

Kansas Human Right Commission Focuses on Hispanics

By: Candy Perez

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A sudden increase in complaints and investigations relating to discrimination in the areas of employment, housing, public accommodations and racial profiling in conjunction with traffic stops is keeping the Kansas Human Rights Commission busy.

The commission's executive director, William V. Minner, visited southwest Kansas recently to provide information about the commission services, explain the process of filing complaints and investigative methods, and talk about the interpretation of the law.

"We want the community in general, but especially Hispanics, to understand the process of filing complaints," Minner said.

"Discrimination at the workplace, housing, or at public accommodations is a legal matter, it against the law. Every person has the right to request an investigation, regardless of their immigration status."

The KHRC is mandated by the Kansas Legislature to prevent and eliminate unlawful discrimination. In addition, the commission is responsible for enforcing the Kansas Act Against Discrimination and the Kansas Age Discrimination in Employment Act.

It is not necessary to be a legal immigrant to file a complaint.

"Some people who have not legalized their immigration status are afraid to complain for fear of retaliation, or worse, deportation. Others, who do not speak English, ignore the law and feel they have not rights," said Minner.

Roma Meraz Valencia, a bilingual special investigator and representative of the commission, is responsible for all cases in southwest Kansas and handles all the Hispanic complaints statewide.

The bilingual representative guides individuals who do not speak English.

"I review cases statewide," Meraz Valencia said. "I am in charge of the incidents related with the Hispanic population in Kansas, and I can talk to them in their language and explain how the investigations are developing."

Her office at 100 Military Plaza, Suite 220, is open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.

It is important to know that if they call me and I cannot answer them immediately to leave their name, phone number and the convenient time to communicate with them," she said while explaining the difficulties for people who work irregular schedules and can not visit her during regular office hours.

The KHRC investigates complaints alleging profiling discrimination by a law enforcement officer or agency. The law prohibits traffic stops based solely on the driver's race or ethnic background.

"When a law enforcement officer stops a driver, it must be because he infringed the traffic law, not relying as the sole factor on race, ethnicity, national origin, gender, or religious dress," Minner said. "When a person suspects that is the case, they should call the commission for the review and, if necessary, the investigation of the complaint."

The legal aspects of a complaint are broad, requiring guidance from experts in the field so that the investigation is carried out based on what the law requires.

"We are interested in enforcing the law," Meraz Valencia stressed. "We are a neutral agency, which means we research and do the investigations, listening to the parties involved to reach to a solution. It is a process which provides mediation and conciliation to attempt to

resolve the controversies between the parties short of having KHRC investigate and process the complaint.”

When the parties do not reach an agreement, the commission continues with a full investigation.

“If conciliation efforts fail, the case may be scheduled for a public hearing,” said Minner.

Mission and philosophy

According to an annual report for fiscal year 2008, the commission’s primary goal is to prevent and eliminate discrimination. Other goals include assuring equal employment opportunity; eliminating profiling in conjunction with traffic stops; stopping discrimination, segregation or separation; and ensuring equal opportunities in all public places and in housing.

The agency’s philosophy in achieving its mission is to act in accordance with the highest level of professional conduct, ethics, efficiency, and accountability, according to the report.

Understanding that the principles of equality and the protection of basic human rights are the most noble of human efforts, the commission devotes its activities toward the purpose, believing that eternal vigilance is the price of freedom.

For more information, contact the Kansas Human Rights Commission in Dodge City at (620) 225-4804 or the Topeka office at (888) 291-3533.