

**Office of Human Rights Review
Committee
2019 Report**

**Prepared for
Howard County Executive Calvin Ball**

REVIEW COMMITTEE

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INTRODUCTION

The Howard County Office of Human Rights (OHR) is an essential agency of Howard County Government that is tasked with investigating complaints of discrimination, enforcing the Howard County Human Rights Law, and helping educate residents, businesses, and other community members about the importance of and legal requirements related to human rights. The Human Rights Commission hears cases brought forth by investigators in OHR and helps conduct education and outreach to the community about the importance of equal opportunities.

Under Howard County law, it is illegal to discriminate based on the following attributes:

- Race
- Color
- Creed
- National Origin
- Source of Income
- Familial Status
- Sex
- Occupation
- Religion
- Political Opinion
- Personal Appearance
- Disability
- Age
- Marital Status
- Sexual Orientation
- Gender Identity

Furthermore, under Howard County law, the Howard County Government shall direct its efforts and resources toward eliminating discriminatory practices within Howard County in:

- Employment
- Housing
- Finance/Lending
- Public Accommodation
- Law Enforcement

The provisions of the human rights law apply both to public institutions and agencies as well as private businesses, with some exceptions.

Over the last several years, members of our community have expressed growing concerns with incidences of bias, discrimination, and hate. Some of the incidences have been widely publicized, while others happen without much notice. In many ways, what we are seeing in Howard County reflects larger concerns that are surfacing throughout our country.

The OHR documented 58 hate-bias incidents in 2018, defined as acts of prejudice, hate or violence directed because of race, religion, ethnic background or sexual orientation. These numbers represent an increase from the previous year.

2018 also saw 61 reports of employment discrimination, 16 reports of housing discrimination, and 1 report of public accommodation discrimination. Cases included at least 32 complaints based on race, 22 based on disability, 16 based on gender, and 9 based on sexual orientation, among others.

Howard County Executive Calvin Ball convened this Task Force to examine the OHR to better understand how it can serve as a model and how it can further the culture of equity and inclusion that our community and its leaders, like Dr. Ball, espouse.

Comprised of community leaders and experts, the OHR Task Force convened in February of 2019 and over the course of five weeks, conducted several interviews with OHR staff and members of the Human Rights Commission. It also hosted two public hearings to solicit testimony from members of the public.

Broadly speaking, members of the Task Force found that OHR's investigation, compliance, and resolution efforts are well-done and effective. The process for investigating complaints is thorough and professional, and the impression of the Task Force is that the outcomes are fair and in line with the County's law.

That said, there are areas where OHR could expand or improve its activities—primarily, through organizational restructuring, a stronger and more supported outreach and educational program, and internal and external training and organizational development initiatives.

The Task Force's specific recommendations are below, categorized by topic area.

PRIMARY AREAS OF RECOMMENDATION

Administrator

An immediate task facing Howard County Government and the OHR is to address the fact that the position of Administrator is currently vacant and being filled in an “acting” manner. While Howard County Code provides a minimum set of qualifications for the position of OHR Administrator, the Task Force acknowledges that these should not be limiting in considering potential candidates for next leader of this office.

Per Section 12.205 of the County Code, the Human Rights Administrator shall have thorough knowledge of the types of discrimination and methods and techniques for eliminating it, including considerable knowledge of County, State and Federal laws regarding discrimination in such areas as housing, employment, public accommodations, law enforcement, financing and related fields. The Administrator shall have had at least five years of experience in human relations or a related field, one year of which shall have dealt with investigating and/or conciliating complaints of discrimination, and two years of which shall have included managerial or administrative experience.

In addition to these qualifications, the Task Force believes that the next OHR Administrator should be well versed in conflict resolution and civil investigation, have strong planning and analytical skills, and possess a vision for the office that aligns with the values and aspirations of our community.

It will also be important for the Administrator to possess strong skills in technology and be proficient with computers, especially in terms of implementing outcome-based strategies. Additionally, the Administrator should understand how to engage the online community through social media.

Organizational Restructuring

- Develop an organizational strategic plan with a robust communications and outreach component as well as verifiable goals and benchmarks to help guide the development and growth of the office amidst the backdrop of ongoing institutional, community, and social changes.
- Create a full-time position to support OHR’s community outreach and engagement efforts (more below).
- Fill the immediate vacancies on the Commission and consider code or procedural changes to ensure the Commission has the necessary breadth of expertise and qualifications to fulfill its obligations.

- Develop a public dashboard of goals, measures, and other outcomes to demonstrate to the community the scope of work being done and the accomplishments of the organization.
- Explore re-defining the role of the MLK Commission to ensure the goals of this body are being met.

Community Outreach and Engagement

- Expand proactive and strategic community outreach efforts to engage partners, communities, neighborhoods, and other relationships to ensure all in the community know of OHR's existence, purpose, and resources.
- Expand OHR's role as a resource to public and private institutions to help them better understand their legal obligations and more importantly to help foster and grow a culture of equity and inclusion throughout our civic bodies and larger community.
- Create advisory groups and tailor outreach strategies to distinct communities in the County based on their unique needs and attributes, and consider hiring or engaging liaisons to serve as points-of-contact
- Develop a robust social media presence to help the community and partners understand OHR's role, but more critically the important of human and civil rights broadly. Consider the creation of an online video that provides an overview of OHR and the Human Rights Commission that would empower residents to better understand the roles of this office and commission.
- Develop a stronger presence as a resource to public school students who need support in addressing their concerns from an entity outside the school system itself.

Training and Organizational Development

- Develop a robust training program for new and existing Commissioners to help them better understand their role, obligations, and opportunities to affect change.
- Develop a training protocol and have regular meetings with partner organizations like County Government, County Council, the Board of Education, Howard County Public School System, and Howard Community College and establish liaisons to ensure ongoing relationships these institutions and their stakeholders. Consider making this training available to HR department of businesses and other large organizations located and operating in Howard County.