

Testimony of Rashad Robinson, Executive Director, ColorOfChange

Thank you to Sen. Daniel Squadron and his colleagues in the state legislature for inviting my testimony today. Given the ColorOfChange community's leadership in the push to get corporations to stop financing the American Legislative Exchange Council, we have important insights to share as you investigate whether ALEC's activities constitute lobbying here in New York.

ColorOfChange is the nation's largest online civil rights organization. We are a community of more than 800,000 people, and our organization uses the power of the Internet to make government and corporations more responsive to the concerns of Black Americans and our allies.

Late last year, we became aware of the connection between ALEC and the discriminatory voter ID bills that have appeared in statehouses across the country in recent years. These bills -- some of which allow people to use their gun license but not their student ID to vote -- have the potential to disenfranchise as many as 5 million eligible voters in the upcoming election. Specifically, these laws make it harder for marginalized populations — including African Americans, Latinos, the elderly and low-income Americans — to vote.

The ColorOfChange community was particularly concerned about these voter ID bills' potential to suppress the Black vote, and we launched a campaign calling on corporations that fund ALEC to cut ties with the group. Our members believe that these companies can't in good conscience market products to Black communities while at the same time handing over customers' dollars to a shadowy DC puppet-master that has worked to keep Black voters away from the polls.

To date, 19 companies -- including Wal-Mart, McDonald's, PepsiCo and Amazon -- have shown that they agree. Just yesterday, pharmaceutical giant Johnson & Johnson announced that it will no longer fund ALEC. Since we launched our campaign in late December, these companies have announced that they will end their membership in the organization. Corporations come to this conclusion after learning that tens or thousands of concerned citizens have signed our petition calling on them to drop ALEC, and in some cases after hearing from hundreds of our members who place calls to corporate headquarters to express their concern.

ALEC undermines the democratic process by promoting corporate interests. It unites corporations with state legislators — primarily Republican — to push policies that benefit business interests at the expense of people of color, workers and the environment. ALEC crafts model legislation out of public view and behind closed doors. Member legislators then introduce these prefabricated bills in state legislatures across the country. In addition to the voter ID laws, other bills covered with ALEC's fingerprints include so-called "stand your ground" laws, including the one in Florida that some have used to justify the ability of Trayvon Martin's killer to evade arrest for more than a month. Other ALEC-crafted laws impose harsher criminal penalties on juveniles and break unions that protect employees.

As citizens, we participate in democracy by going to the polls, contacting our elected officials and organizing to make our voices heard. When our laws are crafted by unelected entities and negotiated through backroom deals, the democratic process breaks down and the power of

citizens wanes. In the past few months, 19 companies -- including some corporate giants -- have ended their relationships with ALEC. These companies understand that putting the interests of their customers first is critical to their long-term success.

ALEC's power has been that for decades it was able to function in the dark. In the past six months, the ColorOfChange community and members of allied organizations have begun to change this by shining a spotlight on the corporations that have financed the group's efforts to weaken our democracy. Hundreds of thousands of people are standing up to tell companies they can't take our money with one hand and attack our rights with the other. As citizens and consumers, it is our right to use our voices and wallets to tell the companies we patronize that they are accountable to us, the people who allow them to thrive and remain profitable.

I commend Sen. Squadron and other members of the legislature who are also shining that spotlight on ALEC and working to get to the bottom of its involvement here in New York State. Thank you.

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