Human Relations Commissions

Human relations commissions serve to ensure all citizens are treated equally, particularly in the areas of employment, housing, public accommodations, recreation, education, justice and governmental services. While they do not make policy themselves, they do make policy recommendations to their respective cities; they also serve as a space where citizens can raise issues and complaints in regards to fair treatment. When complaints are brought to the attention of the commission, it conducts research to investigate the issue and moves to "recommend any action to the city council that the commission feels is necessary and may be lawfully taken to minimize areas of conflict and to promote harmonious relations."

Members

Each commission or board has approximately 13-20 members at a time. Some commissions have a seat reserved for a high school student. As they deal in issues of discimination, HR boards try to have adequate representation across race, religion, disability, etc. Citizens can join these boards and commissions through appointment or application, depending on the specific city/county. There is no particular experience expected, but a passion for community relations and residency in the respective area is required.

Member Spotlight

Rev. Wayne Johnson, Chairperson, Morganton, previously served as a human relations investigator for the federal government and was on the Human Relations Commission of the city of Buffalo, New York, for 10 years. He also served on the Human Relations Commission for the city of Dover, Delaware, for five years.

Experience

For Johnson, one highlight serving on the board was a recent meeting with city council, after not meeting with the council for a long time. This meeting helped Johnson and the other commissioners feel validated in their work. "We're really trying to make a difference—to let people know, it's just not something on paper, another committee," said Johnson. "But you know, we're active. And we have felt very, very concerned about the fact that some people didn't even know we existed. And that is one of the things that makes us so happy now—that we know that we're able to put that message out there that we exist, we are alive, and we will and we want to hear from you."

Impact

This is an important part of who I am. And for me, it's not about being the chair. What it is about [is] being concerned about where I live, to make sure that we are able to have equal justice under the law.
- Rev. Wayne Johnson

Terms of Service

Typically, a commissioner will serve a term that lasts approximately 2-4 years on a volunteer basis.

Relevance to Food Councils

Food is an integral part of every person's life. When someone doesn't have access to housing for any reason, but especially by discrimination, it affects their access to food resources. Additionally, food deserts, areas that lack a supermarket and access to healthy food options, are a major issue in some neighborhoods. Similarly, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance issues that human relations deals with are related to health as well. Some Human Relations commissions also interact with the homeless population in their areas who have a relationship with food insecurity. Lastly, as the local food system works to ensure it is inclusive and equitable, human relations commissions can play an important role as a resource in promoting anti-discrimination practices and equality. Overall, food councils simply increasing their awareness of the human relations advisory boards in their areas will help foster meaningful interactions between the entities.