



# HUMAN RELATIONS COMMISSION

Embrace Diversity. End Discrimination.

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## **Annual Report FY 2015**

**D. Michael Lyles, Esq., Executive Director**

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## Executive Director's Summary



**Dear Citizens, Visitors and Friends of Prince George's County,**

FY2015, which ended on June 30, 2015, was driven by several staffing changes which continued from FY14 and impacted our ability to be as effective as we had been in previous years. But we are no less dedicated to delivering premier service as the County's civil rights education and enforcement agency. As our performance statistics will show, we only marginally improved mediation numbers and started to have some cases slip back into the backlog status. At points during the year we were operating with severely limited staffing and increased attention to human trafficking initiatives. Despite our setbacks, we have brought on new investigators as of the new fiscal year and have been successful in refocusing our efforts on adjudications before the Commissioners and are poised to hold more civil rights violators accountable in FY16. I commend the remaining staff of lead investigators for staying on task and keeping the office investigations moving in the right direction, albeit slower than is customary for us.

Although, we are facing the budget restrictions felt by our sister agencies, we are no less accountable for producing strong cases, where the evidence leads us, and prosecuting, under our County Code - Division 12, more cases of discrimination than ever before. We thank County Executive Rushern L. Baker, III and our Director of Community Relations Musa Eubanks for continuing to see to it that we had the resources we need, even in these tight budget times, to continue our work. FY16 promises to be somewhat more positive as our staffing numbers have recovered to a great degree and we ask the County to restore funding for one investigative position that was reduced as a result of the budget. Our work with the Commissioners and businesses and everyday citizens of this county is a true blessing, but requires all of us to be vigilant in the fight against discrimination in all its forms, whether in the work place, in places of public accommodations and in housing, especially. We believe that FY 16 is the year we tackle housing discrimination in a big way, if not in investigations and adjudications, surely in the bully pulpit. It is my belief that until we recognize as a community that affordable, accessible, discrimination-free housing, near local transportation is a right and is at the crux of many of our social ills, we will be only working the edges of improving life for our residents. This Annual Report, covering the period from July 1, 2014 through June 30, 2015, is a view into the accomplishments and activities of the Commission team in FY15. We hope you read it and find things that you can use. Be reminded that the Commission's anti-discrimination services are free, confidential, quick and easy to use. We have a ways to go to be truly physically accessible, but we make every attempt to provide our services in the most accessible ways possible to all residents regardless of physical or mental disability.

Embrace Diversity and End Discrimination

*D. Michael Lyles*

D. Michael Lyles, Esquire  
Executive Director

# Letter from Commission Acting Chairperson



Dear Citizens of Prince George's County,

FY2015 was a very busy one for the Human Relations Commission. By the time you read this report, the Commission will be in the midst of a new crossroad as the former chair of the Commission; Nichele Vaughan left the Commission after serving our County for nearly 10 years. Former Chair Vaughan and I have worked on the Commission together for some eight years and she will be missed. That being said and since former Chair Vaughan served as Chair all of FY2015, I am pleased to present you with the report that former Chair Vaughan wrote prior to her departure from the Commission.

***"Our landscape for human rights is constantly changing. This fiscal year the Human Relations Commission has taken an even more proactive approach to protecting the civil rights of the citizens of Prince George's County and navigating our dynamic environment. By refining our processes and taking a visible and aggressive stance against discrimination, we have strengthened our foundation for justice and community service.***

***We live in a climate where parties to discrimination cases are more informed. Complainants understand their rights and in general, respondents have an awareness of their responsibilities. Our response to this has been to tighten our processes for reviewing and adjudicating discrimination cases. We have accomplished this by creating a protocol for review, which enables us to meticulously examine each appeal while, at the same time, maintain methodical integrity. Making sound and just decisions based on the facts is our ultimate goal.***

***To support these enhancements, we partnered with our counsel to the Commission to develop the most extensive Commissioner training that we've had within the past seven years. Each Commissioner has been trained and serves with an even more in-depth comprehension of what it takes to fulfill our mission from both an operational and legal perspective.***

***In addition, part of our mission includes taking the steps necessary to prevent discrimination. This year we have projected our voice on global, national, and local issues in a deliberate effort to combat discrimination and crimes against humanity. We recognize that supporting these broader efforts has a direct impact on our ability to be successful at a local level. This year the Commission issued a resolution condemning Boko Haram's abduction of Nigerian schoolgirls. We also joined with other local agencies supporting a written appeal to the U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy recommending how the federal government can support state and local agencies working to protect human rights. At a local level, we were successful in getting several bills passed including the legislation that increased***

***the damages cap to two hundred thousand dollars. This legislation allows for steeper penalties for parties who violate civil rights and increased remedies for victims.***

***Overall, we have had a successful year in that every action that we have taken has had a positive impact on our service to the community. Moving forward, the Commission will continue to be proactive in order to address the needs of our County. Adapting as necessary, we will maintain a strong voice against civil rights violations and ensure justice for victims of discrimination.” former Chair-Nichele Vaughan***

We have a great group of Commissioners who continue to serve on the Commission and as we move forward, their support and commitment is key to our ability to do the people’s work.

Sincerely,

*Merrill Smith Jr.*

Merrill Smith, Jr.  
Acting Chairperson

## Our Guiding Principles

### VISION

THE PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY HUMAN RELATIONS COMMISSION IS COMMITTED TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY AS A GREAT PLACE TO LIVE, WORK AND PLAY: WHERE ALL ARE FREE TO PURSUE THEIR TALENTS AND DREAMS UNHINDERED BY BIAS, MISUNDERSTANDING AND CONFLICT BASED ON RACE, RELIGION, NATIONAL ORIGIN, AGE, OCCUPATION, MARITAL STATUS, POLITICAL OPINION, PERSONAL APPEARANCE, SEXUAL ORIENTATION, DISABILITY, OR FAMILIAL STATUS.

### MISSION

IT SHALL BE THE MISSION OF THE PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY HUMAN RELATIONS COMMISSION, AS THE COUNTY'S CIVIL RIGHTS EDUCATION AND ENFORCEMENT AGENCY *TO*:

- Provide residents, businesses and visitors an efficient and cost effective administrative alternative for investigating, mediating and adjudicating complaints of unlawful discrimination in the areas of housing, employment, law enforcement, education, public accommodations and real estate transactions;
- Be professional, competent and fair to all those we serve;
- Value Staff for their skill, dedication and creativity—in turn, the Commission will provide a positive work environment based on mutual respect and dignity, where personal and professional development is encouraged;
- Always seek ways to improve our systems and processes in the interest of producing more thorough investigations while resolving cases in a timely manner;
- We will Work to ensure that our services are equally accessible to those of various abilities and of limited English proficiency.

### CORE VALUES

**PUBLIC SERVICE:** We are committed to serving and educating the public in a professional, impartial and efficient manner. Quality investigations, alternative dispute resolution and adjudications will be accomplished by utilizing skilled and motivated employees who are responsive to the needs of those who interface with the Commission.

**DEDICATION:** We will demonstrate our commitment to public service by being responsible, dependable and proactive professionals who will exhibit pride and excellence in fulfilling our mission.

**TEAMWORK:** We will empower our employees to achieve a quality work product and harmonious work environment through open communication, positive interaction and the spirit of cooperation.

**RESPECT:** We respect the diversity, talents and ideas of all Commission Staff, our most valued resource. We honor the right of every member of our team and the public to contribute, to be heard and to be treated with dignity.

**INTEGRITY:** We pledge to fulfill our duties and responsibilities without bias and the aim of producing the right result in the public interest.

## Legislative Initiatives

### Division 12 Legislative Initiative

The Commission initiated legislation to create an additional class of protected individuals under Division 12 of the Prince George's County Code. Through Councilmember Obie Patterson, CB-78-2014 or Ban the Box, was introduced in 2014 to make it illegal for employers to inquire into an applicant's criminal background until *after* the first interview. This bill would also make it illegal for employers to request such information on their applications.

The purpose of this legislation was to remove a persistent barrier to many residents in the County, a negative criminal history. Many eligible applicants were often kept out of their desired job markets due to their criminal background. This legislation allowed individuals like these the opportunity to at least be interviewed and considered for a position before there is the taint of a criminal background inquiry. Additionally, this legislation also hoped to eradicate the disproportionate impact premature inquiries into an applicant's criminal background has on minority applicants, especially when the crimes are often minor offenses.

The Commission was also successful in creating legislation to increase the amount of compensatory and civil damages that we were able to seek to redress the wrongs done to our complainants. CB-85-2014 was also passed in 2014 and went into effect immediately.



#### ▲ DIVISION 12

#### ▲ HUMAN TRAFFICKING INITIATIVES AND BAN THE BOX

### APPLICATION FOR EMPLOYMENT

Q1) Have you ever been convicted of or plead guilty to a criminal offense?

