Black students.

Consider examining chronic absenteeism numbers within your district. Taking a look at many trackers like [this one](#) will show that districts with the highest population of Black and Brown students have had the largest increase in chronic absenteeism over the last school year.

Examining what contributes to absenteeism reveals transportation access is a major factor.

Why? Simply put, a key part of going to school consistently is getting to school consistently.

A recent survey of [school leaders](#) said 74 percent see a link between transportation and attendance. And additional research and examples show how safe, reliable rides to and from school can turn around chronic absenteeism, particularly for [Black student populations](#) or vulnerable youth, like those in [foster care](#).



In this situation, most people adhere to traditional thinking like the yellow school bus, which can work tremendously well for the majority of our students. However, many school systems are wrestling with a significant shortage of school bus drivers, most of whom work a part-time, split shift, and for relatively low wages.

Add the fact that more and more students lack access to that bus, regardless of a school district's ability to staff the vehicle appropriately. It might surprise you that a school system in your district has stopped bus service. After all, the third largest public school district in the country, Chicago Public Schools, [has ended](#) bus transportation for general education students. And according to the National Center for Education Statistics, [barely half](#) of students enrolled in public school even use a yellow bus to get to school.

We can't assume that students can access other transportation or simply walk.

[Research](#) shows that Black households are least likely to have access to a vehicle. And for populations that move locations frequently (are highly mobile), like students experiencing homelessness or engaged in the foster care system, school districts are unable to quickly re-route the buses they do have to give those kids a ride to school, often leaving many of them home for a week or more before they can go back to school.

State policymakers can consider the challenges inherent in traditional transportation to and from school, and their impact on absenteeism and education outcomes. Also helpful is looking at how new thinking and innovative approaches to pupil transportation can serve as solutions to this crisis.

It's clear, innovative ideas like supplemental school transportation options can drive new solutions. By more frequently supplementing yellow buses with smaller, non-yellow vehicles—like SUVs, 7 passenger vans and passenger cars—some school districts have made real progress toward resolving bus driver shortages. Notably, this type of service has been [shown to](#) increase attendance, particularly for students most at risk of missing school.

More than 600 school districts, government agencies, nonprofits, and 10,000 schools across the country have partnered with tech platforms like HopSkipDrive that specialize in this. They can leverage a network of vetted neighborhood caregivers in smaller vehicles who can provide a supplemental transportation option to ensure students have access to daily, safe rides to school.

State legislators can take thoughtful action here to help their districts' schools when learning more about chronic absenteeism. For example, Missouri Rep. Kurtis Gregory removed barriers for small vehicle transportation in the state, which fosters a [modern regulatory framework](#) for companies like HopSkipDrive.

As legislators committed to serving our constituents, until we acknowledge the very real ways transportation issues undergird chronic absenteeism and allow for proven solutions, we run the risk of Black students continuing to be left behind, running to catch up, or to catch a school bus.

---

*Funsho Owolabi is the Senior Director of Government Relations at HopSkipDrive. Funsho leads HopSkipDrive's policy team to solve complex transportation challenges where there is a heightened need for safety, equity, and care.*





# RIGHT TO COUNSEL LAWS PROTECT TENANTS' RIGHTS

By State Representative  
**Robin Shackelford** Indiana  
House District 98



Our nation is in the midst of a housing crisis, and there is no clearer evidence than the data surrounding tenant evictions. In the United States, 3.6 million evictions are filed each year alone, according to research from Princeton University's Eviction Lab. This staggering number paints a bleak picture, signifying the need for quick legislative action to protect those facing eviction.

When a tenant is evicted, they may not have another place to go. The financial burden of renting at a new location is often a barrier in finding a new apartment or home. For those unable to meet these costs, they may be forced into lower-quality housing or homelessness. The consequences of this are well documented and cannot be understated. Aside from the obvious health and safety risks, the National Coalition for a Civil Right to Counsel (NCCRC) states that under these circumstances, evicted tenants risk their employment, custody of their children and even their own mental health.

Additionally, evicted tenants are likely to face future repercussions when applying for housing. Eviction records, regardless of outcome, can impede applicants from receiving federal housing assistance and make landlords more likely to reject rental applications. This vicious cycle fuels poverty and housing inequality, making it exceptionally difficult for evicted tenants to get back on their feet.

