

COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

Office of At-Large Councilmember Kwame R. Brown

Chairperson, Committee on Economic Development

PRESS RELEASE

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Brown Introduces Zero Tolerance, Anti-Hate Crimes Bill

Bill makes displaying a Noose for intimidation on public or private property a crime

(Washington, DC) – Today, At-Large Councilmember Kwame R. Brown, Chair of the Committee on Economic Development, introduced legislation that would make it a criminal offense to display a noose on any private or public property in the District if the intent of the action is to deprive equal protection of the law, injure someone, to intimidate a person exercising a federal right or to cause fear of personal safety. On January 22, 2008, four African-American electricians working to build the new Nationals' ballpark discovered a noose in a break room used by employees of Truland Systems Corporation.

“All persons regardless of their ethnic or religious background deserve to work in an environment that is free of discrimination and intimidation,” Brown emphasized. “Due to the tragic history of how nooses were used in America, it has since become a symbol of hatred and a tool for spreading fear. It has even been used to threaten innocent people to prevent them from exercising their constitutional rights. Internationally, the Nazi swastika is recognized as a symbol of discrimination and intimidation. Rightfully, the District has a zero tolerance law against displaying a swastika or a burning cross. Now, in light of recent events, we must make it clear that zero tolerance extends to the use of a noose.”

Last week, Councilmember Brown held a Public Oversight Roundtable on the noose incident. The four workers who discovered the noose testified at the roundtable. Brown commended them for their courage and thanked them for their moving testimony. Following the roundtable, Brown pursued legislation that would help deter people from using a noose to spread fear.

Unfortunately, the discovery of a noose at the ballpark is not the only incident to have occurred in America. According to a study performed by the Department of Justice in 2005, hate crimes have risen to more than 190,000 incidents per year in the United States. The study also observed that the number of hate groups has dramatically increased to 40% in recent years, from 602 groups in 2000 to 844 in 2006. More specifically, statistics show that there is a rise in incidents around the country of noose hangings. In the past decade, about a dozen noose incidents were reported to civil rights groups. Since the Jena 6 rally took place at Freedom Plaza in our Nation's capital on September 20, 2007 in protest of the racially driven prosecution of six black boys, noose incidents in this country has climbed to 50 to 60, according to The New York Times.

At the roundtable, Robert Truland, Chairman and CEO of Truland Systems Corporation, publicly apologized to the employees. All of the employees involved in the incident have worked for Truland. Brown also received a commitment from Truland, the DC Sports and Entertainment Commission, and the master developer Clark/Hunt/Smoot that they would work together to develop a comprehensive anti-discrimination policy that goes beyond sensitivity training by March 1, 2008.

Brown has been working steadily to ensure there is fairness in the workplace at the ballpark. In October of last year, he attended a meeting of the Gertrude Stein Democratic Club. At the meeting, it was brought to Brown's attention that the Washington Nationals' non-discrimination policy for the team's Vendor Procurement Program did not specifically include all protected classes covered by the DC Human Rights Act. In particular, the Stein Club expressed concern that LGBT protections such as sexual orientation and gender identity or expression were not included.

As a result of his meeting at the Stein Club, Councilmember Brown contacted the Nationals' leadership as part of his oversight function as Chair of the Committee on Economic Development. He inquired about the team's non-discrimination policy and urged the team to work with the community to clarify its policy. Since that time, the Nationals have redrafted their policy by working with Brown's office, DC Human Rights Director Gustavo Velasquez and community leaders.

The DC Human Rights Act was originally passed in 1977 and was most recently amended in March of 2007. The intent of the Act is to end discrimination “by reason of race, color, religion, national origin, sex, age, marital status, personal appearance, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression...” and other protected classes. There are 19 protected classes in all and the Act is considered one of the most inclusive in the country.

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