☐ YES

☐ NO

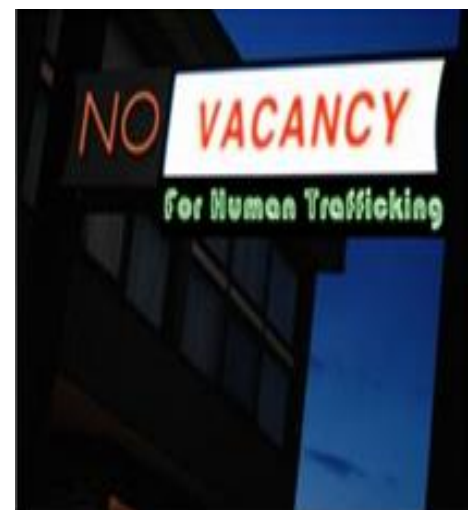
☒ NONE OF YOUR BUSINESS



### Human Trafficking Initiatives and legislation

The Human Relations Commission stood against the scourge of Human Trafficking of children in our County and across the State. In July of 2012 a resolution passed by the Prince George's County Council establishing the first local government task force to combat Labor and Sex Trafficking in the state. Since then, we have learned much about Human Trafficking and the commercial sex trade of our citizens, especially children from within and from outside our County, we have fought and organized to keep together a federation of government agencies, non-profits, churches, individuals and county-based companies.

Through the combined efforts of the various organizations within the Human Trafficking Task Force, we have been able to successfully pass three Human Trafficking Bills, CB-79-2014, CB-80-2014 and CB-81-2014. CB-79-2014 makes it illegal for lodging establishments to rent rooms by the hour; this has the effect of thwarting opportunities for human traffickers to profit from their conduct. CB-80-2014 requires lodging establishments to train their employees on how to detect human trafficking violations. CB-81-2014 implements more stringent requirements for massage establishments, operators, managers and technicians. The Commission hoped to continue making strides towards eradicating human trafficking in the coming fiscal year.



## TABLE OF LEGISLATIVE AMENDMENTS TO THE HUMAN RELATIONS COMMISSION ACT

### CURRENT ORDINANCE

### PROPOSED AMENDMENTS

#### HUMAN TRAFFICKING LEGISLATION

*The Executive Director of the Prince George's County Human Relations Commission and his staff endeavored to create a Human Trafficking taskforce to combat the prevalence of human trafficking in our area. As a result of our involvement, we have been instrumental in getting several pieces of legislation passed.*

CB-79-2014: HUMAN TRAFFICKING –  
LODGING ESTABLISHMENTS – ROOM RENTAL

**PASSED:** this bill prohibits room rentals by the hour. This bill is particularly helpful towards thwarting human trafficking because the majority of human trafficking activity takes place in hotels or motels that will allow room rentals by the hour. If such a practice is made illegal, it reduces opportunities for promoting human trafficking and effectively serves its purpose.

CB-80-2014: HUMAN TRAFFICKING –  
LODGING ESTABLISHMENTS – EMPLOYEE  
TRAINING

**PASSED:** this bill requires the training of employees of lodging establishments to detect instances of human trafficking. At these lodging establishments employees do not know how to detect a human trafficking situation. This bill would require employers to train their employees on how to detect human trafficking and these training tools will be supervised by law enforcement.

CB-81-2014 –MESSAGE ESTABLISHMENT  
LICENSING

**PASSED:** this bill requires additional information for licensing of massage establishments, operators, managers and technicians. A large amount of human trafficking also takes place in massage parlors that are used for human trafficking purposes. Requiring more stringent checks on licensures for these places works to reduce the potential occurrences of human trafficking.

### Our Performance

The Prince George's County Human Relations Commission measures performance via the following: See Addendums 1 through 6

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## Outreach & Education

The practice of connecting the Community to information, services, education and opportunity is defined as Outreach & Education. For The Prince George's County Human Relations Commission, this practice is a performance cornerstone. For this reporting period, the Commission has continued to improve and expand on its existing Outreach & Education Initiatives while engaging the Community through a variety of Outreach opportunities.

**Civil Rights Fellowship Program:** The Prince George's County Human Relations Commission continues to seek committed attorneys and other professionals for participation in this annual Civil Rights Fellowship Program. Under the program, persons with a committed interest in civil rights law will serve as Fellows to the Human Relations Commission, serving at the pleasure of the Executive Director. Fellows are encouraged to take part in monthly Commission meetings and Public Hearings as well as participate in Outreach activities. The monthly Commission meetings and hearings before the Commission offer a candidate a first-hand opportunity to witness and assist with the Commission's processes and to observe how the rights of those discriminated against are championed by this independent government entity.

**Outreach to the Latino Community:** The Prince George's County Human Relations Commission will continue its outreach efforts and collaboration through its "CASA de Maryland" initiative. CASA was founded in 1985 to improve the quality of life and legal justice for Latinos and low-income families through education, training and advocacy services. CASA does not accept complaints and therefore refers housing discrimination and other types of discrimination complaints to the Commission.

### **OTHER OUTREACH & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES FOR THIS REPORTING PERIOD INCLUDE**

- August 2, 2014 – Executive Director Lyles was a participant of the MMCDC Law Day at Kettering Baptist Church in Upper Marlboro, Maryland;
  - September 4th-7th, 2014 – Commissioners and staff attended the annual Prince George's County Fair;
  - September 13, 2014 – Participated in Community Wide Fair at Reid Temple AME Church in Glenn Dale, MD;
  - September 20, 2014 – Executive Director Lyles attended the Women's Legislative Conference (WE3) at Prince George's Community College;
  - September 21, 2014 – Commissioners were participants of the 33<sup>rd</sup> Annual Hispanic Festival at Lane Manor Park in Adelphi, Maryland;
  - October 18, 2014 – Executive Director Lyles attended the Congresswoman Donna Edwards 6<sup>th</sup> Annual College & Career Fair held at Annapolis High School in Annapolis, Maryland;
  - November 6, 2014 – Participants of the LGBT Youth Task Force Conference at Prince George's Community College in Largo, Maryland;
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- February 24, 2015 – Prince George's County Human Trafficking Task Force General Body meeting held in the County Council conference room, County Administration Building, Upper Marlboro, Maryland;
  - March 2, 2015 – Prince George's County Human Trafficking Task Force - Health Professionals Training Session held in Largo, Maryland;
  - March 7, 2015 – Participated in the Mt. Nebo AME: Police and Community Interaction Forum in Bowie, Maryland;
  - March 9, 2015 – Faith based Domestic Violence Training joint effort with the State's Attorney's Office and the Prince George's Department of Health and Human Services held at the First Baptist Church of Glenarden Ministry Center in Landover, Maryland;
  - March 20, 2015 – Maryland Association of Human Rights Agencies Annual Human Rights Day held at the Miller Senate Building in Annapolis, Maryland;
  - June 13, 2015 – Annual Juneteenth event held at Walker Mill Regional Park in District Heights, Maryland.
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## Meet Our Commissioners

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**Chairperson – Nichele Vaughan:**  
**(Resigned July, 2015)**

Chair Vaughan resigned from her position as Chairperson in July of 2015. Chair Vaughan has been a resident of Prince George's County since 2006. Chair Vaughan's spirit for advocating the civil rights of the citizens of Prince George's county led to her appointment as a Commissioner in 2007. In 2011, she was appointed Chairperson of the Commission. Subsequently, Chair Vaughan was also a member of the Commission's Executive Committee and worked diligently to support anti-discrimination legislation, adjudicate discrimination cases and found creative ways to engage in community outreach. Ms. Vaughan also serves on the Victim Services Committee of the Prince Georges County Human Trafficking Task Force. Chair Vaughan has a Bachelor's of Science in Finance and a Masters of Business Administration degree from George Mason University. She also has a Masters of Arts in Education and Human Development from the George Washington University. Chair Vaughan worked for a Fortune 500 company for over ten years supporting government clients and she is also a former 3<sup>rd</sup> grade educator. Currently, Chair Vaughan serves on the board of Joe's Movement Emporium, a non-profit performing arts organization that offers programs in education, production, and artists services for both youth and adults. Chair Vaughan is also a licensed realtor and a certified yoga and Qigong instructor. She teaches group yoga classes and provides private, therapeutic yoga services to individual clients in Maryland and the District of Columbia.



**Vice-Chairperson – Merrill Smith Jr.:**

Commissioner Merrill Smith, Jr. is a small business owner and the Vice-Chair for the Prince George's County Human Relations Commission. Prior to joining the Commission, Mr. Smith worked in the private sector for nearly 25 years in various capacities including Chief Operating Officer, Vice-President of Operations, and Regional Vice-President. A native of Georgia, Mr. Smith has a passion for Civil and Human Rights that has led him to serve as a Commissioner.

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Commissioner Smith is President of Van McCoy legacy branch of ASALH, a proud supporter of the 105 Voices of History Choir and is a graduate and lifetime alumni of The Ohio State University. Mr. Smith also has a Lean Six Sigma Certificate from Villanova University. Commissioner Smith has been a resident of Prince George's County since relocating to the area in 2003.



