



**Budget Testimony of the Ohio Civil Rights Commission
Before the Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee
Fiscal Years 2026 – 2027
Angela Phelps-White, Executive Director
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Hello Chair Schaffer, Vice Chair Koehler, ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee, on behalf of the Ohio Civil Rights Commission, thank you for the opportunity to present information, with highlights, regarding the Ohio Civil Rights Commission. My name is Angela Phelps-White, and I am the Executive Director of the agency.

It has been just a little over sixty years since the General Assembly took a strong stance against discrimination and passed the Ohio Civil Rights Act (R.C. Chapter 4112), which established our agency, the Ohio Civil Rights Commission. Since its founding, the Commission has operated as a neutral state agency charged with fairly and impartially investigating and resolving discrimination complaints, while ensuring that the law, as envisioned by the General Assembly, is upheld across all areas of society. The Commission is committed to promoting positive human relations throughout its diverse communities and with the commitment of hard work, our mission is to see that justice is served when rights are violated.

As the lead agency for civil rights enforcement in Ohio, the Commission ensures that all Ohioans have equal access to opportunities when we handle complaints involving unlawful discrimination in the areas of employment, housing, public accommodation, credit, and higher education. When needed, the Commission takes legal action to hold offenders accountable and to protect individuals from discriminatory practices.

The Commission's investigation process is designed to be efficient and cost-effective, offering a practical alternative to traditional litigation. It provides individuals a way to seek justice without the expense and burden of going through the court system.

To further assist in resolving disputes, the Commission offers neutral mediation services, as a low-cost alternative to court. Our mediation process is highly effective with about 80% of cases ending in voluntary, mutually agreed-upon settlements. Most mediation cases are resolved within a period of 45 days, which provides a quicker resolution for those facing discrimination. Another benefit to the mediation option is that those services are available at any point throughout the investigation process.

Staying true to its mission, the Ohio Civil Rights Commission has secured financial relief for victims of discrimination totaling approximately \$10.3 million during fiscal years 2023 and 2024 which is up from the \$4.8 million in fiscal year 2022.

Even with our efficient successful mediation process, discrimination charges continue to rise. In an ongoing effort to manage the increasing caseloads and adhere to the timeline mandated by the Ohio Revised Code, the Commission launched a new case management system in June 2023. This innovative system allows members of the public to conveniently file charges online which allows the Commission to maintain case files electronically. This process significantly reduces processing and handling time of all charges received. In addition, the system supports investigators by improving task efficiency, and most importantly, it enables the Commission to maintain a centralized system in order to compile and share valuable reports with advocacy groups, legislators, and other state entities.

To illustrate the growing caseload, in FY2023, the Commission received 6,395 case filings—a record 54% increase from the previous year. This upward trend continued into FY2024, with case filings rising to 7,779. Such a sharp increase in case volume underscored the need for enhanced operational needs and additional staff necessary to meet the rising demands of discrimination charges.

In response, the Commission revised its budget and in fiscal year 2024 received approval to hire additional full-time employees, which increased our workforce numbers from 84 to 92 including five Commissioners. With this boost in staff, the average caseload per investigator dropped from roughly just over 200 cases to 189. Even with the above-mentioned staffing improvements, the number of cases remains high, demonstrating a continued strong demand for Commission services as well as the continued need for additional staffing.

Acknowledging the benefits of the streamlined case management system and enhanced investigative processes, the Commission continues to be committed to working diligently to manage its growing responsibilities. While handling the substantial workload, it will uphold the efficiencies and integrity of investigations to ensure that each case receives thorough and fair attention.

As mentioned, the Commission's staff members devote a significant amount of time and effort to every investigation. Our investigators conduct in-depth investigations, speaking with all parties involved, and gathering relevant evidence in order to compile a comprehensive report reflecting a definitive determination. All efforts are made to ensure that the Commission's five Commissioners make a fair and informed decision. In some cases, matters are reconsidered, which prompts further review of the charge to address and resolve all concerns.

Beyond enforcement, the Commission is dedicated to education and outreach. It offers free training sessions to businesses, organizations, and individuals to raise awareness of the Ohio Revised Code 4112 and to promote voluntary compliance.

Our accredited Civil Rights Academy, which is a two-day event, now in its third year, has become a valuable resource for attorneys, educators, and human resource professionals, offering an opportunity to better understand the Commission's mission and processes. Additionally, two privately funded public events, the Ohio Civil Rights Hall of Fame, year 17, and the Martin Luther King Jr. Art, Essay, and Multimedia Contest, lends an opportunity for education while celebrating and acknowledging significant achievements in civil rights.

EXECUTIVE GRF RECOMMENDATION

Detailing the Commission's budget, the executive recommendation for the general revenue fund for the Civil Rights Commission in FY2026 is \$7,464,880 and in FY2027 an amount totaling \$7,763,235. The recommended budget allows the Commission to maintain its current staffing levels. The proposed budget highlights the Commission's largest expenditure category, which is staffing, making up 78% of the total expenses. Personnel costs continue to be a demand and a priority for the Commission. With the increasing number of cases, the Commission will need additional staffing but will continue to make the necessary adjustments to process all charges filed and to ensure that the integrity of the handling of those charges is maintained.

FEDERAL FUNDING

Our federal partnerships' numbers exhibit stable funding at this time. Federal funding remains a key component for the Commission's budget. As demonstrated, there is a reliance on federal contributions in order to sustain our budget predictions. Without the federal reserves or an increase in the GRF funds, the Commission would not be able to sustain effective investigations within the confines of the statutory requirement which is to complete all investigations within one year of the filed date. In addition, it would obstruct the Commission's commitment to satisfying the contractual requirements of our federal partners.

The Civil Rights Commission will continue a balanced approach to budgeting, while maintaining stability operationally.

SUMMARY

In closing, the Commission continues to move forward with advancements that will provide the best customer service possible, while carrying out its statutory duties and responsibilities imposed by the Ohio Civil Rights Act. This passion and commitment, in turn, makes the Commission a valuable resource for the state of Ohio as a whole.

Chair Schaffer, Vice Chair Koehler, ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee, I am pleased to answer any questions or concerns that you may have regarding the Ohio Civil Rights Commission.

Thank you,

Angela Phelps-White