My home state of Indiana has one of the highest eviction rates in the country, yet the Republican majority in the state has failed to take affirmative action. Given the high stakes, it is paramount that those facing eviction have access to legal representation. Yet when faced with eviction, on average only 3% of tenants have representation, compared to 81% of landlords. When looking at how cities around the country are tackling this issue, the solution is clear: We need to establish Right to Counsel laws nationwide.

This issue particularly affects those from underserved and marginalized groups. Data surveyed from the Eviction Lab shows that less than one-fifth of renters in the United States are Black. Despite this, more than half of eviction filings are against Black renters. To further compound this issue, Black female renters face eviction twice as often as white tenants. This points to a clear racial and gender disparity that we must work to solve immediately.

This past legislative session, I authored House Bill 1195, which would have established an Access to Counsel in Eviction Task Force to further delve into the eviction process. The task force would also seek additional funding sources to increase a tenant's access to counsel in an eviction proceeding.

My proposed legislation would have started a conversation on effective methods to combat the high eviction rates in our state, potentially creating a pathway toward enacting laws to combat this issue. However, during the legislative session, the bill was assigned to the Government and Regulatory Reform committee yet received no hearing.

Right to Counsel laws protect tenants from unjust evictions by ensuring they have legal representation, irrespective of their ability to pay. These laws have been successfully implemented in New York City, San Francisco, and Cleveland, just to name a few cities. With access to a lawyer, tenants have a significantly higher chance of staying in their homes. For example, a tenant may not be fully aware of their rights, or they may even have legal arguments in their favor that could help them obtain more positive outcomes. In fact, research from the financial analysis

company Stout LLC has determined that a right to counsel leads to more than 90% of tenants avoiding disruptive displacement.

When looking at the economic impact of implementing these laws, the NCCRC report shows that funding was usually shared among the public and private sectors. Generally, states were contributing a small amount, on average about \$2 million, while reaping a myriad of benefits. From both an ethical and financial standpoint, Right to Counsel is the path forward for humane housing across the country.

Fair housing continues to be a priority for myself and my Democratic colleagues as we look to the future. Current systems work against tenants, especially those of color, by stacking the odds in favor of landlords who have been empowered to endanger every tenant's housing future. We must work with all the power afforded to us as legislators to fix this broken system; when people's homes and very lives are at stake, there's nothing else to do but fight.

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*Robin Shackelford has been the Indiana state representative for District 98 since 2012. During her time as a public servant, Rep. Shackelford has served as the immediate past Chair of the Indiana Black Legislative Caucus, an influential member of the Indiana POWER Caucus, the Public Health Committee, the Insurance Committee and the Courts and Criminal Code Committee.*

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# WE'RE ON TRACK TO END THE HIV EPIDEMIC... BUT NOT FOR BLACK COMMUNITIES

By Ramon Gardenhire, JD,  
Toyin Nwafor, MD and  
Alftan Dyson, PharmD, BCACP, AAHIVP  
ViiV Healthcare



Over the last four decades, researchers have made significant advances in HIV treatment and prevention, allowing individuals to live longer and healthier lives and transforming HIV from a life-threatening disease into a manageable chronic condition. However, progress has not been equal.

There are stark disparities in new HIV cases among different racial and ethnic groups in the US. Although only representing 12% of the US population in 2021, Black/African Americans comprised 40% of new HIV transmissions. Black men acquired HIV at nearly 8 times the rate of

white men, and despite making up less than 15% of the female population, Black women accounted for nearly 60% of the new HIV cases among women.

Since 1987, the FDA has approved over 30 antiretrovirals (ARV) medications, with each new approval building on the efficacy, safety, tolerability, and convenience of prior regimens. Single tablet regimens of 3-4 drugs for treatment have been available for almost two decades and efforts to further simplify regimens continue with both single tablet 2-drug regimens and long-acting injectables that are now available. These advances are changing the treatment paradigm by addressing significant unmet needs and are also helping reduce the transmission of HIV.

Thanks to advances in HIV treatment, a person living with HIV who consistently takes their medication can reduce the level of virus in their body to a point where it is undetectable, and they can no longer transmit HIV to their sexual partners. This is known as undetectable equals untransmissible (U=U) and is an incredible message that empowers people to get tested for HIV, encourages treatment retention, and helps eliminate stigma associated with HIV. Yet despite this substantial progress, [for every 100 Black/African American people in the US diagnosed with HIV in 2021, only 52% were retained in care, and of those only 62% were virally suppressed.](#)

Pre-exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) has also been shown to be highly effective in preventing HIV acquisition when taken as prescribed. With the first product approved in 2012, there are currently three FDA-approved PrEP medications—two oral and one long-acting injectable. In 2021, the CDC updated the [PrEP guidelines](#) to state that all sexually active adolescents and adults should be informed about PrEP. The United States Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) also [recommends](#) that clinicians prescribe PrEP to people who are at increased risk of HIV acquisition. Despite availability of PrEP for over a decade, significant disparities remain in awareness, access, and uptake among Black/African Americans in the US. [Only 11% of Black/African Americans who could benefit received PrEP,](#) the lowest of any racial or ethnic group, despite overrepresentation of those newly diagnosed.

