



City of Philadelphia

City Council
Chief Clerk's Office
402 City Hall
Philadelphia, PA 19107

Legislation Text

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Celebrating the Life and Legacy of Philadelphia Urban League CEO and Executive Director Robert W. Sorrell.

WHEREAS, Robert W. Sorrell was born June 14, 1943, in Detroit, Michigan, to his parents, Josephine and James Sorrell. Bob attended Benedict College in Columbia, South Carolina, where he earned his Bachelor of Science Degree, became a member of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, and was a member of the college's NAIA National Scoring Championship Basketball Team. Bob subsequently received his Master's Degree from the H. John Heinz School of Public Policy and Management at Carnegie Mellon University, in Pittsburgh, PA; and

WHEREAS, Bob began his career as a mathematics teacher and basketball coach, at the secondary level, in the Cleveland Ohio public school system. This effort was followed by a storied career in non-profit executive leadership, corporate diversity and inclusion consultancy, corporate governance and philanthropy; and

WHEREAS, In 1978, after serving for five years as Deputy Executive Director at the Urban League of Pittsburgh, Bob was named President and CEO of the Urban League of Philadelphia, where he remained until 2002. Bob strengthened the League's programming in housing, education, leadership training and economic self-sufficiency. Bob developed and piloted the first citywide, subsidized, centralized childcare administrative program, which served over 4,000 families and provided \$14 million for subsidized childcare, a program that was expanded statewide. He also established the first *State of Black Philadelphia Report*, an annual assessment that provided findings and solutions to key urban issues in the City; and

WHEREAS, In 1988, Sorrell established the Philadelphia Urban League's first Leadership Institute, now called the Urban Leadership Forum, for Black, Hispanic and Asian candidates selected by their employers as individuals with high leadership potential in public and private sectors. Since its inception, the program has provided a vital leadership training experience to more than 500 graduates; and

WHEREAS, Under Bob's leadership, the Philadelphia Urban League also created the Urban League's first Young Professionals organization, a volunteer auxiliary of young college graduates, which has been replicated throughout 40 cities across the nation. Bob also supported what was, at that time, the strongest volunteer auxiliary in the League movement, the Urban League Guild of Philadelphia; and

WHEREAS, After retiring from the Urban League of Philadelphia, Bob started his own business, R. W. Sorrell Enterprises, LLC, specializing in diversity and fundraising consultation. In 2006, he created the Robert W. Sorrell Scholarship Fund, providing four-year college scholarships to students in addition to a paid summer internship through a partnership with Independence Blue Cross. Because Bob Sorrell conceived the scholarship program, it was no surprise that a primary selection criterion for recipients, in addition to their academic track records, was an analysis of their involvement in community-based activities; and

WHEREAS, The Fund has provided scholarship support and facilitated internship work experiences for 27 recipients to date. The Scholarship Fund's mission is to further the education of minority and poor children and the underserved, a mission Bob Sorrell held dear to his heart until the very end; and

WHEREAS, Bob was a natural story-teller who loved to tell jokes, and was widely known for telling the same jokes on numerous occasions. In fact, many in his audiences had heard his jokes so many times that they would deliver the punchline, in unison with Bob, during his speeches. For example, one of his most well-known expressions was: “How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time;” and

WHEREAS, Such light-hearted comments demonstrated Bob’s approach to equal opportunity, housing and economic issues, and his oft-repeated mantra of “having fun with a serious purpose.” Indeed, Bob was known for tackling issues that seemed insurmountable, by taking small, methodical steps to accomplish great objectives. Those who knew Bob clearly understood that serving the underserved, and bettering the lives of African Americans and other minorities, was the primary passion of his life; and

WHEREAS, Bob will be remembered as a compassionate and outspoken leader, who delivered wise and sage advice to those seeking his counsel, including corporate leaders, educators, elected officials, other community-based leaders and members of his exceptional national network within the National Urban League family; and

WHEREAS, Bob loved the Urban League Movement and the family of staff and volunteers who worked daily to deliver on its mission. It was largely through his love of the organization and his dedication to its mission that he was able to help so many people and accomplish all he did over the course of his life; and

WHEREAS, Bob passed away on Tuesday, August 27, 2019. He leaves to mourn him his loving 38-year life companion, Jean Taylor; his son, Rodric Sorrell; four grandchildren, Angel, Aniah, Rodric, Jr., and AuBrey Sorrell; a sister, Renee B. Sorrell; a niece, Renee S. Sorrell; his former spouse, Choicie Sorrell; and a host of cousins, great nieces, nephews and friends; now, therefore be it

RESOLVED, BY THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, That we hereby celebrate Robert W. Sorrell’s life and legacy to the City of Philadelphia.