

PHRC Strategic Plan 2014-2017: Blueprint for Equal Opportunity

After many months of diligent research, spirited brainstorming sessions, and all-hands-on-deck planning efforts, PHRC's Strategic Plan for 2014-2017 is in progress, and we have achieved some significant early milestones.

The plan represents the first formal statement of our agency mission, vision and values, as well as the first effort to publicly document strategy goals and objectives. The plan is a working document to guide how we budget our time and resources.

Staff and commissioners responsible for overseeing plan implementation have been using a "dashboard" tool to track our progress toward meeting our goals and objectives. Staff input and guidance from commissioners and partners will continue to be crucial over the next three years as we seek to carry out our mission and serve the people of Pennsylvania, seeking equality with excellence and integrity.

Early successes include:

- Reducing the average age of cases under investigation from 387 days to 336 days statewide, with case age reduced in every region;
- Partnering with PSU's American Studies Graduate Program and PA State Archives to digitize and catalogue decades of photos and records to make them accessible to those seeking historical information on PHRC and civil rights in PA;
- Establishing an employee recognition program to commend outstanding team and individual performance; and
- Participation in the 2014 Penn State Poll to measure public knowledge of and attitudes toward discrimination.

Read more about efforts to prioritize equal educational opportunity, revitalize PHRC Advisory Councils, make business processes more efficient and effective, and much more in the [2014-2017 Strategic Plan](#) on our website.



PHRC Values - posters are displayed throughout each PHRC office as daily reminders of the culture we are seeking to reinforce.

Equal Educational Opportunity: Foundation for Economic Success

Equal educational opportunity is a vital part of the formula for [schools that teach](#) and it's key to every student getting a job after graduation. Eliminating school funding formulas that further disadvantage poor children is only part of the complicated equation for successful schools. We must work to ensure that our schools are equal opportunity zones for all students, regardless of race, sex, ethnicity or disability.

Without a solid educational foundation, students — especially students of color, students with disabilities and English language learners — underachieve and drop out in high numbers, feeding the cycle of unemployment, dependence on public benefits, and the school-to-prison pipeline. Employers are forced to look elsewhere for qualified workers in communities that fail to educate the students who live there.

National data released last summer by the [U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights](#) showed alarming disparities in the rates at which these at-risk students are disciplined in relation to their representation in the population. Pennsylvania is no exception to this trend.

PHRC is reviewing disciplinary and performance data, dropout rates and demographic information from schools across Pennsylvania. The commission has partnered with the U.S. Department of Justice's Community Relations Service, the Center for Safe Schools, the NAACP and others to provide tangible, proven action plans to schools whose data suggests that there may be equity issues contributing to performance or discipline disparities. PHRC and partners offer training and services included in each customized plan free-of-charge in order to avoid burdening cash-strapped districts.

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Read about discrimination in PA and PHRC's work to fight it in our [2013-14 Annual Report](#)

PHRC Mediation Program Receives Innovation Award

Successful pilot now a permanent option for resolving employment disputes

PHRC received a Governor’s Innovation Award for the Pilot Mediation Program, a partnership with the Office of General Counsel funded by the Office of Innovation in 2013-’14. Awards were made at the Innovation Expo in the Keystone Building in Harrisburg on July 22, 2014.

PHRC was among seven agencies recognized for programs that improve service to Pennsylvanians while reducing costs and increasing productivity.

PHRC’s mediation program provides specially trained, neutral, volunteer mediators to help resolve employment discrimination complaints quickly, avoiding lengthy investigations and hearings or court. Mediation enables parties to reach a voluntary agreement that satisfies both parties.

To date, the program has saved more than \$135,000, compared to the average cost of investigating cases. Participant surveys have shown that 100 percent of those who chose mediation — regardless of how their cases ended up — would choose mediation again in the future.



PHRC Executive Director JoAnn Edwards, Special Assistant Tammy McElfresh, Mediation Coordinator Katherine Petruczok, Chief Counsel Kathy Morrison, Office of General Counsel Volunteer Mediator Jody King and retired Director of the Office of Innovation Joe Deklinski at a July 2014 Innovation Award ceremony.

Expanding Advisory Councils – ‘Boots on the Ground’ in Pennsylvania Communities



PHRC has advisory councils (shown on the map to the left) in Blair, Cambria, Centre, Monroe, Montgomery, Monroe and York Counties. Councils are made up of diverse local leaders who extend the commission’s work to promote equal opportunity and keep the commission informed about discrimination issues in their area. We are currently working to strengthen existing councils and form new ones to reach a broader area of the state.

Find [meeting schedules for a council in your area](#) on our website, or if you are interested in finding out how to form a council, contact Director of Education & Community Services Geoff Biringer at 717-772-0523.

Equal Educational Opportunity - continued from page 1

Some Pennsylvania schools have tackled equity issues head-on, investing considerable effort into addressing existing disparities, and proactively working to prevent future inequities. PHRC forged such a partnership with Coatesville Area School District, implementing an [Equal Educational Opportunity Action Plan](#) in January of 2015 to address specific issues raised last year. Encouraging more schools to

carefully examine and address these issues will be a strategic focus for PHRC over the next few years.