It is clear that many Black people still face barriers to accessing PrEP, HIV treatment, and care. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that includes addressing stigma and social drivers of health. Continued education, research, advocacy, community engagement, and investment in HIV prevention and treatment are essential to further reduce new transmissions and improve the quality of life for people living with HIV.

### **What Legislators can do to combat HIV in Black communities**

Ignoring the reality of HIV has allowed the epidemic to rage in the Black community.

It's time for a change. Lawmakers play a critical role in disrupting the disparities in HIV transmissions. You have an opportunity to help end the HIV epidemic for ALL and eliminate racial/ethnic disparities in HIV prevention and care. Here are some key actions legislators can take to combat HIV in their communities.

- Introduce the NBCSL model [PrEP and treatment](#) and [affordability of prescription medication and healthcare disparities](#) resolutions; [Resolution HHS-22-25](#) [Resolution HHS-24-28](#)
- Ensure adequate funding of HIV and prevention services within state budgets;
- Advocate to ensure healthcare plans are not charging patients cost-sharing for PrEP and associated ancillary services in accordance with the USPSTF
- Identify if your community is one of [57 Ending the Epidemic](#) priority jurisdictions with additional resources, technology, and expertise to expand HIV Prevention and treatment activities. If so, work with your local health department to ensure Black communities are prioritized in these efforts.
- Verify your state AIDS Drug Assistance Program and Medicaid program is covering all HIV medications, including long-acting injectable treatment without utilization management.

HIV is a community issue. Legislators play a critical role in combating the epidemic. We have the tools and resources to end the epidemic in the Black community; let's work together to get this done!

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# ADDRESSING HOUSING DISPARITIES IN OHIO

By State Senator  
Hearcel F. Craig  
Ohio Senate District 15



In recent years, Ohio has been confronted with a multitude of housing problems that affect everyday Ohioans striving to secure a better future for themselves and their families. From urban centers to rural communities, the lack of housing availability and affordability has reached critical levels. Housing is foundational and fundamental, yet little has been done to address the growing crisis. The state's

housing stock falls short of meeting the needs of its residents while rental prices continue to outpace income, exacerbating the plight for low and moderate-income families. In Ohio, I am spearheading new legislative housing initiatives, bringing hope amidst vast challenges.

Ohio's housing landscape is marked by disparities that cut across geographic and socioeconomic lines. In urban areas, skyrocketing property values and rental prices have priced out many residents, pushing them to the fringes of the housing market or into homelessness. Meanwhile, rural communities grapple with a shortage of affordable housing options, compounded by limited resources and infrastructure. I have watched as the gap between the number of houses needed and those available continues to widen, fueling a crisis that demands urgent attention. In Ohio alone, there is a shortage of over 270,000 affordable housing units, and more than [one million](#) Ohioans pay over half their income to housing costs: this is unsustainable.

In response to these critical issues, I have taken proactive steps to address housing disparities through legislative action. As Assistant Minority Leader and the Ranking Member on the Ohio Senate's Select Committee on Housing, my colleagues and I embarked on a statewide tour to listen to the concerns of residents and stakeholders, seeking local solutions that can be facilitated or aided at the state level. This grassroots approach has led my colleagues and I to develop a comprehensive [report](#) outlining proposals to improve housing availability and affordability in Ohio.

State Senator Louis W Blessing, III (R-Colerain Township) and I have introduced Senate Bill 271, which proposes a property tax circuit breaker aimed at alleviating the financial burden on eligible homeowners and renters. This legislation authorizes a refundable income tax credit or a direct rebate for those whose property taxes, or the portion of their rent attributable to property taxes, exceed 5% of their annual income. The maximum benefit is capped at \$1,000 per year, with this limit subject to inflation over time. By providing financial relief through either a tax credit or direct rebate, this legislation aims to support Ohio residents struggling with disproportionate housing costs relative to their income.

