Good morning Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Formica, Representative Lavielle, and members of the Appropriations Committee.

My name is Tanya Hughes and I am the executive director of the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities. Beside me is Cheryl Sharp, CHRO’s Deputy Director. We appreciate the opportunity to testify before the Appropriations Committee today regarding the CHRO. The CHRO celebrated the 75th anniversary of its founding in 2018 and is proud to be an advocate for the protection and promotion of civil rights in Connecticut. The CHRO works to eliminate discrimination through civil and human rights law enforcement and to establish equal opportunity and justice for all persons within the state through advocacy and education.

Historically the CHRO has been understaffed and it has seen a drastic decrease in staffing and funding levels over the last decade. We appreciate that the Governor’s proposed budget holds our budget steady at the FY 2019 level with adjustments for the state employee wage increases. While the Governor’s proposed budget also holds our appropriated staff level at 82 positions, we would like to point out that we currently have only 70 employees (and one durational employee paid largely with federal funds and two 120-day temporary worker retirees) and continue to request to fill the vacant positions. The Commission has federal work-sharing agreements with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and the Department of Housing and Urban Development which require us to process a certain number of complaints in order to be considered substantially equivalent and to receive federal money for our work. Last year, due to a lack of staff the agency was unable to meet our EEOC contract. As a result, our contract amount was lowered resulting in $336,000 less going into the General Fund.

Law enforcement is a crucial piece of our agency’s statutory responsibilities. At a time when our staffing and funding levels have decreased, the numbers of complaints filed at the agency have continued to rise. In FY 2018, the CHRO processed 4,500 complaints, including 2,484 newly filed complaints which is the second highest number of complaint filings in the past fifteen years. Complaints of race discrimination continue to be the most common type of complaint, followed by complaints of sex discrimination (which includes sexual harassment) and complaints of physical disability discrimination. Despite the high numbers of complaints and staff shortages, the CHRO has continued to resolve complaints in a timely manner and avoid a backlog of aged inventory.

Further, the CHRO has a robust Affirmative Action and Contract Compliance enforcement program which monitors millions of dollars worth of state contracting to ensure that these contracts are in compliance with discrimination law. This program contributes to the economic development of the state by enforcing laws.
meant to give Connecticut small and minority-owned businesses the opportunity to bid on state funded projects. In FY 2018, the Contract Compliance Unit reviewed 712 plans and completed 179 closeouts.

The staffing issues that plague the CHRO also affect the Office of Public Hearings (“OPH”). Though OPH is part of the CHRO’s budget, it is administered separately from the agency. There are currently only two Human Rights Referees. Although OPH is allotted three referees under statute, the third seat has been left vacant for several years. The office is currently staffed by a single secretary, with no clerk or paralegal to assist the referees. This lack of staff and referees means that complaints with a finding of reasonable cause face inevitable delays once they reach the public hearing stage even though they are making it through the complaint process under the timelines required by statute.

In addition to enforcement, our mission requires advocacy and education. To that end, the CHRO holds educational events such as Kids Speak and Kids Court and conducts forums such as our annual summer symposium. Through our Business Training Institute, our staff conducts discrimination law training, sexual harassment prevention training, and fair housing training, typically holding multiple sessions per month. Finally, the CHRO sits on multiple task forces and working groups aimed at eliminating discrimination and promoting civil rights. During 2018, some of these groups include the Fair Housing Working Group, the Housing Reentry Working Group, and the Racial Profiling Advisory Board.

The CHRO recognizes the importance of running efficiently and streamlining our process. We have participated in LeanCT for several years. We have made changes in the regional offices and the legal department to eliminate aged inventory and process cases on time. In 2018 our Affirmative Action unit established a working group with the participation of representatives from other state agencies aimed at modernizing and streamlining the CHRO’s affirmative action plan regulations. The group finished its work last month and we are beginning the process of revising our regulations.

We remain committed to continue to improve our agency in order to best serve the citizens of the state of Connecticut. We appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today and are happy to answer any questions.