



MICHAEL SCHRAA

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 53RD ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

P.O. Box 8953
Madison, WI 53708

Office: (608) 267-7990
Toll-Free: (608) 534-0053
Rep.Schraa@legis.wi.gov

Assembly Bill 615

Thank you, Chairman Spiros and fellow Members of the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee, for the opportunity to testify in favor of Assembly Bill 615, which will create a task force specifically to address the problem of African American women and girls who are missing or murdered.

First, I would like to provide some context on why this is necessary. The Department of Justice does maintain a website that includes pages for missing persons, unidentified cases, and unsolved cases. Every case represents an individual's tragic story and a family hoping for answers. Not every case is listed on the website; only the ones requested by local law enforcement agencies are included. Once they are on the page, they remain until their case is solved or until the family or law enforcement agency requests that they be removed, so you will find missing persons from age 14 to age 104 listed on the website. Yet, if you look carefully, there are not many African American women and girls listed.

National statistics indicate that violence, murder, and missing persons status disproportionately affects Black women. We in Wisconsin want to get to the root of this issue. This task force has less than a year to accomplish its work of extensive study resulting in a report due on January 1 of 2025. I admire Rep. Stubbs because her vision is not just to study the causes and solutions to the problem going forward, but to actually locate some of these missing women and solve some of these heinous crimes. This task force will not unravel all of the complex problem of violence directed to African American women and girls, but it is a significant step forward.

In closing, I appreciate the bipartisan group of legislators who have cosponsored this bill. I will be happy to respond to your questions along with my fellow authors.



WISCONSIN STATE REPRESENTATIVE

Shelia Stubbs

77TH ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

January 17th, 2024

Assembly Bill 615—Relating to: creating a task force on missing and murdered African American women and girls.

Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety

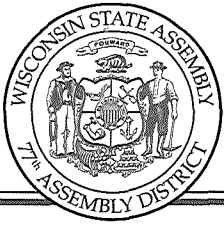
Good morning, Chairman Representative John Spiros, Vice Chairwoman Representative Ellen Schutt, and Members of the Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety. Today is a historic day in Wisconsin. For the first time, we are hearing from a victim family who is experiencing a missing loved one.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Assembly Bill 615—Relating to: creating a task force on missing and murdered African American women and girls. First, I would like to thank my co-authors, Representative Michael Schraa, Senator Jesse James, and Senator LaTonya Johnson for their bipartisan collaboration on this bill. I would also like to thank Madison Police Chief Shon Barnes and Ms. Georgia Hill, who will be testifying in favor of AB 615 today. Additionally, I would like to recognize Community Justice Action Fund, a national violence prevention organization and Antonia Drew Norton, founder of The Asha Project, a Milwaukee-based African American domestic violence prevention organization for submitting letters of support for this bill.

I would like to recognize and thank the members of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated: Wisconsin Delegation: Michelle Brown, Wisconsin State Coordinator, Attorney Angela Arrington, Wisconsin State Social Action Coordinator, and the State Social Action Leadership

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TELEPHONE / (608) 266-3784 TOLL FREE / (888) 534-0077 EMAIL / rep.stubbs@legis.wisconsin.gov



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Team Jessica Strong, Kim Eubanks, Tanesha Jones, Karen Nelson and Jaiden Russell. They are here today specifically to advocate for AB 615 and they may be visiting some of you in your offices to further discuss this bill.

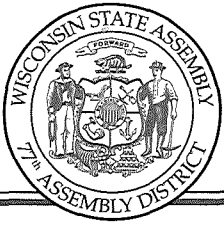
Today, I would like to express my utmost support for AB 615 because it represents a comprehensive strategy for addressing the disproportionate levels of violence African American women and girls face in our state of Wisconsin. AB 615 is necessary to improve the mechanisms for preventing, investigating, and healing from all forms of gender-based violence in our state, which impact women and girls of all racial backgrounds, but which affect Black women and girls at the highest rate.

