

Strengthening Human Relations Commissions' Infrastructure to Enhance the Ability to Fight Hate



Items For Consideration 2024

The information in this document is intended for cities and counties considering the formation of a **Human Relations Commission**, as well as for existing commissions that wish to strengthen their effectiveness. In California, the names of these commissions may vary and include in the title equity, human rights, civil rights, community relations, or some other variation. According to the Community Relations Service (CRS) of the U.S. Department of Justice (2003), Guidelines for Effective Human Relations Commissions:

The mission of human relations is to promote ways in which people in communities learn to get along and to safeguard equal opportunity for all. Human relations activities help communities become more harmonious, respectful, and cohesive.

A commission signifies the government's commitment to combating hate, systemic discrimination, disparities, and their consequences, while also addressing arising community conflicts that affect human relationships. Its effectiveness is paramount in maintaining public trust. The selection of adept commissioners is one aspect of this, yet success is equally reliant on the guidance and assistance the city or county can provide.

The information in this document will focus on key areas for consideration that will optimize a commission's policies and practices. These areas include Commission Membership; Standard Operating Procedures, Code of Conduct, Bylaws; Commission Training and Orientation; Planning; and Public Communication. Ultimately, this document's goal is to equip city and county governments with the knowledge to enable their commissions to operate with greater efficacy.

If you have questions about information contained in this document, or if you would like to schedule a free confidential consultation about this topic, please contact the Community Conflict Resolution Unit at ccru@calcivilrights.ca.gov.

The mission of the Community Conflict Resolution Unit (CCRU) within the California Civil Rights Department (CRD) is to promote peaceful relations by assisting communities experiencing fear, conflict, or tensions relating to discriminatory practices, hate incidents, or hate crimes that have a community impact.

COMMISSION MEMBERSHIP

The Search For Commission Candidates

The importance of selecting the right candidates is of paramount importance as commissioners drive the direction of the commission as they respond to community needs and concerns.

- Look for candidates who have worked with many community groups composed of members with protected characteristics, such as race, color, ancestry, national origin, religion, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, disability (mental and physical), among others.
- Remind candidates that when accepting the role of commissioner, it is their duty and responsibility per the mission of the commission to respond to the concerns of all members of the community that the commission serves. This includes possible concerns of hate and discrimination. The diverse and rich experience of candidates is helpful to identify action items that can help a community in need. To operationalize the mission of the commission, all commissioners must be comfortable working with and assisting all protected groups.
- Ensure the commission application process asks questions about candidates' experience and comfort working with protected groups. Ask about each protected characteristic individually to ensure no category is left out. One option is to allow sufficient space in the application for the candidate to briefly describe their experience working with each protected group. In California there are over 20 protected bases. While this may sound burdensome to ask about, the candidate need not write an essay, but a few brief sentences that give the interviewers an opportunity to ask more follow-up questions to assess the strengths and weaknesses of each applicant.
- If candidates do not have experience working with community groups composed of members with protected characteristics, ask if they are comfortable working with such groups to address any concerns the group may have about hate towards them or concerns related to discrimination.
- Some of the commission's questions to candidates may seem redundant, but they are designed to ensure that the commission has inquired about candidates' experiences and comfort serving community members whose identities reflect a multitude of protected groups and affirmed candidates' understanding of their responsibility to respond to the needs and concerns of all community members per the commission's mission.

QUESTIONS TO ASK CANDIDATES

- Ask candidates to describe their qualifications to join the commission.
- Ask candidates what the commission mission means to them and how it connects to their personal and professional experience and goals.





Extending Appointment Authority to Organizations Outside of Government

If you decide to allow some non-governmental organizations, such as nonprofit organizations, to have appointment authority to the commission, establish a process for doing so that allows all interested organizations to submit their interest to have appointment authority, and establish a process for making a selection.

- Consider asking the candidate organization questions about their own selection process.
- After an organization proposes a candidate you might consider interviewing the candidate as you would normally interview a candidate using your own process.

Liaison Participation

A commission should consider asking and inviting specific governmental organizations to have frequent presence at commission meetings to provide relevant information and perspective to support the commission in executing its mission effectively. These non-voting liaisons may include, but not be limited to:

- **Law Enforcement**

A liaison could provide quarterly hate crime/hate incident reports, as well as background information on any other recent events of significance in the city or county that could have community implications that may necessitate a response from the commission or provide opportunities for the commission to act.

A liaison could also answer questions about law enforcement processes in response to critical incidents that have generated tensions in the community. In these cases, it is vital to have pre-established relationships so the commission may seek timely and reliable information. Pre-established relationships may also enable the liaison to recognize that there may be some meetings or convenings where they may not be asked to participate because some communities may not feel as comfortable with a law enforcement presence.

- **District or City Attorney's Office**

A liaison could provide quarterly reports on hate crime prosecutions or identify patterns with respect to where hate crimes may be occurring (either geographic areas or, for example, in and around certain residential neighborhoods or apartment or housing complexes) to facilitate opportunities for the commission to enact any relevant human relations activities and share resources deemed appropriate by the commission.

