

Black History Month Speech

- Thank you Madam Speaker, I rise today to celebrate and commemorate Black History Month along with my fellow Black Caucus members.
- As we look back on so many remarkable Black women in history, one common thread that strikes me is that so many have fought to lift up voices of those getting left behind.
- So as we recognize our past and those who came before us and fought for justice and equity and equality, I also want to take a moment to talk about our present and future.
- There are so many Black women from our Commonwealth we should be honoring this month, but whose names and stories we'll never know. Because for so many Black women, our country's legacy of systematic racism has been dangerous and at points deadly.
- And especially during COVID-19, we've seen this impact our community. Black women have been in the crosshairs of COVID-19 from the very beginning. And this pandemic has only exacerbated existing inequities.
- Black women were already underpaid upwards of \$50 billion every year *before COVID*, and we were more likely to die from undiagnosed health conditions and in childbirth than our white counterparts

- Now we are unsurprisingly bearing the brunt of this crisis. Black women are on the frontlines of this pandemic at work and at home.
- We women are more likely to work as essential, frontline workers. We are twice as likely to have been laid off, furloughed, or have had wages reduced during this pandemic.
- And we are more likely to get sick, be hospitalized, and die from COVID-19.
- We are also more likely to be caretakers for both our elderly parents and children who are learning from home.
- Before the pandemic, we were facing a crisis. Now we are facing a national emergency.
- As Vice President Harris said recently, “Job loss, small business closings and a lack of child care have created a perfect storm for women workers.”
- I know the struggles that so many Black women across the Commonwealth are facing because I’ve lived them too.
- When my first child was born, I worked at a gas station and had no health insurance.

- For a long time, I didn't know how I was going to make a dollar out of 2 nickels and a dime, and I didn't think I was going to live because of my early childhood tragedy - losing my father to gun violence at such an early age.
- It set the stage for my life expectancy that I had for myself. Raising my son with no protections and very little money worried me.
- If I were to die, if I didn't have health insurance for me or my family, who would care for my son?
- I was frightened.
- If you ever felt alone--looking up, hoping that you would break through--looking for the light at the end of the tunnel because no one was speaking up for me or individuals like me, you can understand how you would have a dim hope for the future.
- But my miracle, the opportunity to be able to rise through these very storms of my life isn't the rule, it's the exception.
- These rules that have historically surrounded my community and put us at a systematic disadvantage have to change. Fights like mine for health care, housing, fair wages and opportunity are far too common for many Black women in our Commonwealth.

- But here in this body, we are making changes to address these issues. This year we've passed an historic budget and progressive legislation to ensure that our Commonwealth comes out of this crisis stronger and more equitable.
- We've passed legislation like a workgroup for a Fetal and Infant Mortality Review Team to examine racial disparities, and worked to strengthen wage protections for our workers that will support Black women more than ever before.
- We must continue this progress and to invest in these programs that will help our community the most, including increasing funding for Women and Minority-Owned Small Business micro-loans, establishing a paid Family and Medical Leave program, expanding access to preschool for every Virginian, and addressing the stark racial disparities when it comes to maternal and fetal mortality.
- I know that our House will continue to do the work to build a better Virginia, and I hope that as we celebrate Black History Month during this crisis, we continue to support Black women who were hurting before the crisis and are devastated during COVID.
- I see you, we see you, and we are going to keep fighting for you every day.