

Testimony to the Executive and Legislative Nominations Committee  
Edith Pestana, Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities  
February 11, 2010

Good Afternoon Senator Looney, Representative Janowski and distinguished members of the Executive and Legislative Nominations Committee. My name is Edith Pestana and I served on the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities from 1998 to 2006. I am honored to be nominated by Governor Rell for a new appointment, and pleased to appear before you today.

I received my BA and MS in Geology from Rutgers University. During this time I tutored and taught problem solving courses to students from inner city schools with academic deficiencies in the sciences and math. I was also a science docent at the Newark Museum for inner city children and persons with mental disabilities. I moved to Houston, Texas in the mid 1980's and worked in environmental consulting traveling extensively across the country where I first became aware of the environmental inequities in lower socioeconomic and minority communities.

In 1988, I moved to Connecticut and subsequently received a MPH from Yale Medical School. In 1990, I began working at the Connecticut Department of Public Health as an epidemiologist where I was responsible for investigating the potential for human exposures to toxic chemicals as they relate to the incidence of cancer and other diseases. I also provided support to the Lead Poisoning Prevention Program and reviewed and provided comments on the State's Lead Poisoning Prevention Regulations. In 1994, I collaborated with the New Haven Health Department in the identification of a new street drug that was being marketed to adolescents in New Haven and was thought to be the cause of death of a twelve-year-old boy. The identification led to a statewide emergency room advisory of the drug in collaboration with the State Department of Emergency Medicine.

During my employment at DPH I became interested in the environmental justice movement and the health disparities of racial and ethnic minority groups in Connecticut and in the US. In 1993 the Department of Environmental Protection invited me to join a workgroup to discuss the environmental justice issue.

Since 1994, I have been with the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection as the first Administrator of the Environmental Justice Program. In this capacity I developed, planned and implemented the oldest continuous environmental justice program in the country. The agency's policy states "no segment of the population should, because of its racial or economic makeup bear a disproportionate share of the risks and consequences of environmental pollution or be denied equal access to environmental benefits." The program's responsibilities include, collaborating with health and enforcement agencies to

investigate and remediate environmental health complaints resulting from possible exposures to asbestos, lead paint, sewage, air pollution, waste sites etc. The Environmental Justice Program was one of five state programs to be awarded a national environmental justice grant from the USEPA of \$100,000. This grant enabled us to develop a curriculum for the public on our permitting program and provide small grants to community organizations to provide recommendations on how to improve our notification process. This project led to collaboration with leaders in the environmental justice communities and the subsequent passing of Public Act No. 08-94, An Act Concerning Environmental Justice Communities and the Storage of Asbestos-Containing Material in 2008.

The program has also collaborated with the Yale Peabody Museum in celebrating Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Legacy of Environmental and Social Justice for 14 years. This free family celebration of environmental and civil rights is held on the weekend of Martin Luther King's birthday and attracts over 4,500 participants.

I have served on several advisory boards and committees, including; the Environment and Housing subcommittee for the Connecticut Lead Poisoning Elimination Task Force; Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation, the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities (from 1999 to 2006); and Yale Medical School's, Adopt-A-Doc Program, a pediatric residency training program designed to enhance the quality of culturally effective care.

I appreciate your attention and welcome the opportunity to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you.