



DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL

DATE: February 24, 2021

TO: House Democratic Leader Barbara Smith Warner
Chair of the House Committee on Rules

SUBJECT: HB 2168 – Establishing Juneteenth as a Legal State Holiday

This testimony is presented in support of HB 2168.

Juneteenth was first celebrated on June 19, 1866 in Galveston, Texas in gatherings of Black people, not yet even recognized as Americans, celebrating the one year anniversary of notice to them of their freedom from chattel slavery. It had taken more than two years after President Abraham Lincoln’s 1863 Emancipation Proclamation for the announcement of freedom to finally reach Galveston, Texas on June 19, 1865 via Union Army General Gordon Granger. And yet many others still remained enslaved until the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment on December 6, 1865.

Juneteenth is the oldest nationally celebrated commemoration of the ending of slavery in the United States. In recognition of this day of *actual* emancipation and liberation for so many—June 19, 1865—Juneteenth celebrations through the years have ranged from church-centered community gatherings, to historical reenactments, to political rallies, to voter registration and instruction drives, to street fairs, to public readings of the Emancipation Proclamation.

Although there are many ways to celebrate this important day, there have been many attempts to curb these celebrations in our nation’s history. Jim Crow laws infringed on rights, excluded Black and African American people from accessing public spaces, and made public gatherings and therefore celebrations more difficult. The Great Depression forced urban migration where it was difficult to take the day off or miss work to celebrate. And during the Civil Rights movement, our nation saw a further uprising of bigots using threats and violence upon those who dared to celebrate or even recognize the humanity of Blacks and African Americans.

In Oregon, our legislature first proclaimed Juneteenth “a day of celebration statewide of the dignity and freedom of all citizens” in 2001. On June 18, 2020, Governor Kate Brown issued a new proclamation declaring June 19th “Juneteenth” and announcing her plan to present a bill in 2021 to make Juneteenth a state holiday—HB 2168 being the result of that proclamation. Both the City of Portland and Multnomah County have already made Juneteenth a paid leave day.

The purpose of Juneteenth is to pause in remembrance of the past enslavement suffered by Black people at the hands of white Americans and sanctioned by our federal and state governments,

and to commit to a better future. Above all, it must be a day to honor the history, culture, and hard-fought freedom from enslavement of Black Americans, even as the struggle for justice, safety, human rights and equality continues.

Each of us plays an important part in ensuring that America's promises of freedom come to fruition. Freedom was not guaranteed for all in our country. It is critical that we take time to celebrate and to reflect on the significance of freedom, and all things that make it worth fighting for.

The Oregon Department of Justice encourages the State Legislature to pass HB 2168 to make Juneteenth a state holiday.

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