



**Commission On
Human Rights**

New York City Commission on Human Rights

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**Testimony of Annabel Palma
Commissioner and Chair New York City Commission on Human Rights
Before the Committee on Civil and Human Rights & Committee on Finance
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Good afternoon Chair Brannan, Chair Williams, and members of the Committees on Finance and Civil and Human Rights. Thank you for convening today's hearing. I am Annabel Palma, Commissioner and Chair of the New York City Commission on Human Rights. Today, I am joined by Kathie Carroll, Deputy Commissioner of the Law Enforcement Bureau, Kajori Chaudhuri, Deputy Commissioner of the Community Relations Bureau, and Mariela Salazar, Deputy Commissioner for Administrative Services. We are excited to speak about the Commission's accomplishments over the last year and our plans looking ahead.

The Commission was established over 80 years ago to tackle racial tension and disparities. Today, my team builds on this foundation to enforce and educate New Yorkers about one of the broadest anti-discrimination laws in the country. The NYC Human Rights Law prohibits discrimination in housing, employment, and public accommodations and includes more than 25 protected categories. These protections are critical for New Yorkers today as we witness efforts to change federal laws designed to address discrimination.

The Commission has a dual mandate – each element is critical to ensuring a New York City where people can live, work and thrive, regardless of how they identify. Enforcement of the Human Rights Law is one cornerstone of our work. This includes investigating complaints of discrimination from the public, initiating investigations on behalf of the city, and conducting tests to identify potential violations of the Law, and shaping remedies to address discrimination that has occurred and prevent future harm. Equally important is the Commission's work to prevent discrimination and build trust across communities, which takes place through education and engagement with community partners, businesses, housing providers, and sibling agencies.

During FY 24, the Commission's Law Enforcement Bureau continued to build on a strong record of addressing source of income discrimination, ensuring accessibility in housing, workplaces, and public places for persons who are entitled to reasonable accommodations, and tackling bias and discrimination. Consistent with past years, when we look across our jurisdictions – housing, public accommodations, and employment – the most common inquiries and claims are in the areas of disability and gender.

The Commission continues to use the tools at our disposal to ensure that covered employers, housing providers, and providers of public accommodations understand their Human Rights Law obligations. We reached more New Yorkers than ever before by leveraging our strong partnerships, innovative outreach, and growing communication channels. Since our budget

hearing last year, the Commission has continued to ensure that New Yorkers know their rights and their obligations. Our legal trainings together with our cultural competency trainings are foundational to tackling bias and discrimination.

Trainings are one example of the wide-ranging outreach carried out by our community liaisons and lead advisors, who work specifically with historically underserved and underrepresented populations. Our efforts to bring New Yorkers together and to increase agency visibility are an ongoing focus. In January of this year, we hosted our second annual Human Rights Summit. This day-long event featured speakers highlighting the Commission's continued partnership with the Office for the Prevention of Hate Crimes that awards grants to organizations combatting bias in New York City. The Summit also had panels with CCHR staff, sibling agencies and advocates touching on critical areas of the Human Rights Law's protections: LGBTQIA + communities, the right to be free from discrimination based on national origin, and the newest protection: Fair Chance Housing. In honor of Black History Month, February was marked by several events: one for city staff, looking at the evolution of protections against discrimination based on natural hair. We also used this February to launch a series of community-facing roundtables as spaces to explore current issues of significance and shape collective action. These events are part of the ongoing anti-Black racism prevention work that our agency does year-round, and which complements the City's larger racial equity planning process. Additionally, since the fall of 2024, CCHR has been holding legal service provider conversations at each borough office to ensure open lines of communication and create pathways for case intakes and trainings.

The Law Enforcement Bureau

In FY 24, the Commission resolved 447 cases and assessed over \$4.6 million in damages and penalties for violations of the city's Human Rights Law. In addition to resolving cases for monetary relief, the Commission has shaped remedies that repair the harm experienced by individuals and communities impacted by discrimination. In FY 24, over 100 settlements were finalized, spanning across all areas of the Human Rights Law. Employment cases ranged from addressing sexual harassment at multinational corporations to putting an end to gender identity discrimination at smaller employers, and a range of settlements were put in place to foster fair chance act compliance across industries. In housing, settlements involved race discrimination, disability, and source of income. One emblematic example of the work that our agency has accomplished is the 2024 CCHR settlement with Parkchester Preservation Management. This represents the Commission's largest housing settlement, resulting in the payment of \$1 million in civil penalties to NYC and an agreement from the housing provider to set aside 850 apartments for New Yorkers with housing vouchers. This settlement is significant for equity and racial justice because 60-70% of voucher holders identify as Black, Latino, or Asian – nationally and in NYC. Looking ahead, CCHR will be monitoring compliance.