**Secretary- Nora Edelman:**

Commissioner Nora Edelman was born in Asunción, Paraguay and currently resides in College Park, MD. Commissioner Edelman is a graduate of the University of Maryland University College, and is currently employed with Community Legal Services of Prince George's County, Inc., where she serves as Deputy Director. Commissioner Edelman served on several boards including the Prince George's County Child Resource Center and the Family Crisis Center. She was the co-chair of the Hispanic Community Task Force, a member of the Prince George's County Circuit Court Latino Task Force, a founding member of the Prince George's Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and a founding member of the Maryland Latino Coalition for Justice.



**Commissioner Katrina Burson:**

Commissioner Burson has been a professional registered nurse for 20 years. She is currently employed as a Clinical Research Associate for a large non-profit organization in Rockville, Maryland. Commissioner Burson has spent most of her career caring for and advocating on behalf of vulnerable populations. Commissioner Burson is also a strong supporter and activist for LGBTQ equality and is passionate about building relationships for and with the LGBTQ community. The right of equality should not be mutable based on ethnicity, race, sex, gender or sexual orientation. Commissioner Burson was born and raised in Houston, Texas but relocated to Maryland in 2012. Commissioner Burson lived abroad in London, England for nearly a decade. While there she worked on numerous projects on behalf of the LGBT Community. She carried her passion to Maryland and continues to be a volunteer with the Prince George's County Youth Equality Project. Commissioner Burson is married to her partner, Kenya. They have one son, Kenneth, who is currently serving in the United States Armed Forces. In her spare time, she develops real estate. Commissioner Burson is proud to be living in a state that recognizes marriage equality and actively seeks to unite communities and reduce discriminatory practices in public domains.



**Commissioner Gerald Folsom:**

Commissioner Folsom, son of Mary Nell and late George Thomas Folsom, is originally from Quitman, Georgia and is employed by the U.S. Department of Transportation as a Senior Transportation Specialist in Washington, D.C. He currently serves on the ministerial staff of Community of Hope AME church under the direction of Rev. Tony Lee in Hillcrest Heights, MD. He serves as ministry leader of Community of Hope's Social Justice and Public Service Ministry and Assistant Men's Ministry leader. On Friday, April 11, 2014, Commissioner Folsom was ordained as an itinerant elder in the AME Church at the Washington Annual AME Conference. Commissioner Folsom has received his Ph.D. in Communication and Culture from Howard University in Washington, D.C., Master of Divinity from Howard University, his M.A. in Organizational Communication from Bowie State University in Bowie, MD, and B.S. in Liberal Arts from Excelsior College in Albany, NY. Commissioner Folsom is a life member of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. and currently serves as the Second District Chaplain, overseeing the spiritual needs of Omega men in Maryland, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, and Pennsylvania. Commissioner Folsom served as the Co-Chairman of the Public Engagement Committee on the Transition Team for the Honorable Rushern L. Baker III, County Executive, Prince George's County, MD. On November 7, 2012, he was appointed by the Prince George's County Executive as a Commissioner on the County's Human Relations Commission (County's Civil Rights Agency). He is married to Joyce Folsom and they reside in Upper Marlboro, MD.



**Commissioner Gail Heath:**

Commissioner Heath is a labor relations professional, with experience working for labor unions and management in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. Commissioner Heath has a Bachelor's of Arts in Political Science from the University of Illinois at Chicago and a Juris Doctorate from the Howard University School of Law. Commissioner Heath is originally from Chicago, IL, and has a brother who proudly serves in the U.S. Army and a sister. She has served as a Commissioner since 2012 and is a resident of Laurel.

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**Commissioner Walter L. Howell Jr.:**

Commissioner Howell has broad public sector management, administrative and supervisory experience. He recently directed the D.C. Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services – Office of Internal Integrity overseeing the agency’s Investigation Division and Administrative Hearings Division. He also served as a child support enforcement executive with the Office of the Attorney General for the District of Columbia. Commissioner Howell was also selected by Maryland State Superintendent of Schools to serve as the Maryland State Department of Education Liaison Officer to Prince George’s County Public Schools concerning the governance, management and finance of the public school system. Commissioner Howell has also served as a commissioner for the Prince George’s County Commission for Children, Youth and Families; and the Prince George’s County Board of Social Services. Commissioner Howell holds a Master in Public Administration degree from Harvard University, a Master of Social Work degree from the University of Pennsylvania, a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science from Morehouse College and is also a graduate of the United States Presidential Management Fellows Program and the Johns Hopkins University Leadership Development Program for Minority Managers.



**Commissioner Eric Jackson:**

Commissioner Jackson is a partner with The Sack Law Firm P.C., a full service law firm based in McLean, Virginia. He has a diverse law practice which includes representation of individuals, law firms, associations and emerging and large companies in business litigation, employment and intellectual property cases. Commissioner Jackson also assists families and children with special needs in navigating the educational and legal labyrinths necessary to obtain special education services. Prior to joining The Sack Law Firm P.C., Commissioner Jackson was a partner at Jenner & Block LLP and Robins, Kaplan, Miller & Ciresi L.L.P. in Washington, D.C. Commissioner Jackson earned an A.B., Values, Technology, Science and Society from Stanford University and a J.D. from the University of Wisconsin Law School. Commissioner Jackson is active in the community. On November 7, 2012, he was sworn in as a Commissioner of the Prince George’s County Human Relations Commission. He previously served as Vice Chair of the D.C. Bar Pro Bono Committee. A father of three active children, Commissioner Jackson resides in Fort Washington, Maryland.

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**Commissioner Janelle Johnson:**

A native of Hampton, Virginia, Commissioner Janelle Johnson attended the University of Illinois with a full scholarship in track and field. She competed in the 1995 Olympic Festival and qualified for the 1996 Olympic Trials. Commissioner Johnson transferred to George Mason University graduating with a degree in Broadcast Journalism, later receiving her Master's Degree in Business from Johns Hopkins University, after relocating to the Washington D.C. area in 1998. She has held positions in various technology companies, including Sprint and Lockheed Martin, where she served as the corporate Diversity Manager. Her current work assignment is with the United States Department of Transportation (DOT) in the Office of the Secretary. She is also an ordained minister on the ministerial staff of Reid Temple AME Church. Commissioner Johnson believes her greatest commitment is to serve God, people, and the community.



**Commissioner Eugene Langbehn:**

Commissioner Langbehn is a retired career and vocational rehabilitation counselor with a Master's Degree in Counseling and Personnel Services with specialization in counseling individuals who have disabilities. Commissioner Langbehn has an AA degree in Paralegal Studies. Previously, Commissioner Langbehn was employed in administrative positions with the State of Maryland, including legal assistant to the State Appeals Officer for the Department of Human Resources. He was appointed to the Prince George's County Human Relations Commission in 2012 and also serves on the Prince George's County Commission for Individuals with Disabilities. Commissioner Langbehn founded and chairs Maryland United for Peace and Justice, a statewide non-profit, advocacy and education coalition. He serves on boards of non-profits, including Pax Christi Metro DC and Baltimore, and Progressive Maryland, and he helped found Maryland Committee to Amend. Previously, Commissioner Langbehn was an elected member of the Democratic State Central Committee of Maryland and Political Action Chair of the AFSCME State Employees Council 92. As a Chief Steward with AFSCME, he handled employee grievances. His disabilities include multiple chemical sensitivity and toxic encephalopathy. After becoming disabled, Commissioner Langbehn served on the Governor's Committee for Employment of People with Disabilities and The Advisory Board of the ADA Information Center for the Mid- Atlantic Region.

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**Commissioner Troy Lowe, Esquire:**

Commissioner Lowe is a product of Prince George's County. He matriculated through St. John's Catholic school, then Surrattsville Senior High School, both in Clinton, Maryland. He was a four year letterman in football at Surrattsville. After receiving his bachelor's degree from Johnson C. Smith University, Commissioner Lowe went on to pursue his juris doctorate in 2005 at The Thomas M. Cooley Law School in Lansing, Michigan. Commissioner Lowe was admitted to the Maryland bar in 2009 and began practicing law as a contract attorney with the United States Department of Justice. In 2011, Commissioner Lowe opened his private practice in Upper Marlboro, Maryland where he focuses on personal injury litigation and family law matters. Commissioner Lowe prides himself on the level of service and attention he provides to each client. His top priority is to ensure each client is confident that their best legal interests are represented. In 2014, Commissioner Lowe was appointed as a Commissioner of the Human Relations Commission where he serves to protect the civil rights of the residents of Prince George's County.



**Commissioner Seth Zirkle:  
(Resigned October 2015)**

Commissioner Zirkle is an attorney with the firm of Reno & Cavanaugh, PLLC, and was appointed a Commissioner in June 2014. Prior to Commissioner Zirkle's appointment to the Commission, he served the City of Annapolis Human Relations Commission as counsel. Seth lives in Cheverly, Maryland, with his wife and daughter.