In 2020, **90,333** Black women and girls were reported missing in our country. Black women and girls represented **33.5%** of missing women in the U.S. that year. Furthermore, in 2020, **5** Black women were killed every day in the U.S. There was a nationwide increase of **33%** in homicide rates of Black women and girls from 2019 to 2020. In 2020, the homicide rate of Black women nationally was **8 per 100,000**. In comparison, the homicide rate of white women nationally in 2020 was **2 per 100,000**.

In 2020, Wisconsin was the state with the highest homicide rate of African American women and girls in our nation, **20.2 per 100,000**. Additionally, the Black female homicide rate in Wisconsin doubled from 2019 to 2020, rising from **10.1 per 100,000** to **20.2 per 100,000**. Underlying this startling rate of Black female homicide are various other forms of violence: sexual violence, gun violence, and domestic violence, all of which African American women across the nation suffer at higher rates than their white counterparts.

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In 2021, Minnesota's State Legislature developed the nation's first Missing and Murdered African American Women Task Force, led by former Minnesota State Representative Ruth Richardson and Minnesota State Senator/Assistant Minority Leader Mary Kunesh, in recognition of the structural issues leading to increased disappearances and murders of Black women. This past year, the Illinois Task Force on Missing and Murdered Women, whose creation was prompted by the disproportionately high rates of missing and murdered Black and Latina women in the Chicagoland area, also began meeting.

Our neighboring states are beginning to acknowledge and address the heightened risk of violence that African American women and girls face across our nation. As a state that has a higher Black female homicide rate than either Minnesota or Illinois, it is imperative that we are the next state legislature to seriously take up the issue of Missing and Murdered African American Women and Girls.

The challenges to addressing the crisis of Missing and Murdered African American Women and Girls are numerous. First, we are lacking crucial data, especially in Wisconsin. Furthermore, the data already gathered is insufficient and lacks critical detail to understand the circumstances of violence. Additionally, this crisis lacks public and media attention and care. According to some sources, the press is 4 times more likely to report on the disappearance of a white person versus a person of color. Compounding on the lack of public and media attention, inaction from law enforcement and the criminal justice system also plays a major role in the racial disparities between outcomes of missing persons and homicide cases.

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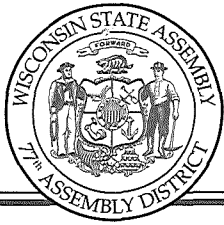
Finally, in our nation and our state of Wisconsin, efforts to combat the disproportionate rates of missing and murdered African American women and girls are met with resistance from lawmakers to frame this as an issue worth being addressed and an unwillingness to address the root causes of this disproportionate violence – racial disparities that exist across the state. To address this crisis, I have introduced Assembly Bill 615.

AB 615 would create a Missing and Murdered African American Women and Girls Task Force in the Wisconsin Department of Justice. The task force must be established by the attorney general and must consist of members who are knowledgeable in crime victims' rights or violence protection and who work in a range of relevant positions as specified in the bill. The task force must examine various factors that contribute to violence against African American women and girls and submit to the appropriate standing committees of the legislature by December 15, 2024, a report on actions that can be taken to eliminate violence against African American women and girls.

This **17-member** task force would consist of legislators, law enforcement experts, community partners that address violence impacting Black women and girls, and Black victims of gender-based violence and their families. The task force would be charged with collecting data on this issue, providing support to victims and their families, and identifying and addressing the underlying structural issues that contribute to the crisis we see today. This would not be the first task force developed to address racial disparities in violent crime victimization in our state: in 2020, the Department of Justice launched

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its Missing and Murdered Indigenous Task Force, which was tasked with the similar goal of examining and addressing violence affecting Native people in Wisconsin.

This Task Force will specifically investigate Missing and Murdered African American Women and Girls because of all women in our state, they are the most likely to be victimized by violence. However, it must not be understated that by getting to the hidden roots of this violence and combating them, we will consequently prevent and reduce violence for all women in Wisconsin, especially those who belonging to vulnerable populations. I appreciate your time and thank you for your consideration of this testimony to the importance of AB 615 to our fight as a state to prevent and address gender-based violence against African American women and girls, those who are at the greatest risk. I hope that my testimony has left you better informed about the need for this bill and its potential to save and transform lives in our state. I ask you to vote yes for AB 615.

