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Human Rights Commission
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MEMORANDUM

TO: House Judiciary Committee
FROM: Big Hartman, Esq. HRC Executive Director & General Counsel
DATE: February 5, 2026
RE: FY27 HRC Budget

The mission of the State of Vermont Human Rights Commission is to advance full civil and human rights in Vermont. Discrimination in Vermont persists, despite our best efforts. At the same time, we are all witnessing a national human rights crisis unfold across the country. Our federal government has dismantled or abandoned meaningful civil rights enforcement, leaving states with limited resources and all the burden of ensuring that the civil rights progress of the past 60 years was not in vain. In today's reality, the work of the HRC is more important than ever. Unfortunately, the Governor's recommended budget for FY27 will not enable us to fulfill our crucial mission in these times.

First, as I discussed with this Committee on February 3, 2026, HRC can no longer rely on federal funds from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to support our fair housing discrimination work. HUD is taking action that will purposefully and effectively dismantle federal fair housing enforcement in this country. HUD will be seeking to disqualify Vermont from the Fair Housing Assistance Program, because our state fair housing laws are more protective than the federal Fair Housing Act. HUD has historically provided HRC with less than 10% of our budget. The last time we received federal funds from HUD, in FY24, we received approximately $95,000.

Rather than account for this relatively small loss of federal funds in FY27, the Governor's recommended budget proposes that HRC absorb that loss with another vacancy turnover savings of nearly $65,000. With a staff of only 9 employees, it is difficult to foresee how our office can accomplish that magnitude of savings without a reduction in staff or temporary furlough. Importantly, now is <u>not</u> the time to reduce HRC operations – it is just the opposite.

The HRC has been historically understaffed and under-resourced, leading to delayed case processing, a high number of declined investigations, backlog of complaints, and staff burnout and turnover. The legislature wisely created two new positions in FY26 (a staff

attorney investigator and an intake coordinator), but this was only a portion of what we needed to meet the needs of Vermonters at present.

At this time, in addition to ensuring that we can keep our office operating at full capacity for the duration of FY27, HRC requests the creation of three new positions. The proposed full-time exempt positions needed are described below:

- **Policy Director**: The HRC statute requires that the Commission continually examine the effectiveness of Vermont's anti-discrimination laws, study persistent discriminatory practices, and recommend measures to enhance legal protections. See 9 V.S.A. § 4552(a). Currently, the Executive Director is the only position at the HRC with the capacity to address these significant policy and legislative matters. The HRC needs a full-time Policy Director to effectively advise lawmakers and other leaders, participate in various working groups and committees, study discrimination in Vermont, and issue substantive recommendations to address the civil rights crisis we all now face. We estimate that this position's salary and benefits would total approximately $130,000 in FY27.
- **Staff Attorney Investigator**: HRC currently has 4 Staff Attorney Investigators who conduct discrimination investigations, and one Senior Counsel who handles all HRC-initiated litigation. This staffing level does not allow HRC to keep pace with requests for new investigations, and instead we decline requests for new investigations much more often than we accept them. A fifth staff attorney investigator will enable us to accept more complaints for investigation, reduce length of investigations, and provide co-counsel for trial as needed. We estimate this position's salary and benefits would total approximately $130,000 in FY27.
- **Paralegal**: This position is needed to assist HRC's Senior Counsel with the 15-20 enforcement actions that HRC has filed in court at any given time. It is standard practice for Human Rights Commission offices in other states to have the service of at least one paralegal on staff to assist with complex cases, document management, and clerical tasks. It is essential to our success and effectiveness in our enforcement actions to have a paralegal. We estimate this position's salary and benefits would total approximately $108,000 in FY27.

FY27 HRC Appropriation Request Summary

Governor's Recommended Budget:	$1,358,757
Remove "Vacancy Turnover Savings":	$64,540
New Policy Director Position:	$130,000
New Staff Attorney Investigator Position:	$130,000
New Paralegal Position:	$108,000
Total Proposed FY27 GF Appropriation:	**$1,791,297**