## MISSION AND SERVICES

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**Mission** - The Human Relations Commission investigates and adjudicates violations of the County's Human Relations Ordinance prohibiting unlawful discrimination in the county. All this in order to promote an active, informed, engaged and vibrant civic culture as well as to foster a strong connection between all those who live, work, and play in the County.

### **Core Services -**

- Mediation and alternate dispute resolution, with a special emphasis on diverting minor civil matters and domestic disputes from the court system;
- Community outreach to inform individuals, businesses, constituency groups and non-profit service providers about the activities of County government as well as their rights responsibilities, and opportunities to participate in improving quality of life in the County;
- Investigation and administrative resolution of complaints of unlawful discrimination in the areas of Employment, Housing, Real Estate Transactions, Financial Lending, Education, Law Enforcement, and Public Accommodations.

### **Strategic Focus in FY 2016 -**

The agency's top priorities in FY 2016 are:

- Increase the percentage of disputes that are resolved through mediation by utilizing an internal case management system to assist in the administration of the dispute resolution program
- Human Relations Commission: Increase the number of discrimination cases resolved through community education, aggressive and timely enforcement of the County's anti-discrimination laws and pursuit of relief for victims and payment of fines and assessments.

## FY 2016 BUDGET SUMMARY

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**GOAL 2** - To provide mediation services to County residents and businesses in order to facilitate resolution of community disputes and civil rights discrimination complaints.

**Objective 2.1** - Increase the percentage of community mediation cases reaching settlement through Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) tools.

Targets	Long Term Target Compared with Performance
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### **Strategies to Accomplish the Objective -**

- **Strategy 2.1.1** - Utilize an internal case management system to assist in the administration of the dispute resolution program;
- **Strategy 2.1.2** - Provide intensive and skills-based training, apprenticeships, continuing education and ongoing evaluation of volunteer mediators in order to ensure mediators possess the needed skills, knowledge and resources.
- **Strategy 2.1.3** - Educate the community members about conflict resolution and mediation

**Objective 2.2** - Increase the percentage of civil rights and discrimination complaints resolved as a result of the effective use of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) techniques.

### **Performance Measures – See Attached Performance Measures**

### **Strategies to Accomplish the Objective -**

- **Strategy 2.2.1** - Ensure printed mediation material is provided and an ADR consult is completed with each complainant.
- **Strategy 2.2.2** - Conduct at least three ADR conferences per month.
- **Strategy 2.2.3** - Ensure mediators receive at least 8 hours of external expert ADR training annually.

**GOAL 4 – HUMAN RELATIONS COMMISSION:** To aggressively investigate and fairly adjudicate claims of unlawful discrimination occurring within Prince George's County in order to encourage fairness and equal treatment under the law.

**Objective 4.1** – Increase the percentage of investigations meeting pre-established criteria for timeliness, thoroughness, and objectivity.

**Performance Measures – See Attached**

**Strategies to Accomplish the Objective –**

- **Strategy 4.1.1** – Continue the Annual Case Audit program which objectively assesses the quality and thoroughness of investigative techniques to ensure that they meet and exceed industry standard.
- **Strategy 4.1.2** – Institute a new online internal case management system created by OIT for the Commission in order to improve regular monitoring of case investigations to better aide the Executive Director in ensuring completion of investigations within 180 days on average from the date of initial complaint.
- **Strategy 4.1.3** – Hire a paralegal to provide administrative, legal and research support to investigative staff as a means of increasing investigative efficiency and increasing the chances that investigative findings will survive legal scrutiny.

**Objective 4.2** – Issue timely and well-written Memoranda, Subpoenas, Commission Orders and Decisions, that are able to withstand legal challenge on appeal.

**Strategies to Accomplish the Objective –**

- **Strategy 4.2.1** – Upon the conclusion of a Public Hearing, the Commission will attempt to issue a well-reasoned and legally supportable decision within 180 days.
- **Strategy 4.2.2** – Mandate that Counsel to the Commission attend all meetings of the Commission, conduct an in-depth annual Commission training and assist in the research and writing of Commission decisions.
- **Strategy 4.2.3** – Provide at least 24 hours of training to Commissioners on proper trial management and procedure, decision making and consideration of evidence.

## COMMISSION PERFORMANCE MEASURES (Addendum 1)

<b>Proposed Changes</b>	<b>Objective</b>	<b>Measure Name</b>	<b>FY 2013 Actual</b>	<b>FY 2014 Actual</b>	<b>FY 2015 Actual</b>	<b>FY 2016 Estimated</b>
2.2	2.2	<i><b>Resources (input)</b></i>				
	2.2	Number of commission mediators	2	2	2	2
	2.2	<i><b>Workload, Demand and Production (output)</b></i>				
	2.2	Number of mediations scheduled	60	24	54	60
	2.2	Number of conciliations scheduled	6	6	6	6
	2.2	Number of mediations conducted	40	17	36	40
	2.2	Number of conciliations conducted	6	4	3	4
	2.2	Number of mediations closed with settlement	20	10	17	20
	2.2	Number of cases that reached a resolution through conciliation	4	3	3	0
	2.2	<i><b>Efficiency</b></i>				
	2.2	Number of ADR sessions conducted per mediator	20.0	10.5	19.0	20.0
	2.2	<i><b>Quality</b></i>				
	2.2	Percentage of mediated cases that reached an agreement	50%	59%	49%	59%
	2.2	Percentage of cases that reached a resolution through conciliation	67%	75%	100%	25%
	2.2	Percentage of customers satisfied with mediation services	100%	100%	100%	100%
	2.2	<i><b>Impact (outcome)</b></i>				
	2.2	Percentage of discrimination cases that reached an agreement through ADR	52%	43%	53%	43%
<b>Proposed Changes</b>	<b>Objective</b>	<b>Measure Name</b>	<b>FY 2013 Actual</b>	<b>FY 2014 Actual</b>	<b>FY 2015 Actual</b>	<b>FY 2016 Estimated</b>
		<i><b>Resources (input)</b></i>				
	4.1	Number of Investigators	8	6	6	6
		<i><b>Workload, Demand and Production (output)</b></i>				
	4.1	Number of intake interviews conducted	300	144	139	144
	4.1	Number of Cases opened as result of intakes conducted	216	70	62	90

	4.1	Number of investigated complaints with "cause" findings	32	5	0	6
	4.1	Number of investigated complaints with "no cause" findings	184	33	71	60
	4.1	Number of administrative closures and voluntary withdrawals	n/a	15	22	22
	4.1	Number of investigated cases closed w/l 180 days	n/a	23	22	22
	4.1	Number of closed investigations subject to quality audit	30	30	30	30
	4.1	Number of "no cause" findings appealed to the Commission	n/a	7	13	7
	4.1	Number of subpoenas served by investigators	n/a	3	4	25
	4.1	Number of MPIA requests processed by staff	n/a	11	5	11
<b>Efficiency</b>						
	4.1	Average number of cases investigated per investigator	27	11	11	11
	4.1	Average number of open cases per month	n/a	62	69	62
<b>Quality</b>						
	4.1	Average case age in days	220	255	255	268
	4.1	Percentage of cases closed within 180 days	n/a	33%	39%	33%
	4.1	Audit Score of closed audited cases (out of 10)	8.38	9.25	9.00	9.00
<b>Impact (outcome)</b>						
	4.1	Percentage of investigative findings sustained by the Commission	99%	100%	99%	95%
	4.1	Percentage of "no-cause" findings reversed or remanded by the Commission	0%	0%	1%	5%
<b>Proposed Changes</b>	<b>Objective</b>	<b>Measure Name</b>	<b>FY 2013 Actual</b>	<b>FY 2014 Actual</b>	<b>FY 2015 Actual</b>	<b>FY 2016 Estimated</b>
	4.2	Number of commissioners	11	13	12	11
	4.2	Number of cases certified for public hearing	2	4	3	5
	4.2	Number of hearings held	2	1	0	4
	4.2	Number of decisions issued	2	1	0	3
	4.2	Number of decisions issued within 180 days	1	1	0	3
	4.2	Number of decisions appealed to Circuit Court	0	1	0	0
	4.2	Number of decisions overturned on	n/a	0	0	0



		appeal				
	4.2	Number of Outreach Events attended	n/a	5	7	7
<b>Efficiency</b>						
	4.2	Percentage of decisions issued within 180 days	50%	100%	100%	100%
<b>Quality</b>						
	4.2	Percentage of decisions overturned on appeal	0%	0%	0%	0%
	4.2	Average number of days decisions are issued after a hearing	180	180	180	180
	4.1	<b>Impact (outcome)</b>				
	4.2	Number of decisions issued in favor of Complainant	1	0	0	4
	4.2	Number of decisions overturned on appeal	0	0	0	0

## ADDENDUM 2

### 2015 Case Audit Report

**Objective:** To review and grade cases closed from the time period of June 1, 2014 through May 31, 2015.

**Purpose:** Annual review of closed cases to discover ways to improve the Agency's investigation process and case jacket presentation for the future.