I would like to take this opportunity to introduce Ms. Georgia Hill. Ms. Hill's daughter, Lasheky Hill, disappeared in Racine, Wisconsin on March 26th, 2023, one day before her 46th birthday. Lasheky is still missing. Ms. Hill continues to advocate for justice for her daughter and has come before you all to tell her daughter's story and ask for your support of this bill. I am happy to answer any questions.

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STATE SENATOR LaTonya Johnson

WISCONSIN STATE SENATE

6TH DISTRICT

Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety

Testimony on Assembly Bill 615

January 17, 2024

Chairman Spiros and members of the Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety, thank you for holding a public hearing on Assembly Bill (AB) 615—which creates a state task force on missing and murdered African American women and girls.

I, like many others in our state and across this nation, bear witness to a silent epidemic plaguing our communities: the disproportionate violence faced by African American women and girls.

Non-Hispanic Black women have the highest rate of dying by homicide when compared to other racial and ethnic groups. Additionally, African American women and girls are reported missing at astonishingly high rates, accounting for 36% of the total missing women and girls in the United States in 2022 alone.

It is past time that we find and address the factors that enable this senseless violence. AB 615 is one small step towards addressing this disturbing trend.

I consider it an honor and privilege to serve in a body that focuses on all sorts of issues facing our state. However, sometimes it is incumbent upon us to acknowledge an issue exists even if a solution or solutions have not yet been identified. That's why this task force will be composed of law enforcement experts, experts in the field of gender violence, and African American women who have experienced gendered violence firsthand. By having a meaningful dialogue, empowering impacted communities, raising awareness, and holding our public safety systems accountable, we can begin to identify where our policies fall short in protecting African American women and girls.

To be clear, this task force is not just about unearthing more statistics; it is about saving human lives. It is about honoring the memory of those who have lost their lives, bringing home those who are missing, protecting those at risk, and building a future where every Black woman and girl can live safely and thrive.

Once again, thank you to committee members for your consideration of this important piece of legislation, and thank you to my co-authors--Rep. Stubbs, Rep. Schraa, and Sen. James for their work on this bipartisan bill.

The Asha Project * 3719 W. Center Street * Milwaukee, WI 53212
(414) 252-0075. Fax: (414) 252-0076 * www.ashafamilyservices.org

January 12, 2024

To Whom It May Concern,

The Asha Project, (Asha) an initiative with End Domestic Abuse WI, is excited to submit this letter in support for *AB 615 Missing and Murdered African American Women and Girls Task Force*.

Asha, was established in 1987 and is the first culturally specific African American domestic and sexual violence prevention agency in WI and is also known as one of the first in the U.S. Antonia Drew Norton, known to field of gender-based violence as Antonia Drew Vann, is Asha's founder. Asha's work for over 3 decades continues to bring to the forefront, the authentic voices, plights and cries of African American women victims and survivors marginalized due to class, sexism and racialized oppression and neglect.

According to data from the National Crime Information Center, it is currently estimated as of 2023, more than 97,000 Black women are missing in the United States. The FBI indicates that African Americans make up 14 percent of the U.S. population; however, they represent 37% of the missing.¹ FBI data indicates that Whites who make up 75% of the US population only represent 59% of the missing.² This overrepresentation is striking just as it similarly is for Black women who are gender-based homicide victims in the U.S. and in WI.

So many lives and potential are absent, and this concern continues to remain virtually unidentified. *AB 615* legislation is a step towards the light to bring voice, awareness, and justice for missing and murdered African American women and girls in WI.