CCHR settlements seek to deter future harms and aim to effectively change the environment that allowed harm to occur. FY 24 settlements included many forms of relief. In one case of ongoing sexual harassment in the workplace, the complainant received \$250,000 in emotional distress damages and the company involved agreed to update its policies and to report to the Commission about any further gender-based harassment complaints for 15 months. To resolve one source of income discrimination case, involving a City FHEPs voucher holder, CCHR was

able to secure 20 apartments as set asides for applicants with public sources of income, as well as to damages and civil penalties. Respondents also agreed to train employees on their obligations under the NYCHRL and SOI discrimination, display fair housing postings throughout their portfolio of buildings, and revise their policies. A number of fair chance cases led to changes in hiring policies, staff trainings on the Human Rights Law, and ongoing Commission monitoring. As in past years, settlements involving claims of discrimination based on the existence of a disability, resulted in the construction of ramps and other modifications in both housing and businesses.

Efforts to shape individual and systemic remedies occur alongside our continued efforts to serve as many New Yorkers as possible. With the Deputy Commissioner of the Law Enforcement Bureau, we have continued to strengthen intake pathways. In FY 24, the Commission fielded 13,360 inquiries from members of the public by phone, email, letter, visits to Commission offices, or speaking with staff at Commission events. More than 1,400 of these inquiries were in languages other than English. Spanish, Mandarin, and Russian are the most common in this category.

In FY 24 the largest number of inquiries we received were in employment, accounting for 1,221 inquiries. Housing was second with 1,168 inquiries. We received 665 inquiries related to disabilities and 275 inquiries related to gender. Race and color were raised in 301 inquiries.

When appropriate, LEB may resolve claims instead of filing a complaint, leading to a quicker resolution in certain matters. Pre-complaint interventions continue to be a valuable avenue for LEB to resolve claims. These interventions can resolve allegations of discrimination without the filing of a formal complaint. Out of the more than 300 pre-complaint interventions, the most common matters involved source of income discrimination. Disability accommodations in housing were the second highest number of interventions.

The Law Enforcement Bureau filed 366 complaints of discrimination in FY 24. While the majority are initiated by members of the public, the agency also filed 64 Commission-initiated complaints. Sixty six percent (66%) of complaints filed were in employment, twenty-five percent (25%) were in housing, and eight percent (8%) were in public accommodations. LEB also utilizes the agency's investigatory and prosecutorial powers to root out discrimination through Commission-initiated investigations. When the Commission identifies the potential of widespread violations or discriminatory practices, the Commission can initiate an investigation.

The Commission also proactively uses testing to investigate whether entities have engaged in discrimination. Agency staff may conduct testing in person, on the telephone, or online to see if certain protected categories are treated differently or are given different information. In FY 24, the Commission initiated tests of 1,302 entities, successfully testing 947 entities. Each entity can be tested multiple times for violations in the same jurisdiction and protected class. An entity may also be tested for violations in multiple jurisdictions and/or multiple protected classes.

Looking across public and commission-initiated cases in n FY 24, the Commission secured \$4,047,283 in compensatory damages for complainants and \$633,200 in civil penalties for City of New York.

The Office of Mediation and Conflict Resolution

The Commission's Office of Mediation and Conflict Resolution offers parties a voluntary mediation program at no cost. It is confidential and available at any stage of a case. Staffed by a Mediation Director, mediated cases accounted for damages in the amount of \$1,643,450 in addition to non-economic relief.

The Community Relations Bureau

The Commission's Community Relations Bureau ("CRB") cultivates understanding and respect among the city's diverse communities, builds partnerships, and informs New Yorkers about the rights and responsibilities that stem from the Human Rights Law. In FY 24, we reached yet another record high number of New Yorkers. The Commission engaged with 142,398 New Yorkers through 2,888 events, workshops, and trainings.

In FY 24, the most requested training was Human Rights Law 101, which was offered more than 260 times. Throughout FY 24, the Commission offered training on racism and discrimination to various organizations and sibling agencies, including the NYC Police Department (NYPD), the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH), and the City University of New York (CUNY). In honor of the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the Commission also launched its first annual MLK Day of Action to increase visibility, discuss the Commission's work, and assist New Yorkers facing or concerned about discrimination. The Commission reached over 1,000 people across all five boroughs, engaging community organizations, faith institutions, and business areas.

Consistent with our mandate to foster intergroup understanding in light of global events, the Commission continued to expand bias prevention and combat stigma. I will mention just a few examples of this work.

Our cultural competency trainings address stereotypes, and other manifestations of bias and hate, and bridge gaps in knowledge while offering strategies to confront hate. The Commission's multilingual Bystander Intervention Training empowered over a thousand New Yorkers to address and prevent hate non-violently. This training emphasizes non-violent intervention techniques, safety, and the impact of identity. CCHR also continued our efforts to foster unity across the city's diverse faith communities, organizing interfaith events, interdenominational discussions, and joint community service projects.

Effective outreach and prevention must include New York's youth. With this in mind, the Commission has deepened and expanded youth programming through our youth advisory ("YES") council, and reached youth via 318 events across the city in FY 24. As already noted, Human Rights Law protections for persons with disabilities are a priority for the agency. To deepen this work, during FY 24, the Commission formed a valuable partnership with Project Access for All, hosting the signature Disability Unite Festival, which attracted over 5,000 participants. The Commission also joined the Disability Pride Parade to demonstrate solidarity with the disability community.

