Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities

Testimony to the Judiciary Committee
Thursday, March 29, 2012

SB 455, AN ACT CONCERNING THE COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Senator Coleman, Representative Fox and member of the Judiciary Committee I am Bob Brothers executive director of the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities. Thank you for the opportunity to address SB 455, AN ACT CONCERNING THE COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES.

We **SUPPORT** SB 455. This bill contains CHRO's legislative initiatives for 2012 along with an addition made by the Judiciary Committee which eliminates the exemptions for municipalities under the state set-aside program. Attached to your copy of my statement is a section by section summary of the bill.

I want to address four areas specifically.

In Section 3, we have proposed reducing the number of hours of training required of Commissioners from an initial ten to five and reducing ongoing education from five to three annually. Commissioners, past and present, unanimously agree that the training requirements are difficult to complete. I do not know of another state board of unpaid volunteers who are required to do training.

Section 8 would add veterans as a protected class under CHRO statutes. We are making this proposal with Commissioner Linda Schwartz of the Department of Veteran Affairs. Those who have served since the outbreak of hostilities on September 11, 2001 have faced many hardships. Repeated deployments have broken up families, caused careers and businesses to fail, resulted in financial issues including foreclosures and bankruptcies. Now as these veterans try to assimilate back into our economy they are being denied employment opportunities because of concerns about whether they will be called up again, whether they are potentially a danger due to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder commonly referred to as PTSD, and other reasons the Department of Veteran Affairs can better address.

We urge you to give this proposal particular attention given that veterans face unemployment rates as high as 30% and among minority women who once expected the military to be their career in excess of 50%.

Third I would draw your attention to Sections 6 and 7 of this bill. This idea came about as the result of discussions with the Department of Economic and Community Development. As addressed in Section 7, DECD expressed concern that contractors still had to provide additional proof of their good faith efforts even though they had already fulfilled their statutory minority set-aside requirements. As a trade-off for the reducing the bureaucratic burdens DECD suggested that the withholding provisions found in Section 6 be increased from 2%. We set it at 5% so that we would have a truly effective enforcement mechanism against those who had not fulfilled their duty under the law.

Although we had discussions some time ago with DECD about the changes we are proposing in Sections 6 and 7 we are unable to inform you whether DECD supports these changes or not at this time.

Lastly, the municipal set-aside exemption has long denied opportunities for the growth of women and minority owned businesses. We strongly support the proposed repeal of this exemption. The millions of dollars spent by municipalities especially for school construction will offer minority owned businesses a fair chance to grow and thrive. We believe this can be done with a minimum of impact on municipalities. We further believe that this will have a minimal fiscal impact on municipalities, certainly nothing compared to the benefits that would come to Connecticut women and minority businesses.

I will warn, however, that the repeal of this exemption will be meaningless if the $1 million appropriated in FY 12 and 13 for a statewide disparity study is cut or eliminated. A disparity study has not been done in over twenty-five years and is the only really meaningful way to ensure that minority and woman owned businesses get fair and equal treatment.

Until Governor Malloy came into office CHRO had not been allowed by the Rell OPM to fill any positions since 2008. With the new administration we have just recently hired an administrative assistant and have two offers of employment pending for investigator positions. Also attached is a copy of the present and pending staffing levels of CHRO. As you can see we are well below the intended 80 positions the legislature has authorized, which is the primary reason complaints take so long to process. It also means that we currently do not have sufficient staff to implement and monitor the set-aside provisions of municipalities if the exemption was to be repealed.

Thank you for your attention and consideration. I am pleased to answer any questions you may have.