

## **Human Rights Commission in Allegheny County**

*Research summary by Oscar Cariceo*

In the State of Pennsylvania individuals have the right to live, work and learn free from “illegal discrimination”. In order to enforce these premises, the PA Human Relations Commission (PHRC) works on guarantee equal opportunities, based on Pennsylvania's anti-discrimination laws.

PHRC investigates complaints of illegal discrimination, which includes issues such as sexual harassment, predatory lending, unequal pay, bullying and the many other forms illegal discrimination can take.

In the same track, the Allegheny County Human Relations Commission was established on July 1, 2009 in order to ensure that all persons enjoy the full benefits of citizenship and are afforded equal opportunities for employment, housing and use of public accommodation facilities. These benefits must be accomplished regardless of race, color, religion, national origin, ancestry or place of birth, sex, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, disability, marital status, familial status, age or use of a guide or support animal because of blindness, deafness or physical disability.

The Human Relations Commission consists of affiliates appointed by the Chief Executive with the approval of County Council. All members of the Commission must be residents of the County at the time of appointment and throughout their service.

Although HRC represents a public effort to avoid discrimination, is limited only to employment and housing. Therefore, HRC should move forward and integrate several discrimination and human rights issues in its tasks and duties. Allegheny County should improve its public mission in order to ponder complexity and challenge related to human rights in the Pittsburgh Metro Area, which exceed the mere employment and housing matters.

Oppression, discrimination, and segregation include an interconnected cultural system that interacts with structural inequalities. Thus, the first action must be shifting the HRC's focus into a human rights commission as a comprehensive response to these conflicts.

In order to establish the Human Rights Commission in Allegheny County, it is necessary to start a public-private partnership to improve community responses to ensure human rights protection in the city of Pittsburgh.

According to the international experience, during the last decade, several institutions have been working on the protection and education about human rights. The main goal of these institutions is to create a culture of respect of Human Rights. In the city of Pittsburgh, public and private institutions and organizations must address human rights. This means create a space that looks, reflects and reviews the history of the U.S in order to install Human Rights in the State and County present and impulse them with strength and stability towards the future. Thus, the following recommendations can be considered to improve this effort:

- Change the HRC's name to “County Human Rights Commission” (CHRC) in order to recognize human rights as a continuum and interrelated actions and

goals, beyond the mere economic and employment relation between employer and employee.

- The CHRC's mission will be promoted and protect the human rights of all Allegheny County citizens and residents, based on constitutional and legal norms, in the international treaties signed and ratified by the United States, as well as those emanating from the general principles of the Law recognized by the international community.
- CHRC should create internal committees, which will be responsible for specific tasks or subjects. Each committee will be chaired by a member of the commission and may invite outstanding individuals with proven experience in the field in question, such as education, economic justice, immigration, and gender.
- CHRC will incorporate a County Advisory Council (CAC), in which the social and academic organizations dedicated to the promotion and defense of human rights, will be represented. The CAC will provide its advice to CHRC on any matter within its proficiency when required, for proper resolution, for the pronouncement of civil society.

Finally, CHRC will fulfill the following functions:

1. Prepare an annual report on its activities, the national human rights situation and make recommendations for its appropriate control and respect. This report must be submitted to the County. In additions, it can be sent to the State and Federal agencies, as well international institutions, such as UN, OAS and organizations for the defense of human rights.
2. Communicate to the State and Federal Government and various State agencies their views on the human rights situations that occur in the County. They may request reports from the relevant agencies.
3. Propose measures to specific County agencies that favor the promotion and protection of human rights.
4. Promote that the national legislation on the subject is in harmony with international treaties signed by the US.
5. Support education activities by conducting researches, publications, granting awards, and foster a culture of respect for human rights.

Ultimately, CHRC must fulfill its function with autonomy, independence and pluralism.

In additions, CHRC will integrate diverse perspectives related to human rights in order to defense human rights, expand social understanding of human rights in all their dimensions, and cooperate with civil society networks related to human rights advocacy.