

Testimony of Andrew Norton
Executive and Legislative Nominations Committee
March 10, 2009

Chairman Looney, Chairwoman Janowski, Senator McKinney, Representative Piscopo and distinguished members of the Executive and Legislative Nominations Committee, good afternoon. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I also want to extend my thanks to Minority Leader Larry Cafero for placing his confidence in me with this nomination to the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities or CHRO. I have enjoyed the service I have been able to offer the Commission in the past and look forward to continuing my involvement in Connecticut's fight against discrimination.

For the last several years I have been able to observe firsthand the commitment of my fellow Commissioners and the nearly 100 staff at CHRO to ending the negative effects of prejudice in employment, housing and public accommodation. It is an ongoing struggle and Connecticut is fortunate to have so many qualified people dedicated to this work.

First and foremost, the people of Connecticut have CHRO to turn to if they have experienced discrimination. And thousands do just that. Some complaints are brought concerning public accommodation; many more are brought in the area of housing and the agency has a unit dedicated to housing complaints. The preponderance of investigations we do, in fact, involve discrimination in the workplace. People of all backgrounds, all races, all ages, male and female, knock on our door every day to seek justice. We are there to help them. And while we continue to strive to move cases along more efficiently, we are still a quicker, simpler and less expensive alternative to the courts, which is what we are meant to be.

The agency's other focus is the monitoring and enforcement of the state's own goals in affirmative action and contract compliance. In these arenas, where the state itself, directly or indirectly, is the employer, we, or rather, more accurately, you, the legislature, have set higher and more demanding standards and goals. Each year, CHRO staff review the Affirmative Action Plans of every agency with more than 25 employees - those smaller are reviewed every two years - effectively monitoring the hiring and affirmative policies for an organization of

50,000 people. CHRO's oversight ensures that all Connecticut agencies are doing their best to hire people from groups that are underrepresented in government employment. In our Contract Compliance work, we hope to also ensure that same outcome in companies that, indirectly, work for the Connecticut taxpayer as well.

Our charge and mission, of course, only address some of our society's problems in this area. There is much other important work that needs doing. Making sure all of our state's children stay out of prison, finish high school or college and successfully set a career path is the all-important groundwork that is needed before a person would generally have recourse to our services. All that you can do and we can do in pursuit of these aims is perhaps more important, but, in any case, equally so.

I know, everyone knows, that we are in difficult economic times. Over the next two years, at least, we will all be working with fewer resources in both our private and our public lives. We at CHRO understand this. We are doing our best right now to maintain a high level of service under straitened circumstances. We also understand that we may be called upon to provide for our constituency with even fewer resources in the future. I want to promise this committee and your colleagues in both chambers that my fellow Commissioners and I are committed to continuing CHRO's historic commitment to helping those who need us. I believe that we Commission members can effectively apply our talents, intelligence and energy to whatever situation confronts us. We are the nation's oldest state anti-discrimination agency and have weathered difficult times before. We shall again.

Thank you for your time and attention. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.