Another piece of legislation, [Senate Bill 243 that I co-sponsored with State Senator Michele Reynolds \(R-Canal Winchester\)](#), shows our unwavering commitment to tackling barriers to housing development by addressing local zoning regulations. In addition to zoning reform, I also co-sponsored a bipartisan piece of legislation, [Senate Bill 244](#), to authorize programs for partial homeowner property tax exemptions. This initiative empowers local governments to create residential stability zones where homeowners may qualify for a partial property tax exemption, providing more incentives for homeownership and investment in communities. By incentivizing long-term residency, the bill aims to foster stability and strengthen neighborhoods throughout the state.

[Senate Bill 245](#) seeks to modernize housing laws and promote transparency and equity

in property transactions. By revising property transfers and eviction laws, the bill would streamline processes and enhance protections for tenants and homeowners alike. Moreover, the bill mandates Realtors to enter into agency agreements before representing buyers or sellers, ensuring greater accountability and consumer protection.

My legislative agenda extends beyond addressing immediate housing needs to encompass broader systemic changes. Senator Reynolds and I have also introduced [Senate Bill 246](#), which seeks to modify housing law and rename the Department of Development to the Department of Housing and Development. By expanding the scope of housing programs and initiatives, this extensive bill aims to prioritize housing as a fundamental component of economic development and social welfare.

Furthermore, [Senate Bill 249](#) would provide direct assistance to Ohioans facing housing-related challenges. By restarting the "Save the Dream Ohio" program with grants for mortgage, property tax, and utility bill aid, this bill offers tangible support to vulnerable populations. Eligible Ohioans, including seniors and low-income households, can access up to \$3,000 in assistance annually, helping them stay in their homes and maintain housing stability.

Our legislative initiatives represent a bold, comprehensive, and vital approach to addressing housing disparities in Ohio. By advocating for policy reforms that promote affordability, accessibility, and stability, I seek to lay the groundwork for a more equitable and inclusive housing market and future legislation. Through collaborative efforts and targeted programs, Ohio can overcome its housing challenges and pave the way for a brighter future for all residents.

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*State Senator Hearcel F. Craig (D-Columbus) represents Ohio's 15<sup>TH</sup> Senate District, which encompasses areas of Franklin County, including Columbus, Bexley, and Whitehall. Craig previously served two terms in the Ohio House and seven years on Columbus City Council.*

# STATE DRUG BOARDS THREATEN TO COMPOUND PATIENT ACCESS CHALLENGES



By **Maimah Karmo**  
Tigerlily Foundation  
and **Melissa Gong Mitchell**  
Global Coalition on Aging



Uninterrupted access to treatment that meets a patient's clinical needs is essential to enabling individuals to lead longer, healthier lives. Yet many Americans, including historically marginalized communities and older persons, continue to face significant barriers to access timely care.

For one of us, this story is deeply personal. Now an 18-year survivor of Triple Negative Breast Cancer (TNBC), Maimah had to fiercely advocate for her own access to care after doctors dismissed her concerns and test results when she knew something was wrong. This story is one of many that illustrates why addressing health disparities is so central to the work we do.

Many communities face an uphill battle plagued by financial and administrative barriers to access necessary treatments. In Washington and states, legislators are working to eliminate these barriers to care and address health inequities.

Yet not all pathways to address high out-of-pocket costs will benefit Black communities, older adults, and other vulnerable populations as intended. State prescription drug affordability boards (PDABs)—empowered to set medicine prices without considering patient needs or consequences of their efforts—only threaten to put affordable treatments further out of reach.

Most often, PDABs are state government-appointed boards with the authority to review prescription drug costs and determine if they present an affordability challenge for patients. To date, the makeup of PDABs has failed to

accurately reflect patient communities whose actions stand to impact—with a noticeable lack of engagement of patients and diverse populations. PDABs promise significant savings for patients and do not struggle to garner political support. Yet, it is important to read the fine print, as stated by NBCSL's own Dr. Desmond Banks during a recent National Minority Quality Forum [webinar](#).

Central to concerns about PDABs lies the singular tool that many of these Boards have been empowered to use to set prescription drug prices—an [upper payment limit](#) (UPL). A UPL is a ceiling amount that a healthcare payer can reimburse for the purchase of a medication that a PDAB deems unaffordable. While not impacting what patients pay out of pocket, UPLs limit the amount that can be paid to providers responsible for stocking and administering a treatment.

