

Massachusetts legislators push to make Juneteenth an official state holiday

By Katie Lannan

State House News Service

A pair of bills filed in the House and Senate this week would make Juneteenth an official state holiday in Massachusetts, a step that's already been taken in other states.

The lawmakers who filed the bills here said in a press release that they did so "on behalf of their constituents and in solidarity with the Movement for Black Lives."

Juneteenth marks the day – June 19, 1865 – that enslaved African Americans in Texas received word they were free, more than two years after President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation.

This year, the holiday arrives amid a string of national protests against police violence and systemic racism, spurred by recent killings of Black Americans, including George Floyd, an unarmed man who died in Minneapolis police custody with an officer's knee on his neck.

Massachusetts law currently calls for the governor to issue an annual Juneteenth proclamation and for the day to be observed on the closest Sunday to June 19th "in recognition of June 19, 1865 when Union General Gordon Granger announced freedom for all slaves in the Southwestern United States and in recognition of the end of slavery in the United States as well as the significant contributions, individuals of African decent have made to the commonwealth and to the United States."

In a statement accompanying his proclamation Friday, Gov. Charlie Baker said he looks forward “to working with our legislative colleagues to recognize this important day more widely going forward.”

Asked about the bills during his afternoon press conference, 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.”

The bills (HD 5141, SD 2975) were filed in the House by Reps. Maria Robinson, Bud Williams, Mindy Domb and Chynah Tyler, and in the Senate by Sens. Brendan Crighton, Sonia Chang-Diaz and Jo Comerford.

Tyler said that “as an African-American woman who happens to hold an elected seat,” she was “proud to offer up this bill in efforts to unlock access to freedom alongside my colleagues.”

“The need to establish Juneteenth as a state holiday is aligned with the Black Lives Matter Movement and is a step in the right direction,” she said in a statement. “African Americans fought valiantly in every war since the Civil War, yet have not been granted access to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Because Black lives matter, we must honor all African Americans who sacrificed their lives for this very cause and set the tone for the future generations to live without fear of being unlawfully detained or harmed without equitable due process.”

Most states recognize Juneteenth in some way, and a handful have taken steps this week toward making it an official holiday.

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo on Wednesday issued an executive order making the day a holiday for state employees, and said he would “advance legislation to make Juneteenth an official state holiday next year.” Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam also gave state workers the day off and announced plans to make it

a permanent holiday. Oregon Gov. Kate Brown plans to introduce a bill in her state.

U.S. Sen Markey and fellow Democrat Sens. Tina Smith of Minnesota, Cory Booker of New Jersey and Kamala Harris of California announced Friday they would file legislation to make Juneteenth a federal holiday. Their bill, according to Markey's office, "would also establish a Juneteenth Federal Holiday Commission to encourage appropriate ceremonies and activities throughout the United States."