**2015 Case Audit Conducted by:** Charles Floyd (Investigator), Jason Bush (Former Investigator) and Nia Cowan (Intern).

#### Overall Grade: B+ (3.7)

In July 2015, thirty (30) cases that were closed from June 1, 2014 through May 31, 2015, were randomly chosen from an available pool of ninety-six (96) cases. The 2015 case audit grading system consisted of three (3) categories in which to score the cases. The three (3) categories used to review the thirty (30) selected cases were: Strength, Timeliness, and Organization. The decision was made to abandon the one (1) through ten (10) scoring system utilized in previous audits in order to streamline and simplify the process. For this year's audit, cases were scored on a scale of one (1) to four (4), with one (1) being the lowest score and four (4) being the highest possible score. After reviewing all thirty (30) case jackets, each one was scored and an overall average was calculated based on the scores of each individual category and translated into a letter grade for easier review. The overall letter grade of the 2015 case audit was a "B+" with an overall average score of 3.7.

#### Strength: B+ (3.7)

The investigative team continues to move forward with the strength of their investigations and the quality of the case jackets. The Investigators in the majority of the cases made sure each relevant case jacket had a Report of Investigation, which laid out their entire investigative process for anyone to pick up, read and understand how things went from beginning to end. The case jackets also had the proper documents and information required in each investigation based on its individual specific needs. The Investigators conducted appropriate witness interviews and communications with Complainants and Respondents, but there seemed to be a downturn in the amount of signed witness statements obtained when compared to previous years. It may stem from Investigators better understanding that it is most important to get signatures or notarized statements from those witnesses who can provide information truly relevant or decision-changing to the investigation. In addition, there were no documented complaints against the Investigators in the case files. Furthermore, any cases that were appealed by the Complainant, the Executive Director's determination was upheld by the Commissioners, which speaks positive volumes about the strength and effort the investigative team puts into their quality of work.

### **Timeliness: B (3.5)**

Only one reviewed case investigation took over four hundred (400) days to complete as a result of being reassigned, but the majority of the reviewed cases scored very high in the Timeliness category. Out the thirty (30) reviewed cases, seventeen (17) were closed in one hundred-eighty (180) days or less. Even though the staff has lost several Investigators since the 2014 case audit, the investigative team continues to begin and end the majority of all investigations within the timeframe of one hundred-eighty (180) days.

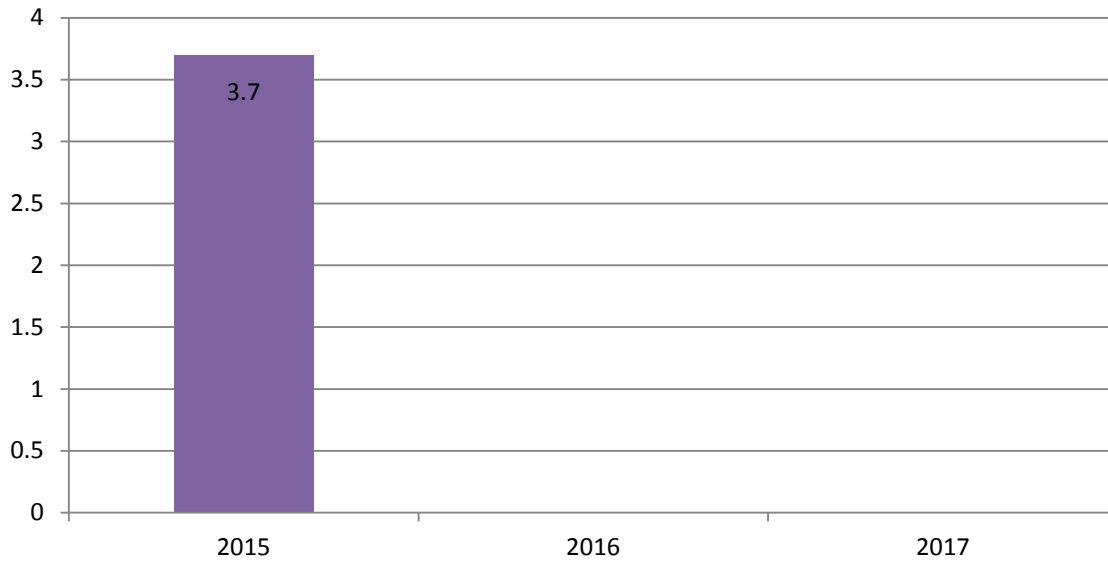
### **Organization: B+ (3.9)**

Case jacket quality no longer seems to be an issue for the investigative team in the category of organization. Out of the thirty (30) cases reviewed, none had any significant damage or loose papers hanging out and everything was hole-punched into its proper place. Twenty-seven (27) of the thirty (30) cases reviewed scored a four (4) out of four (4). The table of contents for each case jacket was an easy read and the audit team had no problem finding any document they were looking for in the majority of the cases.

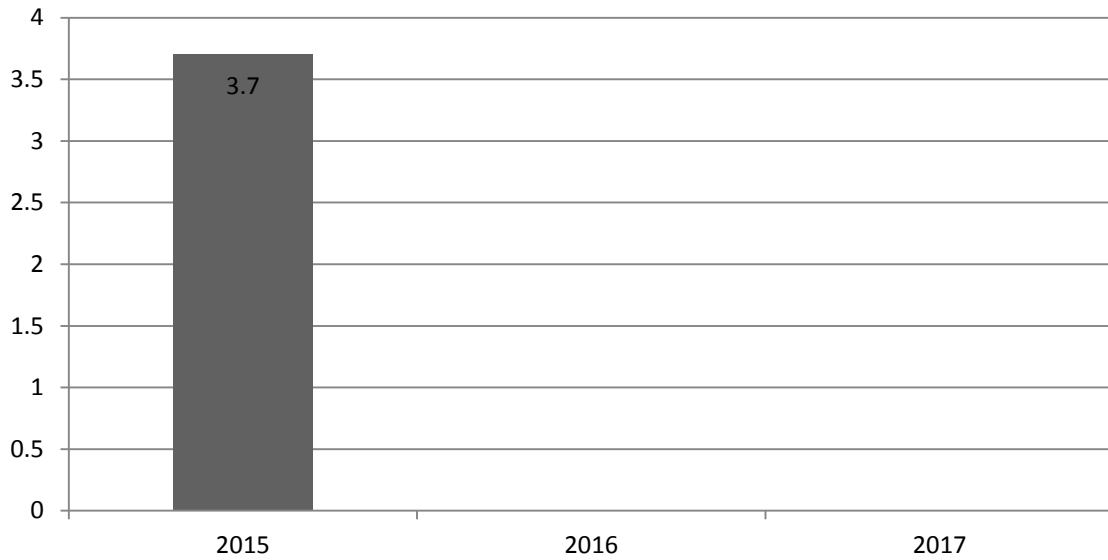
In conclusion, the consistency and progress shown since the 2014 audit is very encouraging as it shows Investigators have taken the knowledge gained and continue to provide exhaustive investigations. One major takeaway is the pool of ninety-six (96) closed cases to choose from instead of the seventy-one (71) from the 2014 audit, an increase of twenty-five (25) closed cases. While staff changes have occurred, it has not affected the quality of investigation that the investigative team wants to provide to the citizens of Prince George's County, Maryland. It is encouraged that the investigative team continue to improve on the timeliness of their case investigations and make sure that appropriate procedures are taken based on how an investigation is closed.

**Please see the following quantitative data which further shows the breakdown of the thirty (30) cases involved in the 2015 case audit. The following graphs will be used in future case audits to better track trends and patterns.**