I strongly urge your support for this legislation. Please do not hesitate to contact Antonia Drew Norton (Vann) at (414) 517-8179 or antoniaadv@gmail.com

Sincerely,



Antonia Drew Norton
Director, The Asha Project
3719 W. Center St. Milwaukee, WI 53210

end
abuse

THE ASHA PROJECT is an initiative of End Domestic Abuse WI

¹ <https://www.statista.com/topics/2153/crime-in-the-united-states/#topicOverview>

² <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/2022-ncic-missing-person-and-unidentified-person-statistics.pdf/view>

COMMUNITY JUSTICE

January 16th, 2024

Room 7 North
State Capitol
Madison, WI 53708

RE: Support for Assembly Bill 615/Senate Bill 568 (Rep. Shelia Stubbs)

Dear Representative Stubbs,

On behalf of Community Justice, we are proud to support **AB Bill 615/SB568**, known as the Task Force on Missing and Murdered African American Women and Girls. The Task Force on Missing and Murdered African American Women and Girls will examine the systemic causes behind the violence, appropriate methods for tracking and collecting data, propose institutional policies and practices that are effective in reducing gender violence, and more.

The Community Justice is a nonpartisan 501(c)(3) project of the Tides Advocacy working to change the conversation on gun violence prevention by leading with the people closest to the pain of everyday gun violence. At Community Justice, we are proudly the largest Black-led survivor organization working on gun violence prevention policies and advocacy in America.

Last year, Black women and girls made up approximately 18% of all missing persons cases despite accounting for about 7% of the population, according to data from the National Crime Information Center and U.S. Census Bureau.

In 2022, 97,926 Black women were filed as missing persons in the US and at least 4 black women per day were killed in this country. The creation of this taskforce is crucial to Wisconsinites whereas Wisconsin has the highest homicide rates for Black women and girls. This task force will bring together elected officials, the police department, judges, advocacy groups, and African American women who are survivors of gender violence to work collaboratively and save lives.

For these reasons, Community Justice is proud to support **AB 615/SB568 (Stubbs)**.

Sincerely,

Mariah Cooley
Midwest Advocacy Associate
Community Justice

Senator Mary Kunesh
District 41
Minnesota Senate Building
95 University Ave West
St. Paul, MN 55155-1606



Senate

State of Minnesota

January 16, 2024

Dear Criminal Justice and Public Safety Assembly Committee Members,

I am writing in support of Assembly Bill 615, the creation of a Task Force on Missing and Murdered African American Women and Girls through the Wisconsin legislature. As the author of Minnesota's Missing and Murdered Black Women task Force, I am pleased to extend my support to our neighboring state's efforts to address the historic violence to Black women and girls.

For years, impacted communities have been elevating this injustice and pushing for solutions. We know that for much too long, Black women and girls have been uniquely vulnerable and ignored, thus excluded from public discussions and real solutions around missing and murdered people. Minnesota's report illustrates a devastating picture of the magnitude of the issue: over 60,000 Black women and girls are missing in the United States, and Black women are more than twice as likely than their peers to be victims of homicide. As legislators, it is our responsibility to ensure safety and justice for all of our constituents and to work toward solutions. Assembly Bill 615 is the first step for Wisconsin as it was for Minnesota.

Horribly, Black women are nearly three times more likely to be murdered than White women in Minnesota – a fact that had not been illustrated until the completion of the Minnesota's own MMBW task force was completed. By creating the Missing and Murdered African American Women's Task Force in 2021, the Minnesota Legislature became the first U.S. state to dedicate resources to investigate and to consider the measures necessary to reduce and prevent violence against Black women and girls. I hope that Wisconsin joins us in this endeavor and would be proud to collaborate in the best way possible to make it happen.

Please do not hesitate to reach out to me with any questions or for resource ideas.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mary Kunesh', written in a cursive style.

Mary Kunesh
Minnesota Senate
Assistant Majority Leader



Proudly serving the communities of St. Anthony, New Brighton, Columbia Heights, Hilltop, Fridley, and Spring Lake Park

Office phone: (651) 296-4334 Email: sen.mary.kunesh@senate.mn

