



**TESTIMONY OF STAFF ATTORNEY PAMELA A. HELLER REGARDING THE
COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES: DISCRIMINATION
COMPLAINT PROCESSING STUDY**

Good morning Senator Fonfara, Representative Carpino, and distinguished members of the Committee. I am testifying today on behalf of the Connecticut Fair Housing Center, a statewide nonprofit dedicated to ensuring equal access to housing for all Connecticut residents. Our agency has four attorneys dedicated to bringing fair housing enforcement complaints on behalf of people who have experienced housing discrimination. Between us, we file approximately 40 complaints with CHRO each year. In addition, we refer people to CHRO to file a complaint directly when we cannot represent them.

CHRO has a vitally important mission, and it offers complainants and respondents in housing cases the opportunity to resolve cases without the expense and difficulty of protracted court litigation. Further, for those who do not have counsel, CHRO's process offers a straightforward, inexpensive, and accessible method for resolving housing discrimination complaints. CHRO's complaint process reduces the caseload of the civil court system, as that is the primary alternative available for resolving these cases.

We are involved at all stages of the complaint process, but most of our cases are resolved during the mediation and investigation stage. We interact with the mediators and investigators regularly, and we have observed that they are knowledgeable and fair. I personally have

observed that they interact with complainants and respondents in a way that is respectful, as well as informative about the process and the parties' rights and obligations within the process.

Over many years, we have observed that CHRO does a better job when it is well-resourced, meaning that there are sufficient staff to handle the volume of complaints. At various times, the process of resolving a complaint has taken longer than it does today, and we and our clients truly appreciate the ability to get timely resolutions in our cases. We also know from our contacts with fair housing organizations nationwide that, in terms of efficiency and competence, CHRO outperforms similar agencies in other states.

The primary way that the legislature can help CHRO continue fulfilling its mission is by ensuring it has sufficient funding for adequate staffing. Other ideas for improvement include an electronic database of previous complaints and their resolutions, as well as an electronic means of checking a current case status. Lastly, we would like to see more resources devoted to educating the public on housing discrimination and to informing housing providers as well as tenants about their rights and obligations under the fair housing laws.