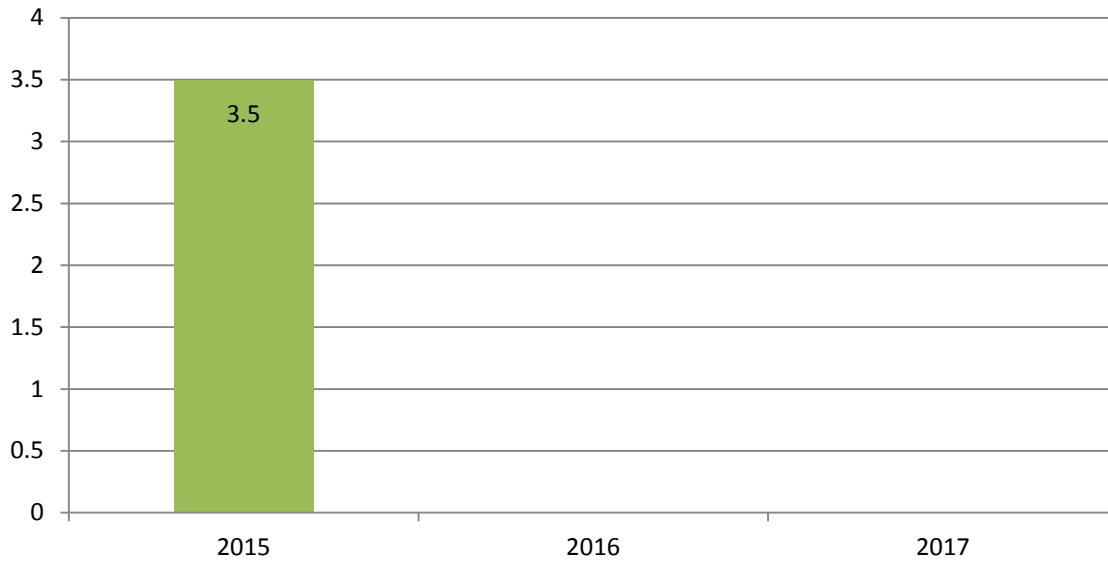
## Overall Audit Score



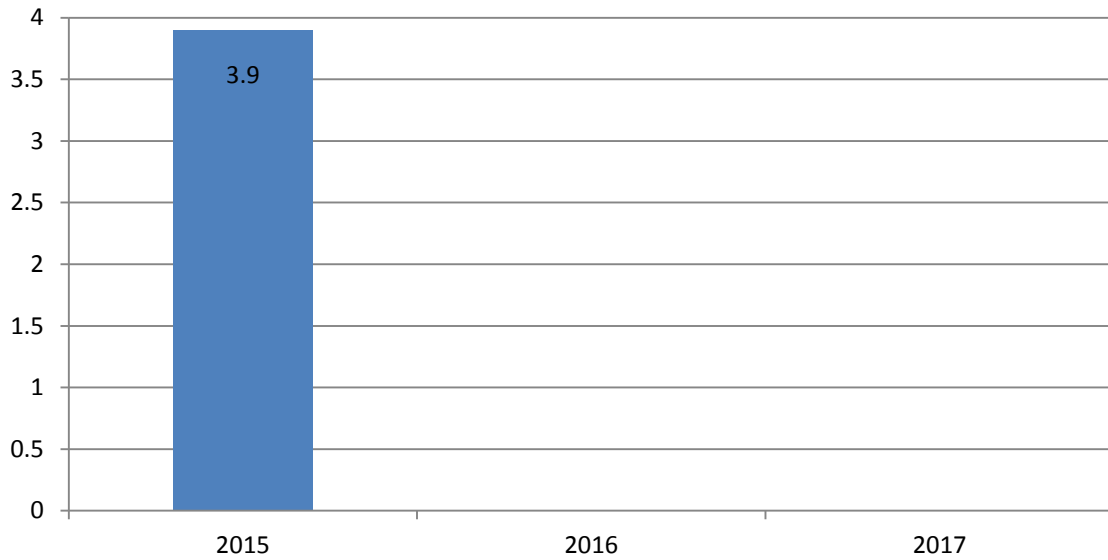
## Strength



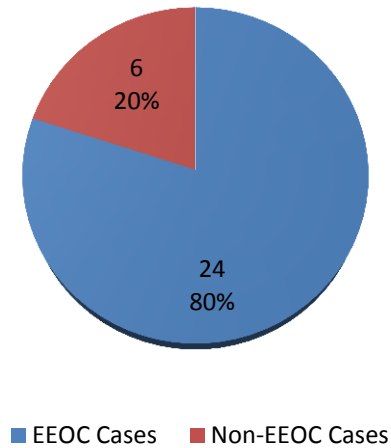
## Timeliness



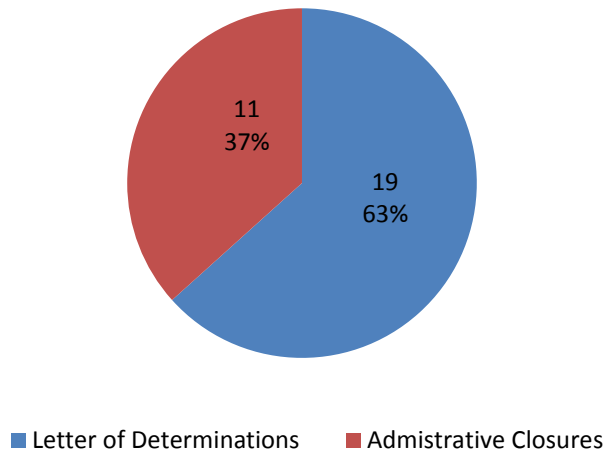
## Organization



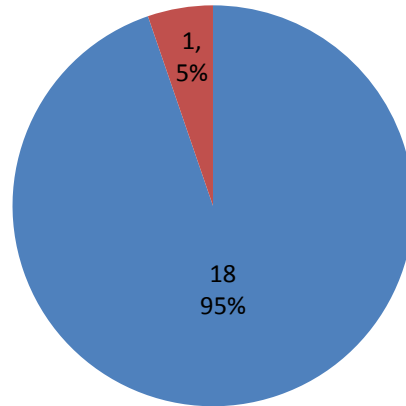
## The amount of EEOC cases Compared to Non-EEOC in 2015 Audit



## Number of Letter of Determinations compared to Administrative Closure

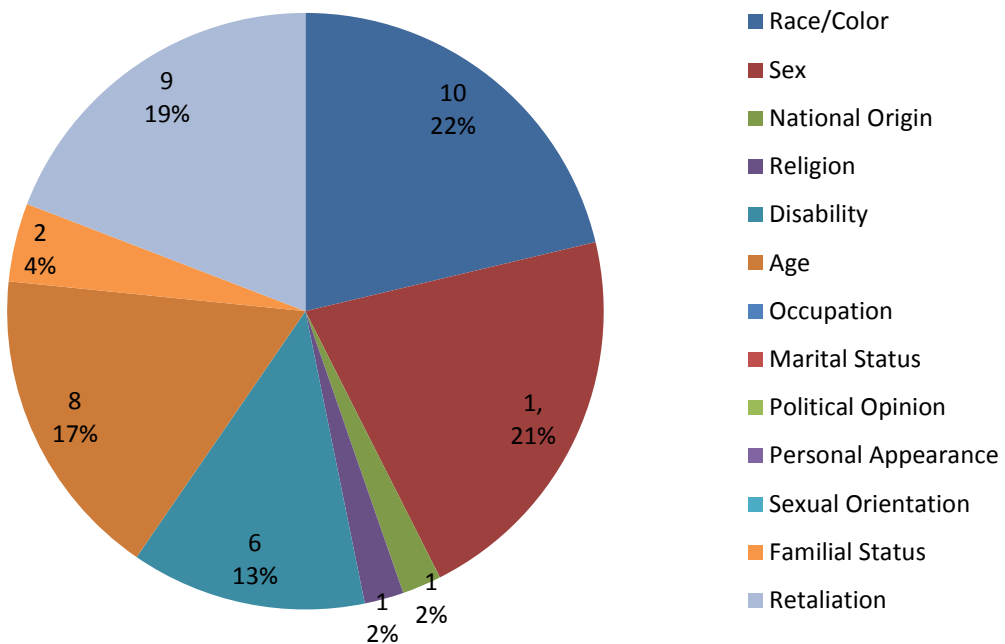


## Number of Cause cases vs. No-Cause cases

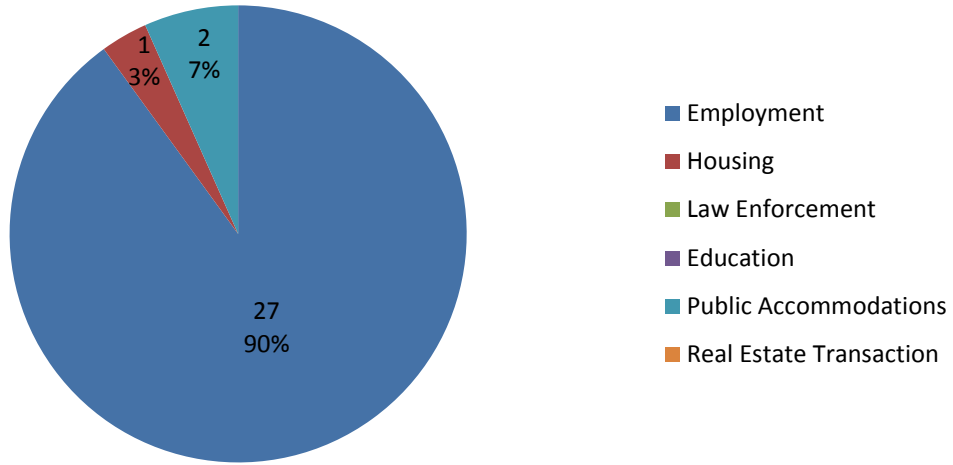


■ No-Cause cases
 ■ Cause Cases

## Protected Bases Represented in the 2015 Audit



## Area of Investigation



# Important Information

## THE PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY HUMAN RELATIONS COMMISSION



### DUTIES OF A COMMISSIONER

**DUTIES:** The Commission, along with its Executive Director, is the agency empowered to enforce the civil rights laws of Prince George's County. Primary duties of the 13 member commission are to: 1) conduct administrative hearings involving claims of unlawful discrimination. 2) Serve as the civil rights policy arm of county government; and 3) perform community outreach activities aimed providing information to citizens about cultural diversity and civil rights enforcement.