Our economy needs every child to have a fair chance to succeed. Equal educational opportunity is not an option, it’s a legal responsibility.

New Commissioners Bring Breadth of Legal Expertise, Diversity of Experience



Above left - Commissioner George Dawson, an attorney from Delaware County, being sworn in by former Secretary of the Department of State Carol Aichele as PHRC Executive Director witnesses.

Above right - Commissioner Kathleen Dormer-Carusone, a legal professor from Cumberland County, following her swearing-in ceremony. Both were confirmed unanimously by the Senate for five-year terms in October, 2014.



• PA Fair Housing Hotline • Toll-free • 855.866.5718

It's NOT a choice. It's a Right. It's a Necessity. It's a SUPPORT ANIMAL.

Support animals make it possible for people with disabilities to perform everyday tasks, allowing them greater freedom and independence in their homes, at work, or in places like stores and restaurants. Many people recognize that these animals are not pets, but are crucial to the independence of their owners. Not everyone does. PHRC is out to change that.

Employees, students and renters who have disabilities have the right to use a support animal as a reasonable accommodation. In some situations, trainers and handlers of disability support animals have rights as well.

Those who train or handle support animals have the right to access public accommodations such as stores, accompanied by the support animal. Training a support animal in a realistic setting is vital to preparing the animal to meet the needs of a person with a disability.

This year, PHRC will join support animal organizations like Merion, PA-based [Paws and Affection](#), to educate Pennsylvania business owners on their legal responsibilities, and people with disabilities on their support animal rights.

Learn more in our free brochure, "It's not a choice. It's a right. It's a necessity. It's a SUPPORT ANIMAL," found on our website under [Publications](#).



>Vf fa qYZf ŽCricket, Paws and Affection Program Director and Head Trainer Susie Daily, Trainer Deborah Rosan and Beesly on a recent visit to PHRC's Harrisburg offices.

Q&A: School Discipline

Q.

My son's teacher disciplines him, while ignoring classmates for the same or worse behavior. As a minority in a mostly white school, I know he stands out, but this seems like much more than that. What can I do?

A.

Every student in PA has a right to learn free from unlawful discrimination. Singling out students for discipline or harsher discipline because of their race, sex, ancestry, national origin, religion or disability is discrimination. Statistics from the [U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights](#) tell us discriminatory discipline is a significant problem nationwide.

Talk to your son's teachers and administrators about the problem. Keep records of what happened, who else was there, and when and how you reported the issue. School officials are responsible for stopping discrimination, but they need to know about it to stop it.

You have a right to file a complaint with PHRC and we will investigate. Learn more about equal educational opportunity and how to file an education discrimination complaint or download our free brochure, **Civil Rights & Teens** at www.phrc.state.pa.us.

New Faces Investigating Cases — Human Relations Representatives



I. to r. - Human Relations Representatives Carla Johnson, Philadelphia; Amy Sunnergan, Harrisburg; Taiwan Martinez, Philadelphia

PHRC has recruited, hired and trained three outstanding classes of human relations representatives — the staff members who investigate cases — in the past 16 months. They have hit the ground running and are fast becoming high performers!

Human relations representatives have a tremendous amount of public contact, both with those whose complaints are being investigated and those who have had complaints filed against them. Their everyday work can have a profound positive impact on an individual whether that person agrees with the eventual outcome of an investigation, wins a monetary settlement, sees an improvement in their school or workplace environment, or just encounters a kind professional who listened to their side of a story.

If you have a deep commitment to justice and fairness, intellectual curiosity and creative problem-solving ability, you may be a good fit for PHRC. Watch for civil service testing opportunities and job openings at www.phrc.state.pa.us.

Coming Soon to a Neighborhood Near You — PHRC Education & Community Services Division



I. to r. - Harrisburg-based PHRC educational outreach staff: Attorney Tom Zimmerman, Director of Education & Community Services; Geoff Biring; Attorney Jelani Cooper



I. to r. - Human Relations Representatives Mark Matako, Harrisburg; Alva Licius, Pittsburgh; Mike Mussoline, Harrisburg; Robert Santiago, Philadelphia; Mike Goldstein, Harrisburg; Denise Fahie, Harrisburg



I. to r. - Human Relations Representatives Christine McCreary, Harrisburg; Meredith McCann*; Carol Norbeck, Harrisburg; Chelsey Jeremiah, Harrisburg; Christopher Young, Harrisburg; Manuel Zuniga, Pittsburgh
*McCann has since returned to private sector employment.

“Being an investigator gives me the opportunity to help hurting families, whether we find probable cause or not. They just want us to look at their company, even if we can’t resolve their financial issues in a settlement. It takes courage to come forward, and they appreciate that we took time to listen to what happened to them.”
– Denise Fahie

Attorneys Geoff Biring, Jelani Cooper and Tom Zimmerman have all recently joined the staff at PHRC. Together they make up the Division of Education & Community Services, which provides free training and other educational outreach to businesses, schools, community groups and others interested in learning more about their non-discrimination rights and responsibilities.

They provide legal support to the commission, with a special emphasis on equal educational opportunity, and they are liaisons with PHRC’s advisory councils. (Read more on pages 1&2)

Find out more about how to request training for your organization at www.phrc.state.pa.us.