The Commission's ongoing commitment to gender justice also manifested in an array of activities, with an emphasis on the rights of pregnant and lactating people in the workplace. The

Commission led trainings on how to identify and prevent pregnancy discrimination, best practices for employers, and the right to accommodations for pregnancy and related conditions, as well as lactation. The Commission also worked closely with domestic worker coalitions to educate workers and employers on NYCHRL protections. One outgrowth is a collaboration with the Care Forward campaign and the NYC Domestic Worker Coalition to improve practices and standards for domestic workers through a multi-sector group working to formalize high standards for working conditions and enhance dignity in the workplace.

For decades, the Commission has safeguarded New York City's LGBTQIA+ community members. In FY 24, the Commission celebrated Pride and the 55th anniversary of the Stonewall Uprising, and demonstrated solidarity through a number of events and celebrations. Along with Governor Hochul's Office of LGBTQIA+ Affairs, the Commission partnered with the New Pride Agenda to host a Building Bridges Panel that addressed visibility and inclusion of trans communities. CCHR also served on the Bronx LGBT Taskforce, advising the Bronx Borough President on LGBTQIA+ issues. During FY 24, we were proud to participate in the 8th annual LGBTQ+ Iftar, a continued CCHR partnership with the LGBTQ Community Center, Fordham University, the Mayor's Office for the Prevention of Hate Crimes, along with other community partners. It is also vital to note that the Commission continued to show up to support communities affected by bias-motivated acts. In response to the tragic murder of O'Shae Sibley, the Commission organized a vigil where hundreds gathered to honor and mourn his life. As attacks against LGBTQIA+ communities, particularly the trans community, increase nationwide, the Commission remains steadfast in its commitment to enforcing the protections of the NYCHRL.

Office of the Chair

The agency's policy and regulatory priorities, and interagency collaborations, continue to reflect our commitment to advancing the rights of all New Yorkers. In recent months, the agency released multi-lingual and multi-media materials regarding Fair Chance Housing protections, and has worked with members of the Tenant Protection Cabinet to shape the NYC Tenant Bill of Rights, which includes protections against discrimination based on conviction history, and the right of New Yorkers to receive reasonable accommodations paid for by the housing provider absent an undue hardship. Earlier this year, CCHR also released an updated guidance on Human Rights Law protections against discrimination based on national origin and immigration status. Our work also includes ongoing partnership with the Mayor's Office of Equity and Racial Justice and the Commission on Racial Equity to support implementation of NYC's laws on reparations and truth and healing.

Communications and Marketing

The Commission continues to leverage social media, digital platforms, and community press to expand our reach. In FY 24, to educate New Yorkers and the housing providers, employers, and providers of public accommodations who must abide by the NYCHRL about new protections against height and weight discrimination, the Commission led a public information campaign "Different Bodies. Same Rights," displayed on bus shelters, in convenience stores, on LinkNYC kiosks, in subway stations, and in TaxiTV ads. This campaign yielded about 69 million impressions and drove thousands of visits to CCHR's website. The Commission also published an array of resources that highlight scenarios that may constitute illegal discrimination if based

on an individual's height and/or weight, and conducted targeted trainings for employers, EEO officers, and general counsels. These protections are also now embedded in all of our trainings.

The agency also prepared the rollout of a "Together NYC" campaign, which included a pledge for New Yorkers, an opportunity to request a bystander intervention training, and a survey to hear from New Yorkers about their experiences and perceptions of discrimination. More recently, this January, we launched Break Down Barriers to Housing as part of Fair Chance Housing education and outreach. Our multilingual campaigns span social media, radio, print outlets, and convenience stores. Campaigns are complemented by a series of short videos known as the "Human Rights Minute," which feature staff and aim to make the work of the Commission more available to New Yorkers.

Media and press outreach are a means to elevate the Commission's outreach, trainings, events, and enforcement actions. As a result of our campaigns and focus on expanding social media, we continue to reach new audiences with information about the Human Rights Law. CCHR was in the press 339 times in FY 24. The Commission also had more than six million social media impressions, and four million webpage views.

The Commission further invested in community and ethnic media through print advertising. The agency also continued to prioritize M/WBE's and has continuously invested in work with M/WBEs.

All of this work is made possible by the passionate and committed staff that show up every day to prevent and address discrimination in New York City.

Staff and Personnel

As of today, the Commission has a current headcount of 138 with 109 active staff. The staff across each unit and borough is committed to working in partnership with communities vulnerable to civil rights violations. We are a small but diverse staff that speaks over 20 languages across the agency.

Budget

The FY 25 Budget provided for **\$13,933,618**. For FY 26, the Preliminary Budget provides for **\$14,270,627**

Conclusion

I appreciate the opportunity to speak about the work of NYC Commission on Human Rights. We look forward to working everyday as part of this Administration to ensure that New Yorkers can live work and thrive and appreciate the ongoing support and partnership of New York City Council.

Thank you and I welcome your questions.