**TIME COMMITMENT:** Attendance at mandatory monthly commission meetings held on the 4th Monday of the each month at 6:00 pm. At the meetings, the Commission manages administrative details related to hearings, case closures, policy pronouncements, research and community outreach. Some preparation time prior to the meeting may be necessary depending on the agenda items established by the Executive Director and the Chair. Meetings typically last no more than 2 hours.

**HEARINGS:** Public Hearings are held at the discretion of the Commission, usually after a recommendation by the Executive Director, who is authorized to bring the charges of a civil rights violation. The hearings are scheduled at the pleasure of the Commission and are held on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. Timely written decisions are required within 180 days after each public hearing.

**PANELS:** Commissioners hear cases in panels of three or four members, divided by subject area (Housing, Public Accommodations, Employment, Education, Real Estate, Lending, Law Enforcement Discrimination). A panel chair, assigned by the Commission Chairperson, presides over any hearings or related meetings. The Commission has the authority to award money damages, levy fines and issues cease and desist orders or other injunctive relief directed at penalizing or stopping discriminatory conduct.

**TERM:** Three years, depending on year of appointment.

**BENEFITS:** Although the position is non-stipend, funding is provided for travel and training in connection with civil rights conferences and meetings throughout the year. Reimbursement for certain expenses related to the performance of Commission duties is also permitted.



[www.princegeorgescountymd.gov/civilrights](http://www.princegeorgescountymd.gov/civilrights)

# HUMAN TRAFFICKING HAS MANY FACES.

Help Us Stop Human Sex and Labor  
Trafficking in Prince George's County.

VICTIMS CAN GET HELP.

humans **NOT** for sale



PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY  
HUMAN TRAFFICKING TASK FORCE

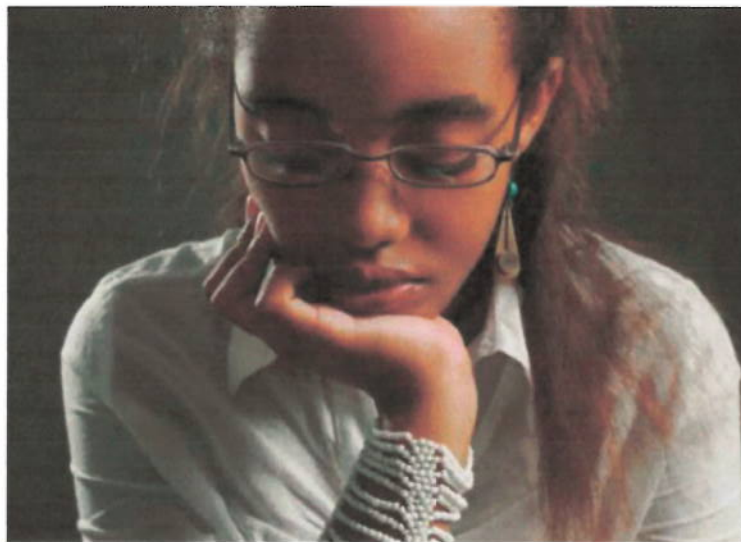


Prince George's  
**CountyClick311**  
easy. convenient. accessible.

National Human Trafficking  
Resource Center (NHTRC)  
**1-888-373-7888**  
[www.TraffickingResourceCenter.org](http://www.TraffickingResourceCenter.org)

PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY  
**hrc**  
**HUMAN RELATIONS  
COMMISSION**  
*Embrace Diversity. End Discrimination.*

**Human Trafficking** (hu·man traf·fick·ing) *n.* – organized criminal activity in which human beings are treated as possessions to be controlled and exploited (as by being forced into prostitution or involuntary labor).



### **In Maryland Human Trafficking is:**

- The buying or selling of a human being for the purpose of sex or labor.
- The facilitating of buying or selling of a human being for the purpose or sex or labor.
- Receiving earnings as a result of a human being who is being trafficked for sex or labor.

**Membership:** Chaired by the Executive Director of the County's Human Relations Commission (*The County's Civil Rights Education and Enforcement Agency*), the membership of the PGCHTTF includes, but is not limited, to the following government and non-government agencies and organizations, as well as a host of individual community members and ex-officio organizations.

Prince George's County  
Commission for Women

Prince George's County  
Circuit Court

Prince George's County  
Department of Family  
Services

Prince George's County  
Fire Department

Prince George's County  
Health Department

Prince George's County  
Human Relations  
Commission

Prince George's County  
Office of Homeland Security

Prince George's County  
Office of Community  
Relations

Prince George's County  
Police Department

Prince George's County  
Public Schools –  
Office of the CEO

Prince George's County  
State's Attorney's Office

Prince George's County  
Department of Social  
Services

The Prince George's County  
Office of Law

Office of the Sheriff for  
Prince George's County

Maryland National Capitol  
Park Police

FAIR Girls

Courtney's House

Maryland Coalition Against  
Sexual Assault

The Polaris Group

The Samaritan Women

Safe House of Hope  
Turn Around

The Maryland Human  
Trafficking Task Force

The Maryland Department  
of Juvenile Services

The Governor's Task Force  
on Crime Control and  
Prevention

The Office of the United  
States Attorney for the  
District of Maryland

The Federal Bureau  
of Investigation

The District of Columbia  
Human Trafficking  
Task Force

U.S. Department of  
Homeland Security  
– Homeland Security  
Investigations

Iota Gamma Omega  
Chapter of Alpha Kappa  
Alpha Sorority

Dimensions Health Systems

Various faith-based  
organizations

University of Maryland –  
College Park

City of Greenbelt Police

MNCPPC Park Police

City of Bowie

Municipal Police Chiefs  
Association

**Those that need help or see something suspicious can call 311 in Prince George's County or the National Human Trafficking Hotline directly at 888-373-7888 when outside the County. If you wish to learn more about how you can help, dial 311 in Prince George's County or call the Human Relations Commission at 301-883-6170. In case of emergency or immediate danger call 911.**

## Mythbusters – Human Trafficking Facts vs. Fiction

### FICTION:

Human Trafficking only occurs in other countries, not the United States.



### FACT:

Human Trafficking occurs in every city and every community.

### FICTION:

Human Trafficking victims are brought into the United States by strangers from foreign countries.



### FACT:

Human Trafficking victims are living right in Prince George's County and are trafficked by peers and/or family members.

### FICTION:

Human Trafficking only affects lower income and poorly educated communities.



### FACT:

Human Trafficking affects all communities regardless of income or educational levels.

### FICTION:

Females are the only victims of Human Trafficking.



### FACT:

Victims of Human Trafficking are both males, females, transgender and transsexual.

### FICTION:

Human Trafficking victims are mainly teenagers.



### FACT:

Victims of all ages are subjected to Human Trafficking.

### FICTION:

All "pimps" are men.



### FACT:

Women are often "pimps".

### FICTION:

Prostitutes are never victims of Human Trafficking.



### FACT:

Many prostitutes are victims of Human Trafficking.

### FICTION:

Recruiting for Human Trafficking only happens on city streets.



### FACT:

Recruiting for Human Trafficking can occur at any location, such as the internet, schools, shopping malls, parks, swimming pools, hotels, movie theaters, amusement parks, etc.

### FICTION:

It is only men who recruit victims of Human Trafficking.



### FACT:

Women, teens and children often are recruiters.

### FICTION:

Only someone who is homeless or from a single parent home is at risk for Human Trafficking.



### FACT:

All individuals, regardless of where they live or with whom they live with, can become victims of Human Trafficking.

### FICTION:

"Johns" are not criminals.

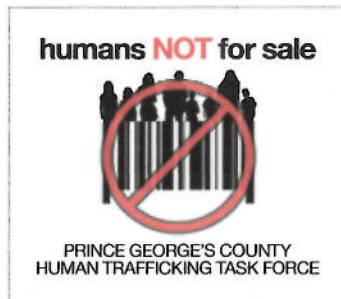


### FACT:

"Johns" engage in criminal activity when they purchase sex.



# PGCHTTF: Prince George's County Human Trafficking Task Force



**Mission:** The Prince George's County Human Trafficking Task Force (PGCHTTF) was formed by Council Resolution CR-74-2013 in July, 2013. The brainchild of Human Relations Commissioner Walakewon Blegay, the Task Force Resolution was developed and championed by Councilmember Karen Toles (Task Force Vice Chair). The Task Force was established in response to the Commission's 2013 Countywide Community Conference on Human Trafficking. The Task Force's focus is to study and combat the problem of Human Sex and Labor Trafficking in Prince George's County and, as a by-product, educate the public, identify and rescue victims and increase prosecution of traffickers.

