

Massachusetts House approves Juneteenth as a state holiday

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Juneteenth is a step closer to becoming a state holiday in Massachusetts after the House on Wednesday agreed to mark June 19 as Juneteenth Independence Day.

The holiday took place last Friday and residents across the state took the streets in large numbers to peacefully celebrate the occasion against a backdrop of nationwide protests against police violence and systemic racism. State officials, including Gov. Charlie Baker, have filed police reform bills they hope to pass before the end of session on July 31.

Rep. Bud Williams of Springfield filed Juneteenth amendment and called its addition to a COVID-19 spending bill a “big step” during a speech during Wednesday’s House session.

“This a real important day,” he said. “We filed this in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter. In terms of making this state holiday, it will go a long way in bridging the racial gap between individuals.”

Juneteenth is a celebration of the day when enslaved African Americans in Texas were told they were free, more than two years after President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Several bills were filed in the House and Senate last week that would make it an official state holiday in Massachusetts.

The Senate still needs to act on the Juneteenth proposal and leaders in that branch have indicated support for making the day a state holiday.

Williams said the discussion around making Juneteenth a state holiday started two weeks ago during a weekend phone call with Rep. Mindy Domb (D-Amherst). Domb offered the idea and then Sens. Jo Comerford and Sonia Chang-Diaz and Reps. Maria Robinson and Chynah Tyler became involved in the effort, Williams said.

"Certainly, we've tried this many, many times. And this is part of Black history. And you can't talk about the American history without talking about Black history," he said. "And most individuals in the Commonwealth have no idea what Black history is."

Tyler said she grew up attending an annual Juneteenth celebration in Boston's Franklin Park in honor of the continued fight for freedom of African Americans.

"Today, we are making a tremendous pivot and truly delivering freedom to the African Americans with this amendment," she said at Wednesday's session. "Although this is the beginning of the road, I'm committed to helping us as a team deliver a more equitable Commonwealth for African Americans."

House Speaker Robert DeLeo threw his support behind the amendment on Monday.

"#Juneteenth reminds us of the most painful parts of America's history and shows us that while progress is possible, we have much more to do," he said in a Tweet. "Proud to sign on to Rep. Williams' Amendment #81 to make Juneteenth a state holiday."

Gov. Charlie Baker issued a Juneteenth proclamation Friday, and said he looks forward "to working with our legislative colleagues to recognize this important day more widely going forward."

Asked about the the holiday bills during a press conference last Friday, Baker said he "would look forward to working with

the Legislature to come up with an approach to this that puts a much finer emphasis and a bigger point on Juneteenth."