



State of Vermont
Human Rights Commission
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MEMORANDUM

TO: House Appropriations Committee
FROM: Big Hartman, Esq. HRC Executive Director & General Counsel
DATE: February 10, 2025
RE: New Initiatives Requested for FY26

Throughout FY24 and in the first quarter of FY25, the Human Rights Commission has experienced an unmanageable influx of new requests for complaint investigations. Under my leadership, our team acted quickly to respond to this high level of need by:

- onboarding a low-cost case management system to store all of our intakes and complaint data and investigative files;
- creating a [Guide for Complainants and Respondents](#), a plain language document that addresses the most common questions parties ask our staff about the HRC process, reducing the need for staff to discuss those matters with parties;
- streamlining and revamping our processes for intake and inquiry review, to better track new requests for complaints and organize information submitted by people seeking to file complaints; and
- significantly simplifying our investigative reports to reduce case processing times and increase total case closures.

These improvements to our operations have yielded measurable results in a short period of time. Compared to FY23, we processed 50% more complaints in FY24, and we completed 40% more investigations. Nevertheless, we remain unable to meet the high volume of new demands upon our office and are at the point of needing to turn people away simply due to resources.

Staff members have experienced overwhelm and burnout, causing additional delays due to long-term leave and the need to train new staff. We are not able to process new intakes in a timely manner (averaging 3-6 months), and we continue to receive more complaints each month than we are able to close. Every week, the HRC processes calls and emails from Vermont's most vulnerable community members, most often individuals with disabilities, lower income parents, people of color, and the elderly. Many of these Vermonters are in crisis and require additional supports and resources beyond what the HRC's staff members are able to provide.

Unfortunately, the HRC has exceeded its capacity to conduct new investigations. There are 30 complaints pending at our office that do not have an investigator assigned. Meanwhile, 15 more complaints have been accepted and will be filed soon. The HRC must have new positions and retain new staff to conduct these investigations if we are going to continue to accept complaints.

What does the HRC need?

The HRC requires a **drastic increase to our staffing capacity** in order to fulfill our statutory mandate to enforce Vermont's anti-discrimination protections. Below is a list of the positions requested and a brief explanation for each.

- **1 Intake Specialist** is needed to staff the phones, review new complaint questionnaires, respond to a large volume of email inquiries, and schedule/conduct intake meetings with a trauma-informed perspective. HRC lacks a single position dedicated to processing intakes, and this has resulted in significant delays for new inquiries. Salary and benefits for this position for FY26 are estimated at \$100,000.
- **3 new Staff Attorney Investigators** are needed immediately to address the backlog of new complaints, allow us to process cases much more quickly, and continue to accept new cases at the pace of intakes. The three investigator positions currently allocated to the HRC are insufficient to meet the needs of the state and disproportionate to staffing levels of other human rights commissions. The number of HRC investigator positions has levelled at three for far too long, while the number of new complaints has significantly increased in the past year. Salary and benefits for one Staff Attorney Investigator position are estimated at \$130,000 for FY26.
- **1 Paralegal** is needed to enable us to process complex cases, index and review large volumes of documents and data, and support enforcement actions in court. It is standard practice for Human Rights Commission offices in other states to have the service of a paralegal on staff. Salary and benefits for this position for FY26 are estimated at \$100,000.
- **1 Communications and Outreach Coordinator** is needed to modernize the HRC website, build a social media presence, support outreach work, and assist education efforts about anti-discrimination laws statewide. This is crucial to enable the HRC to get the word out about Vermonters' rights and responsibilities under the Fair Housing and Public Accommodations Act. Salary and benefits for this position for FY26 are estimated at \$100,000.
- **1 part-time Mediator position** is needed to effectuate settlement conversations at the outset of every case and support the parties in finding resolutions to their complaints in lieu of investigation or litigation. This will allow us to process more complaints in an efficient and positive manner for all parties. Salary for this part-time position is estimated at \$52,209 for FY26.
- **1 part-time Social Worker/Case Manager** is needed to assist new inquiries and parties in our cases. Many complainants and some respondents require services

and referrals to address housing insecurity, mental health crisis, trauma, disability-related barriers, and other supports in order to participate meaningfully in our process and minimize re-traumatization. Salary for this part-time position is estimated at \$52,209 for FY26.

An increase in staffing levels will also necessitate additional operating expenses such as computers and office space, estimated at \$68,000 for FY26.