A recent [survey](#) showed that most health care payers did not believe UPL-related savings would benefit patient out-of-pocket costs. If certain drugs become unavailable in states where UPLs are set, patients may be forced to cross state lines to access the medicines they need—an inaccessible option for a majority of those managing or at increased risk for complex conditions. The consequences of inconsistent treatment are severe, at worst leading to death.

Advocates believe these short-sighted cost containment measures will unintentionally create patient harm. Instead of cutting costs to patients, it stands to limit access to life-saving and life-sustaining medications. As a result, we will very likely see higher hospitalization rates, more emergency, acute care, and doctors' visits—ultimately creating greater strain on the system—and shortened lifespans. The impact on health equity will be profound.

The Global Coalition on Aging published [policy principles](#) that call on states to recognize the need for health systems to move toward more modern reimbursement models aligned with emphasizing prevention strategies rather than the 20th century acute care model. PDABs and UPLs threaten to do the very opposite—limit patient access and stunt innovation of treatments that allow communities to live healthier and longer.

During a [panel](#) at the recent NBCSL Region X meeting, we underscored the need for diverse patient representation in any efforts to address healthcare costs. That discussion highlighted the need for education to ensure the threats PDABs and UPLs pose—specifically to low-income communities of color—cut through the false promises of lower patient costs.

Consider that Black women are nearly [three times](#) more likely to be diagnosed with TNBC and [28 percent](#) more likely to die from the disease compared to non-Hispanic white women. TNBC is an underinvested breast cancer subtype with limited targeted treatment options, meaning we must continue to invest in research to discover new treatment options and ensure unimpeded access to medicines for the best chance of survival.

For patients impacted by TNBC and other complex medical conditions, unimpeded access to doctor-prescribed—not payer- or government-imposed—care is essential. Marginalized communities who disproportionately bear the burden of these diseases also stand to be disproportionately negatively impacted by state policies like PDABs.

Policymakers should instead focus on solutions that provide real relief to patients at the pharmacy without threatening the medical innovation that brings about new treatments and cures.

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*Maimah Karmo is the founder and CEO of the Tigerlily Foundation, a national women's oncology and health foundation providing education, awareness, advocacy, and support to young women during and after cancer.*

*Melissa Gong Mitchell is Executive Director of the Global Coalition on Aging, the world's leading business voice on aging-related policy and strategy.*





# ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF DISABLED WORKERS WITH INTERSECTING MARGINALIZED IDENTITIES

**By State Representative  
Ajay Pittman**  
Oklahoma House District 99



According to the [US Census Bureau's 2021 American Community Survey](#), 15% of adults living in the US (39 million people) have a disability. This prevalence is notably higher among Black adults (17%). Among working-age adults, 15% of Black workers have a disability whereas only 10.9% of white workers do.

Mental health conditions are prevalent in marginalized communities and can be compounded by intersecting identities such as [race, ethnicity, and disability](#). Addressing this disparity requires a multifaceted approach: examining data; exploring inclusive workforce policy options; and fostering collaboration among stakeholders, community leaders, and policymakers are effective strategies and best practices. Ultimately, considering [mental health as an aspect of disability is key](#).

We know that supporting employees' mental health improves their well-being. When employers foster a mental health-friendly workplace and adopt comprehensive support systems, their workers thrive—personally and professionally—leading to a more positive, productive, and engaged workforce. In my role as state representative, I strive to develop policies with disabled workers, including those with intersecting marginalized identities, in mind.

[The Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion \(EARN\)](#) conducted four



listening sessions to explore how workplace mental health supports can best serve all employees, particularly those with intersecting marginalized identities. These conversations brought to light [10 best practices](#) to advance workplace mental health and support employee well-being.

Of these recommendations, creating a trusting and psychologically safe environment resonates with me. Employers who cultivate a welcoming and inclusive workplace culture prioritize confidentiality and assure employees that mental health conditions will not jeopardize their job. Whether through formal policy or my own day-to-day leadership style, I recognize the value of flexible work schedules and accessible and available mental health resources, among other supports.

To further emphasize the importance of addressing mental health, I recommend viewing the Campaign for Disability Employment's (CDE) ["Mental Health at Work: What Can I Do"](#) PSA Campaign. This impactful PSA uses personal

perspectives to demonstrate how we all play a role in promoting and supporting mental health-friendly workplaces for all.

There is still more we can do to address workplace mental health. As a start, raising awareness is critical for progress. From the legislature to the break room, inclusive policies make a real impact. It is not just an ethical necessity, but a practical one. By fostering inclusive, respectful, and supportive environments, we can significantly enhance the productivity and well-being of all employees, and especially those from underserved communities.

