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Testimony of Chanel C. Johnson, Executive Director

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Written Testimony Submitted to the House Committee on Natural Resources

Subcommittee on Federal Lands

Legislative Hearing on HR H.R. 9269, “Renewing the African American Civil Rights Network Act”

Good morning Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and members of the subcommittee:

My name is Chanel Compton Johnson, and I serve as the Executive Director of the Maryland Commission on African American History and Culture and the Banneker-Douglass-Tubman Museum.

I am honored to testify in support of H.R. 9269, Renewing the African American Civil Rights Network Act, which would reauthorize this critically important National Park Service program - the African American Civil Rights Network – for another ten years.

I applaud Congressman James Clyburn and Congressman Mike Carey for their leadership in introducing this legislation, which is strongly bipartisan and which has also been introduced in the Senate with bipartisan support.

The African American Civil Rights Network Act was first passed into law, again in bipartisan fashion, at the end of 2017 and signed into law by President Trump in January, 2018.

As you know, the African American civil rights movement was a national movement that spanned across the country and across several decades. And as we reflect on America 250, it is unquestionably one of the most pivotal and defining parts of our shared history in America.

The African American civil rights movement expanded civil liberties for all in this country and on all fronts. Let's just pause for a moment to consider just what this movement accomplished. Ending legalized segregation. Outlawing Jim Crow. Integrating our schools AND universities. Expanding voting rights and fair housing.

It is just remarkable to think about the transformational changes in our nation that inspired the world and has led to the advancement of civil rights for so many other important causes such as women's rights, LGBTQ rights, and disability rights.

Congress's purpose in creating the network was to connect together the countless places, stories, and events that represent the African American civil rights movement. Each place, whether it is a historical site or museum or research center, is an opportunity to preserve and celebrate civil rights history, an opportunity to educate and engage the public, and an opportunity to boost local tourism, which is a real highlight of this program.

A small number of these network members are formally included as units of the National Park System. Places like Medgar and Myrlie Evers Home National Monument in Mississippi, and Brown v. Board of Education National Historical Park in Kansas.

But the most important part about this program is that the vast majority of sites across the country are not managed by the National Park Service. Instead, they are local sites and museums that share local history. Places like Lincolnville, South Carolina, Buffalo Soldiers National Museum in Houston Texas, and my personal favorite, the Banneker-Douglas-Tubman Museum in Annapolis, Maryland.

The beauty of this program is that through membership in the African American Civil Rights Network, it helps to elevate these local sites and museums to the national level while maintaining local management and ownership. Today, there are more than 200 members of the network, with so much potential to continue to grow.

I want to share a bit about the Banneker-Douglass-Tubman Museum and why I value our membership in the network.

We are the State of Maryland's official museum of African American heritage, located in Annapolis, once a major slave port, and later a center of abolitionism and civil rights activity in our state capital.

Our home is the former Mt. Moriah AME Church, built in 1875, nearly a decade after the emancipation proclamation was signed. The NAACP convened here. Everyday citizens organized here for equal rights, and later fought to preserve this building as a museum and library.

Today we document, interpret, and promote African American history and culture for this generation and the next. We tell our state's story of the civil rights movement through Marylanders such as Thurgood Marshall, Pauli Murray, Parren Mitchell, Lillie Carroll Jackson, Verda Freeman Welcome and Gloria Richardson.

Like our museum, the 200 plus members of the African American Civil Rights Network are contributing to local economies through tourism. And we are contributing to educating the public and our young people about why the Civil Rights movement was so important, not just for African Americans but for all Americans. And we are not only preserving history, we are also building on that history through research so that we can tell a complete story about this history.

That's why reauthorizing this program is so important. There are so many additional places that are eager to join the network, so many opportunities to build on this legacy. To expand the preservation, education, and local tourism opportunities.

And this is the year to do it. As we celebrate our 250th anniversary, what better way to honor those self-evident truths of our Declaration of Independence – that we are all created equal and endowed with unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That is why we MUST continue the African American Civil Rights Network by passing this legislation.

Thank you for considering my testimony.