

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF
COLUMBIA OFFICE OF HUMAN RIGHTS**



**FY24-25
Budget Oversight Hearing**

Testimony of
Kenneth Saunders
Interim Director

Before the
Committee on Public Works and Operations
Council of the District of Columbia
The Honorable Brianne K. Nadeau, Chairperson

John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20004

April 26, 2024
3:00 PM

Good afternoon, Chairperson Nadeau, Committee members, and staff of the Committee on Public Works and Operations. I am Kenneth Saunders, Interim Director of the DC Office of Human Rights (OHR). I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today.

As you are aware, similar to FY24, the District is facing a tough budgetary year in 2025. Agencies have made tough choices and ensure quality delivery of our core services. The Mayor's proposed budget for OHR for FY25 is \$9.23 million. The FY25 budget is comprised of \$8.83 million in local funds and \$400,000 in federal grant funds. OHR does not have capital budget. The proposed FY25 budget will support a total of 65 FTEs to pursue OHR's mission and core functions. OHR has additional 5 FTEs supported by the Universal Paid Leave fund.

OHR is the District's quasi-judicial agency that works to eradicate discrimination, increase equal opportunity, and protect the human rights of individuals in employment, housing, education, public accommodation, and government services. We do this by enforcing local and federal civil rights laws through a cost-free legal process to those who believe they have experienced discrimination, and by taking proactive measures through education and community engagement. OHR's enforces civil rights laws, provides public education on rights, and executes equity and compliance programs.

OHR is responsible for enforcing approximately 23 anti-discrimination and compliance laws. The newest laws in FY23 and FY24 include: (1) the Sexual Harassment Data Collection Act, (2) the Domestic Worker Employment Rights Amendment Act, (3) the Human Rights Enhancement Amendment Act, and (4) the Eviction Record Sealing and Fairness in Renting Act. Over the last decade, OHR has seen consistent expansion in the number of local laws it enforces as the District strives to be a leader in civil rights.

In FY24, OHR began enforcement of the Sexual Harassment Data Collection Act. Council

did not authorize funding for the Sexual Harassment Data Collection Act, so OHR did not receive any FTEs. Despite having no funding, our team worked diligently to collect data from every District agency, answer questions from agencies, reconcile data discrepancies, and produce the report required under this law. I am proud to report that OHR submitted this report to the D.C. Council and the Office of the Attorney General (OAG).

The Domestic Worker Employment Rights Amendment Act amends the DCHRA to include “domestic workers” as protected workers covered under the DCHRA’s anti-discrimination provisions. Additionally, this act amends the Office of Human Rights Establishment Act of 1999 (HREA) to require OHR to create written guidance for employment situations involving “domestic workers.” This law was funded for FY24 and OHR immediately began enforcement of the law.

Although Council passed the Second Chance Amendment Act in March 2023, the law remains unfunded. Once funded, OHR will be responsible for enforcing Title II of this law, which prohibits background providers from reporting criminal history information related to records that have been sealed, expunged, or set aside, and authorizes OHR to adjudicate complaints and provides penalties for violations of this prohibition.

In addition to enforcing laws, OHR’s educates the community about the laws it enforces. OHR produces educational resource materials and tailored educational sessions to educate the public about new laws. Our staff also provides recurring educational training series that cover all of the laws OHR enforces. In addition to these general training sessions, our teams working on language access, youth bullying prevention, and safer spaces also provide regular training and resources to our communities in these specific areas. OHR also holds community engagement events such as listening labs, open houses, the annual Human Rights Gala, and the 20th year anniversary celebration of the Language Access Act, which took place this past Wednesday.

OHR also produces several reports, such as the Language Access Annual Report, the Youth Bullying Prevention Biennial Report, training, and guidance materials for advancing racial equity in District government (pursuant to the REACH Act), quarterly data reports, and an Annual Report.

As shared at our performance oversight hearing in February, our FY24 and FY25 priorities are: (1) continued effort in case processing improvements and related public information; (2) continued effort in case management system and IT system investment; (3) continued investment in people (recruiting, hiring, and retention); (4) improved informational sharing; and (5) a new home for OHR. In FY24, we invested in recruiting, hiring, and retention. We onboarded an Associate Director for Enforcement. I'm currently serving in a dual capacity in this role and as Interim Director. In addition to hiring other programmatic staff, we onboarded an Associate Director for Communication and Equity Programs. We are actively recruiting for the following positions: one Supervisory Equal Opportunity Specialist, two Equal Opportunity Specialists/Investigators, one Program Support Specialist, and one EEO Compliance Specialist.

In closing, similar to last year, this is a difficult budget period for the District. OHR appreciates the Mayor's and Council dedication to eradicate discrimination by delivering a balanced budget to the agency. As always, I want to thank the dedicated team at OHR for their hard work. I also want to thank our community partners for their relentless advocacy. Finally, I would also like to thank you, Chairperson Nadeau, and the Council for leading the District in civil rights changes and ensuring that OHR is supported in the process.

This concludes my testimony. I am available to answer any questions you may have.