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*Ajay Pittman serves as a member of the Oklahoma House of Representatives from the 99<sup>TH</sup> district as a member of the Democratic Party.*

# “THE WALLS HAVE EYES:” BORDER SURVEILLANCE IN A REGULATORY VACUUM



AI Surveillance Tower in Arizona, 2024 (Photo: Petra Molnar)

By **Petra Molnar**  
Harvard University's  
Berkman Klein Center  
for Internet and Society



Mr. Elias Alvarado was a young husband and father, in search of a better life for his family. He died in a dusty arroyo in the Sonoran Desert, trapped by a growing deadly surveillance dragnet.

Racism, technology, and borders create a cruel intersection that traps certain people on the move in high-risk technological experiments. More and more people are getting caught in the crosshairs of an unregulated and harmful set of technologies touted to control borders and ‘manage migration,’ bolstering a multibillion-dollar industry.

I have just returned from another trip to the Arizona/Mexico border in May 2024. And as I explore in my new book, [The Walls Have Eyes: Surviving Migration in the Age of Artificial Intelligence](#), borders are both real and artificial. In recent years, a new frontier has emerged. Digital technologies are making their way into immigration and refugee processing, now at a faster rate than ever before. Decisions such as whether to grant a visa or detain someone, which would otherwise be made by administrative tribunals, immigration officers, and border agents are now made by machines through algorithms. Tools like [AI-surveillance towers](#), [drones](#), and even [robo-dogs](#) are part of the migration management arsenal of the United States. Globally, border technologies have become so rampant that they now impact every aspect of a person’s migration journey—from [social media scraping of refugee applicants](#), to [biometrics at the border](#), to experimental projects like [AI-lie detectors](#) and [voice-printing for asylum applications](#).



Border Wall at the US-Mexico Border, Arizona 2024 (Photo: Petra Molnar)

Political pressures of securitization in the public sector combines with profit incentives of the private sector drive this proliferation, all of which occurs with little regulation or oversight. Consequently, the color of our skin, the accent in our voice, and even our bodies become a passport read by an increasingly automated border regime that excludes some while welcoming others. Already violent global border policies are sharpened by digital technologies developed for the purposes of border control and migration management in a [\\$68 billion dollar border industrial complex](#). These technologies separate families, push people into life-threatening terrain, and exacerbate the historical and systemic discrimination that is a daily reality for people on the move, especially those from marginalized communities—this is all too familiar if we are Black or Brown or otherwise deemed “suspicious” and have had many uncomfortable interactions at airports or with immigration officers.

Unfortunately, very little regulation and oversight currently exists to prevent human rights infringements when border technologies are developed and deployed. And because migration is an election issue and conflated with security concerns for political gains, this fervent push for government surveillance, policing, immigration enforcement, and border security programs incentivizes and rewards the tech industry for developing rights-infringing technologies.

After the lackluster approach to border technologies in the much-anticipated [AI Act of the European Union](#), in 2025, other jurisdictions like the United States are unlikely to enact stronger laws protecting the rights of people who are at the sharpest edges of technological development. For example, the Biden administration’s 2023 [Executive Order](#) on the Safe, Secure, and Trustworthy Development and Use of Artificial Intelligence does not mention the impacts of border technologies on people migrating. And while the DHS has released its [2024 Roadmap on Artificial Intelligence](#), outlining its framework for what the agency considers “responsible use of AI,” the document neglects to mention the human rights impacts of

people on the move. Even the UN, with its various multilateral meetings and statements, is unlikely to take a strong position on a ban or even a moratorium on these most rights-infringing of technologies, even if this is in opposition to years of academic research and even its own [report by the UN Office of the Human Rights Commissioner](#) which I co-authored with Professor Lorna McGregor.

More robust legislation is desperately needed, recognizing and centering the experiences of people-on-the-move as they are caught at the sharpest edges of border surveillance, like we try to do with our [Migration and Technology Monitor](#) project. There are real people who time and again get caught in the growing net of digital and deadly surveillance experiments. Because these projects do not just remain at the border. Projects like robo-dogs at the border become normalized and bleed over into public life. For example, the [New York City Police Department](#) proudly announced in 2023 that it will be deploying robo-dogs to “keep New York safe.” One such robo-dog is even painted with polka-dots like a dalmatian.

