

Inch by inch, protection for natural hair grows

14 states have passed laws barring discrimination and, with passage in U.S. House, the CROWN Act advances one step closer to becoming federal law.

Published on August 2, 2022—4 min read



Nebraska community advocate Ashlei Spivey's twists are on full display. Photo provided by Abiola Kosoko.



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Did You Know?

2020 was declared the “Year of the Woman” in anticipation of the centennial commemoration of women’s voting rights. But many Black women in America are fighting for another right – to wear their hair in its natural state within the workplace.

From teachers and restaurant workers to athletes and news anchors, women of color often encounter subtle and rather bold reminders that they don’t reflect America’s Eurocentric

standard of beauty. Even after naturally coiffed Black women were crowned Miss America, Miss Teen USA, Miss USA and Miss Universe in 2019, there is still discussion about the professionalism and appropriateness of Black hair styles.

Over the past two decades, news outlets across the country have reported what working women (and students) have endured because of their natural hairstyles: everything from disciplinary action, lack of advancement, and even termination.

[A 2019 study](#) of 2,000 women, conducted by beauty industry giant Dove, revealed that Black women were 1 1/2 times more likely to be sent home from the workplace because of their hair. These and other findings led to the creation of The CROWN Coalition, an alliance among Dove, business groups and civil rights organizations, including Color of Change, the National Urban League, and the Western Center on Law & Poverty.

With the help of California state Sen. Holly Mitchell, a Democrat, the coalition advocated for and launched the [Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair Act](#) in 2019, which bars discrimination against race-based hairstyles. It addresses hair texture and styles such as braids, locs, twists, and knots in the workplace and public schools. Analise Harris, a Denver, Colorado, educator and founder of the nonprofit Curles on the Block and the Miss Curly Self-eSTEAM pageant, is excited about the CROWN Act in her state. Colorado was the fifth state to pass the law. She remembers when, as a young teacher, the head of school laughed and compared her to Mickey Mouse because of the way she wore her hair.

“(This) is a global issue; however, nationally, we can take charge and be a leader in the efforts to normalize, appreciate and respect Black existence and aesthetic,” Harris said. She believes the bill marks a new chapter for Coloradans, as organizations like the Denver Board of Education are examining how their policies affect students of color.

Community advocate Ashlei Spivey co-founded I Be Black Girl in North Omaha, Nebraska. The organization — which focuses on issues affecting Black women, femmes (people who identify as female) and girls — is helping lead the charge for the passage of the CROWN Act, which Gov. Pete Ricketts vetoed earlier this year. Spivey, who is working closely with The CROWN Coalition, said local organizers will regroup and continue to push for change. “In general, it’s a step towards recognizing and reconciling racial equity in our policies and practices,” Spivey said. “Any time that you center Black women and girls in economic policies and initiatives, there is a ripple effect that benefits everyone that has experienced discrimination. Regardless of whether people are working from home or in a building, it is important to create spaces where there is no discrimination.”

In addition to California and Colorado, the CROWN Act or similar legislation is now law in New York, New Jersey, Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, Connecticut, Oregon, Nevada, Nebraska, New Mexico, Illinois and Washington. Support for the legislation is growing, as South Carolina, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Massachusetts have proposed

legislation to address hairstyle discrimination. As America attempts to combat adverse effects of systemic racism, the bill offers another layer of protection against workplace biases toward employees of color.

In September 2020, the CROWN Act advanced one step closer to becoming federal law. The House of Representatives passed [H.R. 5309](#) and a similar bill was introduced in the Senate. For professionals like former Lafayette, Louisiana, television reporter Allison Bourne-Vanneck, federal legislation signifies progress.

“During my first interview in the journalism field, I was told that women reporters wear their hair straight. For the CROWN Act to become federal law means we are finally moving in a direction that embraces the fullness of our cultural diversity as a people,” Bourne-Vanneck said.