

#7

Good evening **Senator Harp, Representative Walker** and all of the members of the committee. My name is Cheryl Sharp, and I have been a Civil Rights Attorney with the State of Connecticut Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities for the past 18 years. I am currently a union steward for the P-2 bargaining unit of AFSCME. I am here in support of the CHRO.

The CHRO is a watchdog agency established in 1943, and is the oldest state Civil Rights Agency in the nation and, further, has served as a model for other states seeking to develop Civil Rights Agencies.

Governor Dannel Malloy expressed that he does not want to leave any federal dollars on the table. In 2010, the CHRO lost **\$163,000** of federal funding because of extreme staff reductions that occurred during the last Administration. The CHRO was stripped into its core. In 2008, the CHRO had a staff of 103. Today, there is a staff of 73 and our statutory responsibilities continue to increase while staff decreases. The CHRO has repeatedly requested refill of its lost positions but has been constantly denied. The current staff levels dramatically hinder our ability to efficiently process cases. With the reduction of staff, last year the CHRO was unable to complete its contracted number of EEOC cases, which resulted in a loss of federal funding.

The mission of the CHRO is to eliminate discrimination through enforcement, advocacy and education. The CHRO receives, investigates, prosecutes and adjudicates thousands of complaints of discrimination in employment, housing, credit and public accommodation each year. The CHRO also monitors state contracting to ensure that Connecticut's small businesses, businesses owned by individuals with disabilities, and women and minority owned businesses receive a fair share of the state's contracting dollars. The CHRO reviews the affirmative action plans of all other state agencies. Additionally, the CHRO is in your communities holding informational sessions or town hall style meetings throughout the state to educate the public about their civil rights, promote equality and eliminate discrimination. CHRO staff educate various community groups and government agencies about discrimination and regularly participate on panels about discrimination and civil rights. CHRO partners with other state agencies and legislative commissions to provide diversity, equal employment opportunity and sexual harassment and diversity training to Affirmative Action Officers, public and private businesses and schools throughout the state. The CHRO has representatives serving on the CT Safe Schools Coalition, the Civil Rights Conference with the U.S. Department of Justice, the Fair Housing Association of CT, CELA, NELA, the American Association for Affirmative Action and the Child Poverty & Prevention Counsel. All of these functions are vital and are being performed by a staff of **73 people**. Nonetheless, it is imperative that we maintain the integrity of our process by continuing to perform all of the functions we are statutorily required to perform, even though short staffed. We need to continue to house all non-discrimination oversight and enforcement

functions within the CHRO including affirmative action--to retain the integrity and consistency in the enforcement and interpretation of the law.

Alarming, the state is in danger of leaving additional federal dollars on the table this coming year if the CHRO is not supported and funds are not appropriated to allow the CHRO to fill investigator positions. Without a sufficient number of investigators to perform case processing, cases languish and a back log is created, which endangers the state's receipt of federal dollars. The CHRO currently receives **1.3 million dollars** of federal funding each year for case processing. That number will be drastically reduced if positions at the CHRO are not funded. We must have staff investigators to process cases, attorneys to prosecute cases and Referees to adjudicate cases, support staff to perform paralegal functions and to prepare reports for our Federal equivalents EEOC and HUD, and the legislature and the governor; and an IT person to make the CHRO technologically stable.

We must maintain the integrity of the CHRO's process. The CHRO provides essential services that the state, and your constituents cannot afford to do without. The CHRO is being proactive--proposing legislation that will expedite the complaint process and we need the legislative support to make the proposal a reality and to ensure we do not lose anymore federal funding.

The mission of the CHRO has to be as important to each legislator as it is to each of his or her affected constituents--equality, civil rights and equal opportunity are woven into the fabric of our great state, and we must maintain our position as a pioneer in civil rights with a progressive government that supports the needs of its people. The CHRO needs the support of and cooperation from the Governor's Office and the legislature in order to continue its vital task of rooting out illegal discrimination and making Connecticut the model for diversity and equality. To that end, I would implore you to fully fund the CHRO and appropriate funds that would allow the Agency to fulfill its mission. Thank you.