

FLOOR STATEMENT

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday

Prepared for

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Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Commission

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Good morning Mr. President/Mr. Speaker and colleagues, the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Commission is pleased to join the nation today in remembering and celebrating the life and legacy of Dr. King on the eighty-eighth anniversary of his birth. Dr. King was born on January 15, 1929, in Atlanta, Georgia. A man of many gifts and talents, he entered Morehouse College at the tender age of 15, and earned his bachelor's degree in sociology in June 1948. The consummate scholar, Dr. King received his divinity degree from Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, PA, in 1951 at age 22, and four years later, he earned his Ph.D. in theology from Boston University in 1955, at only 26 years of age. His calling was uniquely timed to one of the most turbulent moments in American history.

On December 1, 1955, eleven years after Irene Amos Morgan Kirkaldy refused to surrender her seat on a Greyhound bus in Gloucester, Virginia, and after Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to relinquish her seat on a Montgomery city bus, this anonymous young Southern Baptist pastor was thrust into the public eye when he successfully led the Montgomery City Bus Boycott and the 1966 Chicago protests for equal housing. In 1957, he organized the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), an organization devoted to the cause of civil rights. His stand against Jim Crow laws culminated in the August 28, 1963, March on Washington, where he gave his "I Have a Dream" speech, an often quoted speech, which convicted the soul of this nation. Dr. King has been credited with marshaling, galvanizing, and unifying African Americans and other justice-loving persons across the nation to change the social order and the status quo through nonviolent protests, commonly known as the Civil Rights Movement.

Unfortunately, too many people know Dr. King only as a great civil rights leader. The MLK Commission, of which I am proud to serve as chair, is working assiduously to educate Virginians concerning Dr. King in the totality of his being as a noted scholar, prolific writer, peacemaker, humanitarian, a lover of history, an advocate for education, the consummate pulpiteer, theologian, philosopher, father, husband, and servant who decided early to give his life to "something eternal and absolute."

In the spirit of Dr. King, our nonpartisan Commission was created by the Virginia General Assembly in 1992, in response to federal law that established the national King Holiday and requested states to establish statewide commissions to memorialize and perpetuate Dr. King's work and legacy. Virginia was among the first states to create such a commission.

The King Commission works together harmoniously and with state and local agencies, institutions of higher education, and professional and community groups to continue his work in the Commonwealth through educational, historical, cultural, and commemorative programs that (i) facilitate public policy analysis through the lens of his principles and philosophy, (ii) promote scholarly inquiry, (iii) encourage citizen participation, (iv) present his life and achievements in historical context, and (v) offer public discourse on contemporary issues.

The Commission is one of the busiest legislative agencies. A few of our more significant accomplishments include the start of research in 2004 to identify the first African American legislators to serve in the General Assembly during Reconstruction; in 2013, as a part of the Commission's commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, it memorialized the signing of the Thirteenth Amendment and honored the African American men who served in the Underwood Convention and in the House and Senate during Reconstruction from 1867 to 1890, with plaques which now hang in the State Capitol at the Great Seal; and in 2014, the Commission paid tribute to the descendants of these legislators, who reside around the nation.

Mindful of the signs of the times, the Commission hosted a panel of historians, educators, and legal scholars to discuss the 50th anniversary of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. In 2015, the Commission led the state's commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the signing of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Persons who attended offered cogent observations and ideas concerning the future of voting rights.

Today, we continue our work and are deeply involved in continuing to build the African American Legislators database, to which African Americans elected to the General Assembly since 1967 will be added. Two other major projects include "King in Virginia, 2016-2018," to mark the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. King on April 4, 2018. Although the Commonwealth is acquainted with his leadership of the Civil Rights Movement, particularly efforts focused in the Deep South, few Virginians are aware of his influence on the fight for civil rights in the Commonwealth. The Commission will participate in the national observance of his assassination by working in collaboration with the faith community, institutions of higher education, and the Library of Virginia to research, assemble, document, and exhibit Dr. King's numerous visits to and influence in Virginia. The Commission was also directed in 2012 to erect the Virginia Emancipation Proclamation and Freedom Monument. Working with DGS and the City of Richmond, Brown's Island has been selected as the site for the monument. A design has been agreed upon and Jay Warren of Oregon is the artist. It is anticipated that the monument will be unveiled in September 2019 to coincide with the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first Africans to the Free World.

Finally, on April 4, 1968, an assassin's bullet ended Dr. King's life, but not his dream for this nation. Therefore, it is appropriate that we remember today the circumstances and social conditions in our nation that propelled Dr. King--this "drum major for justice, love, peace, and equality"--into the social consciousness. During these challenging social, economic, and political times for so many citizens, especially the poor, the marginalized, and disenfranchised, the Commission renews its commitment to our mission to continue Dr. King's work and perpetuate his legacy in the Commonwealth.

Therefore, on behalf of the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Commission, we urge all Virginians to become involved in their communities. Let's honor Dr. King by accepting others without regard to gender, race, socioeconomic background, or political affiliation, and without the rancor of partisanship, as he would have desired. We invite you to join us as we recommit ourselves to leadership through service to the people of this great Commonwealth. Let us strive for public policies that reflect his dream of justice, love, peace, and equality. Let us accept Dr. King's challenge to be "great" by serving one another, being supportive of each other, and sincerely working together to make Virginia a "Commonwealth of Opportunity," and these United States, the land of the "Beloved Community," where people are judged by "the content of their character and not by the color of their skin."

Mr. President/Mr. Speaker, I move that when the Senate/House of Delegates adjourns today, that we do so in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.