**Goals:** Operating through six standing committees: First Responder Training; Law Enforcement and Public Safety; Legislative; Public Awareness and Outreach; Research and Advisory; and Victim Services; the four initial overall goals of the PGCHTTF Task Force are:

- to facilitate more coordinated anti-trafficking efforts in the County through protocol development, extensive community outreach, proactive investigations, law enforcement training efforts, intelligence sharing, forming partnerships between law enforcement and non-governmental organizations ("NGOs");
- to increase identification rates of human trafficking victims in the County, including domestic and transnational victims of both sex and labor trafficking;
- to aide in the establishment of a provider network to provide comprehensive services to victims of trafficking; and,
- to increase the prosecution of traffickers, criminally and where appropriate civilly.



Those that need help or see something suspicious can call **311** in Prince George's County or the National Human Trafficking Hotline directly at **888-373-7888** when outside the County. If you wish to learn more about how you can help, dial **311** in Prince George's County or call the Human Relations Commission at **301-883-6170**. In case of emergency or immediate danger call **911**.

The Washington Post

Maryland Politics

# Residents protesting water bills facing eviction in low-income co-op



The sign of Village Green Mutual Homes at the entrance of the residential community with 231 homes in Landover. (Astrid Riecken/For The Washington Post)

By [Arelis R. Hernández](#) January 19 at 10:17 PM

Month after month, bill after bill, year after year, members of the Village Green housing cooperative suspected they were being overcharged for their water. Eventually, in protest, they stopped paying.

Now, they may lose their homes.

The board is trying to evict at least 15 co-op members, citing ignored invoices that total hundreds of dollars per person. The first to get a hearing in landlord-tenant court will be Pat Fletcher, 65, a community activist and the unofficial leader of the protest group, who is scheduled to appear before a judge next week.

What began as a dispute among co-op members has evolved into a nearly two-decade battle that has spawned two investigations by the county's consumer rights office, one of which is ongoing. The Prince George's County attorney is seeking a temporary restraining order to halt the evictions until that probe is complete.

Officials, including County Council member Andrea Harrison (D-Springdale), say they are troubled by an initial audit that found \$285,000 in excess water charges over a two-year period. The audit also concluded that there is no record that the board returned to its members an additional \$60,000 it was refunded because of a separate billing error.

Pat Fletcher, community activist and former member of the Prince George's County Board of Education, poses for a portrait inside her home at the Village Green Mutual Homes in Landover. (Astrid Riecken/For The Washington Post)

“Because of what appears to be irregular billing practices and operations, the County requests a neutral third party receiver to review the water and sewage billing and accounts at Village Green,” county attorney M. Andree Green wrote in the injunction petition, which accused the co-op board of “clear attempts to circumvent Maryland law.”

Fletcher said she is determined to remain at Village Green, where she and many other people of modest means have lived for decades.

“I know I’m right,” Fletcher said “If people look at what we’ve found, they would know that. If they set me out, I will put up a tent. I am not giving up.”

### **An affordable oasis**

The townhouses in Village Green Mutual Homes were built in 1968 along Sheriff Road in Landover, part of a federal Housing and Urban Development program for low- to moderate-income families. Shirley Wallace moved there in the early 1970s.

“I was young at the time and had three kids,” said Wallace, 73, a retired administrator with the Securities and Exchange Commission. “It was a good way to have a home and raise my kids in the neighborhood with the school abutting the community.”

Residents of the 231 townhouses are shareholders in the nonprofit cooperative corporation, which paid off its HUD-backed mortgage in 2010. They pay monthly carrying charges that are supposed to cover utilities and shared operating and maintenance costs.

The federal income restrictions that were in place until Village Green paid off its mortgage are no longer mandatory, but most residents are of modest means, including many retirees on fixed incomes. Carrying charges remain low, from \$377 to \$692 a month.

Village Green Mutual Homes a residential community with 231 homes, is located near FedEx Field in Landover. (Astrid Riecken/For The Washington Post)

The co-op's finances are managed by a five-person board of directors, made up of residents elected annually by the co-op membership. Major financial decisions are supposed to be discussed at monthly membership meetings. The disaffected residents say one family — Mary Williams, her children and her grandson — has played a central role in Village Green operations and governance for more than 30 years.

Williams was site manager of the complex from 1984 until 2014. Her son, David Williams, was board president starting in the 1990s, and was succeeded by his sister, Stephanie Seawright, in 2003, according to documents included in the 2014 investigative report by the Prince George's Human Relations Commission. Seawright's son is a maintenance engineer at the complex.

Members of the dissident group say they were declared ineligible to vote in board elections in 2011, because they hadn't paid their water bills. In 2013, all members were allowed to vote, but the only candidates nominated were incumbents, according to the report by the Human Relations Commission, which investigates consumer complaints. Water-bill protesters said they tried to vote for write-in candidates such as Fletcher, but were told their ballots had been thrown out because they had neglected to place a check next to the names they had written, the report says.

In an interview, Stephen Brown, 59, a former real estate agent who has lived in Village Green since 1972, called the vote "another election that was stolen."

Neither Mary Williams nor Seawright responded to requests for comment or questions about the co-op's operations. David Williams died in 2011.

Bernard A. Cook, the board's attorney, did not respond to residents' statements about Village Green leadership or questions regarding the elections. But he denied there were problems with how water is billed at the complex, and said that "people who don't pay cause a deficit for the entire community."

### **Billing problems**

In 1999, Williams and the co-op board proposed installing sub-meters in each unit to track each household's water usage. YES Energy Management, a billing company, was contracted to read the meters remotely and send invoices to members.

Cook said residents voted for and welcomed the change because it was supposed to keep their carrying charges low. But investigators with the Human Relations Commission found no documentation showing co-op members had approved the sub-meters, and several residents said in interviews that their carrying charges did not go down.

Soon members realized that their monthly invoices from YES Energy were actually bills that they needed to pay. Their carrying charges no longer covered water and sewer, even though those costs are supposed to be covered, according to the occupancy agreement.

"We actually paid the water bill twice," said Allena Wesley, a 73-year-old resident.

Cook said members pay YES Energy for their own water use, and that money is reimbursed to Village Green to pay the water bills charged by the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission.

Arnold Brier, an attorney for YES's parent company, said the company signs confidentiality agreements with its clients that prohibited him from commenting on specific accounts. He said each client works out a different billing system with the company.

In an interview with county investigators in December 2013, Mary Williams said the amount of money collected by YES Energy "rarely matches the actual amount due," and the carrying charges make up the difference.

Fletcher was the first resident to refuse to pay her water bill, starting in 2000. By 2007, she owed \$5,300, and Village Green took her to court. She agreed to pay what she owed to keep from being evicted, and signed an agreement that said all future water and sewer bills "may be considered additional carrying charges/rent."

But Fletcher now says she regrets signing the document and did not receive good advice from her attorney. She argues that the agreement's language about future bills is not valid because it conflicts with her original occupancy agreement and, according to co-op bylaws, such changes have to be approved by Village Green corporation members.

"I didn't agree with it, but I signed it. It was a mistake," Fletcher said.

By 2013, Fletcher estimates, about 50 co-op members had stopped paying the YES invoices. They sought help from state and local politicians, federal housing officials and even President Obama.

“It appears as though someone or some group has made a bundle off of low- to moderate-income residents,” Fletcher wrote in a June email to the president.

### **Legal maneuvers**

At the urging of County Council member Andrea C. Harrison (D-Springdale), the county launched an investigation that included an audit by Hawi Sanu, who works for the County Council. She found that the WSSC had billed Village Green \$256,219.69 in 2012 and 2013. YES Energy billed residents \$313,942.14 during the same period. The carrying charges that went to water and sewer costs during that time were \$228,000, the audit found. Sanu concluded that Village Green had \$541,942.14 to pay the WSSC bills — \$285,722.45 more than the utility had charged the cooperative.

And the audit flagged another potential problem. In March 2013, WSSC had refunded Village Green more than \$60,000 because of a separate billing error. “The expectation is that the refund would be given back to residents in the form of credits for future bills,” Sanu wrote. But residents say that never happened.

Sanu said the results of her initial review could not confirm wrongdoing or prove that there was none. She recommended a full forensic audit.

Seawright, the co-op president, told investigators the consumer complaint was motivated by personal vendettas against her mother,

the report says. She accused Fletcher of sending feces to Williams in the mail to protest how the co-op was being run — an allegation that Fletcher denies.

In September 2013, 10 Village Green residents sued the co-op board, alleging fraud and seeking access to the co-op's financial records. For nearly two years, the board successfully fought efforts by the plaintiffs to get Sanu to testify. Both sides agreed to a dismissal of the lawsuit in July, after the board told District Judge Hassan A. El-Amin it would explain the water billing to residents in a membership meeting.

But the board's explanations were unsatisfactory, said Gabriel Christian, an attorney who is representing the residents pro bono. The plaintiffs tried to reopen the case, but Amin denied the motion. The residents have appealed.

The county opened a second consumer-protection investigation in October, and in November the county attorney's office filed its request for a temporary restraining order.

Fletcher's eviction hearing is scheduled for Tuesday in Hyattsville District Court.