Technology is a useful lens that illuminates how power operates in society. Who gets to determine what we innovate on and why—and why are we developing robo-dogs and refugee lie detectors when we could be developing technology to root out racist border guards? Ultimately, we must foreground the stories of people on the move and the daring forms of resistance that have emerged against the hubris and cruelty of those seeking to use technology to turn human beings into problems to be solved.

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*Petra Molnar is a Faculty Associate at Harvard University’s Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society. She co-runs the Refugee Law Lab at York University which incubates the Migration and Technology Monitor and is author of [The Walls Have Eyes: Surviving Migration in the Age of Artificial Intelligence](#).*

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# POLLUTION FREE BUILDINGS FOR HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

By Madeline Semanisin and  
Alejandra Mejia Cunningham  
Natural Resources Defense Council



We spend 90 percent of our time inside buildings—working, resting, taking care of loved ones, and so much more. This makes the quality of air we breathe inside our homes and other buildings just as, if not more, important than the quality of our outside air. Unfortunately, there is a hidden danger lurking in many of our buildings: noxious fossil fuels. Burning methane, aka “natural,” gas inside of our homes increases health risks, like asthma and respiratory illness, by releasing pollutants into our spaces.<sup>1</sup> These are health impacts that disproportionately burden Black communities. State legislators across the country are taking action on behalf of their impacted constituents and becoming leaders in the movement toward efficient, all-electric buildings that are healthier, safer, and can be affordable to all.

Studies have found that in many cases indoor air has higher levels of harmful pollutants like fine particulate matter (PM2.5) and nitrogen dioxide (NO<sub>2</sub>) than would be considered healthy for outdoor air by the Environmental Protection Agency (US EPA)<sup>2</sup>. Gas-burning appliances that are not properly vented release toxic pollutants like carbon monoxide, benzene, and formaldehyde into the home. Higher levels of nitrogen dioxide can increase the risks of asthma symptoms for children in the home, according to a peer-reviewed study published in the *International Journal of Epidemiology*<sup>3</sup>. Our homes are meant to be places of relaxation and safety, not polluted with toxins that harm our families.

Indoor pollution disproportionately impacts some of the most vulnerable communities in our country. Buildings reflect long-standing inequities in housing quality directly connected to racist policies and practices, such as redlining and exclusionary zoning. Over time, these policies have led to Black communities experiencing higher levels of pollution, poorer housing conditions, and subsequently spending a greater share of their income to heat and cool their homes.<sup>4</sup> Black homeowners also face barriers to financing options to make improvements to their homes such as purchasing efficient all electric heat pumps that would lower their energy bills.<sup>5</sup> Black families living in rental properties have even less control over appliance installation and

maintenance. Poor ventilation, older appliances, and smaller units in rental properties can lead to even higher amounts of hazardous indoor air pollution.

Energy efficiency retrofits and swapping out fossil-burning appliances with highly efficient all-electric versions can help improve the quality of indoor air and save overburdened households money on their utility bills. This is called building decarbonization: increasing the efficiency of homes so they use as little energy as possible and installing electric heat pump water heaters and space heaters to ensure that what little energy is used isn't polluting the home.

Thanks to the Inflation Reduction Act, significant federal funding is available to help states shift to clean, electric, and healthy buildings. Tax credits and rebates from the law will help offset the cost of efficiency and building upgrades like electric heat pumps and home energy audits. Nearly \$9 billion in funds is to be administered directly through state energy offices. States must take advantage of this funding to prioritize it for historically underserved communities. Other funding, like the \$2 billion US EPA grant funding the Power Forward Communities project of which the National Black Caucus of State Legislators is a partner, has already been awarded and is ready to be deployed.<sup>6</sup>

State legislatures across the country are maximizing the beneficial impact from this opportunity by pairing the new funding with standards for reducing pollution from combustion of fossil fuels inside homes and other buildings. In Illinois, the Clean and Healthy Buildings Act was filed this month. This bold bill will help plan for an equitable transition away from the dirty gas system, help residents make their homes more efficient which will lower

energy bills, and directly help communities of low incomes access new efficient electric equipment. This bill is modeled after successful laws in Colorado and Vermont, where the methane gas industry and other fossil heat providers are already leveraging Federal funds to help meet their indoor pollution obligations.

The building sector is responsible for more than 30 percent of the US greenhouse gas emissions driving the climate crisis. We cannot reach our climate goals without addressing our buildings. On the flip side, tackling indoor air pollution by investing in our building stock is a once in a generation opportunity to invest in Black community infrastructure, improve health outcomes, and take action against climate change. Now is the time to act.