- **Non-profit Advocacy Organizations and Faith-Based Groups**

A liaison could provide information not transmitted across major media networks as well as perspectives that the commission may not have, but that are complementary to the commission's mission. They could also assist the commission in identifying areas of concern as well as resources to address these concerns.



About California vs Hate

Hate incidents and crimes continue to rise in number within the state of California and beyond. Now more than ever it's critical that we have avenues to report these acts. Led by the California Civil Rights Department, the California vs Hate initiative is a non-emergency reporting system designed to support individuals and communities targeted for hate.

It is a dedicated space for people to report an act of hate and seek support from professionals trained in culturally competent communication and trauma-informed practices.

LEARN MORE

STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES, CODE OF CONDUCT, BYLAWS

A commission should consider having standard operating procedures, code of conduct, or bylaws. The name of these rules or operational guidance may vary by commission, but absent any the commission should strongly consider developing these and consider the following items for inclusion:

Commitment to Work with All

Require commissioners to understand their obligation to work with and provide assistance to all community members.

Commissioner Statements

When speaking as a commissioner, commissioners must be aware that stating personal positions or opinions, or making statements that others may find offensive, may undermine the commission's role as a place where communities in need may access resources and support. This should be highlighted in the application and interview process, should be included in the Standard Operating Procedures, Code of Conduct, or Bylaws that govern the commission,

and reemphasized when the candidate is sworn in as they take the oath of their new office or position as commissioner.

Governmental Identity

Consider highlighting in your Standard Operating Procedures, Code of Conduct, or Bylaws, that when candidates join the commission they gain a governmental identity. When they speak and provide an opinion in their role as a commissioner, they do not only speak for themselves; they speak on behalf of the commission and the city or county that appointed them. To the public, commissioners are a reflection of the government and the commission as a whole. Even while off-duty, what they say in public and in social media in their personal time may be perceived by others to reflect their role as a commissioner. The public may lose confidence in government if they see commissioners conducting themselves in ways that run counter to the mission of the commission, regardless of whether the commissioners are on-duty or off-duty. Candidates who are selected as commissioners and accept the appointment agree to conduct themselves in accordance with the values of the commission at all times.

Disciplinary or Removal Process

Commissions should identify a process to address incidents involving commissioners who provide opinions or make comments that express biases against community members that hinder their ability to further the interests and mission of the commission.

Commission Meetings

Each commission meeting should restate the mission and commissioners' roles to provide assistance to all as identified in the mission.

COMMISSION TRAINING AND ORIENTATION

- Commissions should consider developing or having educational materials for new commissioners to review and acknowledge in addition to reviewing the Standard Operating Procedures, Code of Conduct, or any Bylaws they might have.
- Commissions might consider highlighting any relevant hate crime data or other information to orient new commissioners to the area and to the commission's work overtime and increase their situational awareness when they go out into the community and build relationships with community groups. This can include law enforcement-community relations concerns as well as any other human relation concerns within the community's neighborhoods and/or in such areas as local businesses, recreational centers, places of faith or schools, especially if there are recent trends or incidents.
- Commissions should consider arranging for training for all commissioners on unconscious bias and microaggressions to help them better understand the different ways that bias and discrimination can manifest.
- Commissions should also consider arranging for proactive conflict resolution training for all commissioners that focuses on skill-building for commissioners in the areas that are relevant and important to their role as commissioners



California vs Hate is a resource for your HRC and community.

More graphics for the community [here](#).

PLANNING

- The commission should have some basic plans for responding to the types of incidents (e.g., hate crimes) to which it has a duty to respond.
- Plans should include information identifying liaisons and contacts in particular communities and within government to quickly coordinate responses.
- Planning may also include template press releases, processes for receiving and triaging community comments and complaints during and after an emergency, referral lists of community, social service, or other resources in various languages and formats to support communities.
- Other plans might include responding to community tensions following a law enforcement critical incident where there are community allegations and concerns about excessive use of force. These plans can then be tailored and adopted to any specific high-profile case in which the commission elects to engage.

PUBLIC COMMUNICATION

Disseminating Information

A commission should have a process established to communicate with the public. There will be times when it is critical for the commission to communicate about an urgent issue. For example, it may be time sensitive for the commission to show solidarity with a community group that suffered a hate crime. The commission should establish a process to disseminate information targeted to reach communities, including language interpretation and translation to ensure that all community members have meaningful access to important information in a language they can understand, and that community members with disabilities receive the information in accessible formats.

Outreach

Commissioners should be proactive and a process should be considered to identify outreach responsibilities. For a commission to be effective the public should know it exists and understand what it does, so it can reach out to the commission when there is a need.

ABOUT THE CALIFORNIA CIVIL RIGHTS DEPARTMENT

The California Civil Rights Department is an agency of the California state government charged with the protection of residents from discrimination in employment, housing, public accommodations, and elsewhere, as well as combating hate violence and human trafficking. It is the largest state civil rights agency in the United States.

Learn more at civildrights.ca.gov or reach out to info@ca.gov.

[@CalCivilRights](https://twitter.com/CalCivilRights) | CAvsHate.org

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