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*Madeline Semanisin is the Midwest Equitable Building Decarbonization Advocate for NRDC (Natural Resources Defense Council) where she dedicates her efforts to working on equitable building decarbonization policies in the Midwest. As an advocate, she operates at the intersection of equitable building decarbonization, energy efficiency, and housing. Her work covers city and state legislatures, as well as public utility commissions, aiming to enact building decarbonization policies that center equity.*

*Alejandra Mejia Cunningham is Senior Manager for State Buildings Policy at NRDC (Natural Resources Defense Council) where she focuses on the decarbonization of buildings across the United States, working closely with stakeholders and policy makers to design and promote innovative policies to transition buildings from fossil fuel use to electricity powered by clean, renewable energy.*

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# EMPOWERING THE ILLINOIS AFRICAN DIASPORA

PHOTO: Illinois State Capitol Building

**By Jailene Aguirre**  
Illinois State Representative  
Carol Ammons' Office



While 158 years have passed since the abolishment of slavery in the United States, the negative ramifications of the wrongful abduction and human trafficking of Black Africans in the Transatlantic Slave Trade continue to this day. Through the ancestral displacement that has created gaps in the family trees within the African diaspora, Black families descended from an enslaved individual encounter, face challenges in researching their family histories for personal and health reasons.

[Dr. Lakisha David](#), Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, stated in relation to the findings of an insightful [study](#) that: “family scholars have long ago established: a person’s awareness of their family history has a profound effect on their sense of continuity, sense of self, and psychological well-being”. It is no surprise then that for the African American family, the disruption of this ancestral tracing due to slavery has had negative developmental consequences with no real offer of reparations for the harm endured.

Dr. David states in her [research](#), many descendants of enslaved Africans are unable to trace their ancestral family roots to Africa. Unless they have the financial means and give consent to commercial direct-to-home genetic testing companies to garner a glimpse into their ethnic composition and trace said composition to an ancestral homeland.

For this reason, through the office of State Representative Carol Ammons of Illinois, House Resolution 453 was developed to create the “Family Roots Genealogy Pilot Program”. It aims

to analyze autosomal DNA of descendants of enslaved ancestors to trace the ancestral ethnic origins of Black individuals and their families. Representative Ammons also filed House Bill 5767 to appropriate funding for the pilot program. Funding will ensure this service is available to 900 pilot program participants at no cost to them. This serves as a form of long overdue social justice. We hope that with continued support for this initiative we may permanently fund the Family Roots Genealogy program to expand our reach and continue providing this service for free for years to come.

Research has consistently demonstrated the developmental importance of knowing where one comes from. For example, one [study](#) found how ancestry is a crucial component of racial-ethnic identity development, family dynamics, optimal health and psychological well-being. This is in part due to family ethnic and cultural socialization passed through family members to a child as they grow up.

In their research, Dr. Epp and Dr. Price found that family history is crucial to family identity, family dynamics, and family well-being. Another [study](#) indicates that for Black individuals this socialization results in a strong ethnic identity which can be psychologically beneficial. Moreover, [research](#) suggests that having access to detailed family health histories, in particular, can help African Americans more accurately assess their health risk perceptions for diseases such as cancer. Thus, conveying the importance of knowing one's family history for health purposes can lead to a reduction in health disparities among the African American diaspora.

Overall, the policy implications of this House resolution is one step towards a reparative journey for all the descendants of enslaved persons. The resolution has the potential of empowering members of the Illinois African diaspora with the knowledge of their family roots. This can provide numerous benefits to their well-being, ranging from better knowledge of their family health history to reconnecting to distant long lost relatives in their ancestral homelands.

State Representative Carol Ammons believes this is only the beginning for this historic, first-of-its-kind legislation. While this is starting in Illinois the

aim is to make it nationwide. We hope to count on your support in sharing this initiative with your legislators to garner support to continue this work. Special thanks to our NBCSL colleagues doing amazing, impactful work on reparatory justice legislation.

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*Jailene Aguirre is a Policy and Research Legislative Fellow at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign's (UIUC) Center for Social and Behavioral Science (CSBS). As part of her research-to-policy initiatives, she is serving in Illinois State Representative Carol Ammon's Office, with a focus on establishing the Family Roots Genealogy Pilot program through House Resolution 453 in partnership with Dr. LaKisha David, Assistant Professor of Anthropology at UIUC.*



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