

Background

Tacoma's Human Rights Unit's role is to protect and promote civil rights within Tacoma; to that end, the Human Rights Unit primarily engages in civil rights investigations, and conducts community outreach, and supports the Human Rights Commission.

The Human Rights Commission is a volunteer board that performs three major functions:

- Oversight – review and hear appeals on formal cases filed under the City's anti-discrimination ordinance, to ensure Complainants receive a legally correct, thorough, and impartial investigation;
- Policy Making – study relevant community issues and submit its conclusions and recommendations to the Tacoma City Council;
- Public Liaison – organize special committees that focus on areas of interest to the City of Tacoma residents.

The creation of the Human Rights Commission and its role and responsibilities are explained in Tacoma Municipal Code 1.29. TMC 1.29 prohibits unfair employment and housing practices in the city of Tacoma. If a person feels they have been mistreated in an employment or housing situation due to the following reasons, they can contact the Human Rights Unit for assistance.

- Race
- National Origin
- Creed
- Color
- Sex
- Disability
- Use of a service animal
- Marital Status
- Age (40+)
- Sexual Orientation, including Gender Identity

Would the current duties of the Human Rights Commission include services to Immigrant and Refugee residents in Tacoma?

The current duties of the Human Rights Commission includes protecting individuals who are treated unfavorably in a place of employment, public accommodation, or housing, because they are from a particular country or part of the world outside the U.S., because of their ethnicity or accent, or because they appear to be of a certain ethnic background. Immigrants and non-English speaking individuals are often unaware of their rights and protections under the City's Anti-discrimination Code. The Human Rights Commission could become the cornerstone of the

[Immigrant and Refugee community, providing important resources for one of the most vulnerable communities in Tacoma.](#)

Many immigrants fear the repercussions of reporting civil rights violations, and suffer employment discrimination, wage theft, and sexual harassment in the workplace under the threat of being fired or reported to immigration authorities.

For the Human Rights Commission to assist, an individual must:

- File a claim with the City's Human Rights Unit

To file a claim with the City's Human Rights Unit, an individual must:

- Experience harmed;
- Experience the harm within the last 6-months;
- The alleged harm must be believed to be linked to their national origin status

Example of an Immigrant and Refugee Rights Project Working with Civil Rights Organizations such as Tacoma Human Rights Unit

Established in 1978, the Immigrant and Refugee Rights Project (IRR Project) has served as a critical resource for some of the most vulnerable populations in the Washington, D.C. area.

The IRR Project often works with its clients to file charges of discrimination with the EEOC or local agencies, such as the District of Columbia Office of Human Rights. The Project staffs pursues litigation in both the EEOC and federal courts on behalf of immigrants, and provides representation in a range of issues, including: discrimination in housing, employment, public accommodations, medical care and government services; sexual assault and/or abuse by employers; and loan mortgage modification scams. In cases where clients have been victims of crimes, the IRR Project staffs continue to work with the EEOC and other agencies to help procure U-Visas so that the clients can prosecute the criminal bad actors who abused them.

The IRR Project aims to make its clients whole for the wages that they were owed, or the abuse that they suffered. In addition, its litigation helps to educate employers about their need to comply with local and federal laws regardless of the immigration status of the employee, and creates injunctive relief to prevent future bad practices.

Project Activities

- Legal representation – As a direct response to civil rights violations, the IRR Project collaborates with various local law firms to provide pro bono legal representation to immigrants suffering discrimination in employment, housing and other aspects of their daily lives.
- Community Outreach – To prevent further exploitation and abuse of immigrants and refugees, the IRR Project partners with community-based organizations to raise greater awareness of housing and employment rights among immigrant groups. The Project staffs provide “Know Your Rights” presentations at various community centers in the D.C.

area, and encourage victims of discrimination and harassment to report any of these violations to the authorities.

- Investigative Reports – In addition to its advocacy and outreach efforts among immigrant communities, the IRR Project works to educate the greater non-immigrant population about the discriminatory treatment of immigrants and refugees in the D.C. area. To this end, the IRR Project has published a series of reports investigating the problems of discrimination and marginalization faced by immigrant communities in the D.C. area.

Conclusion

Tacoma's Human Rights Division enforces TMC1.29, which includes the protection of immigrants and refugees as a part of the national origin protected category. The Human Rights Commission can expand its outreach efforts to ensure communities and organizations that serve immigrants and refugees become more aware of their rights and protections under TMC 1.29. This expansion would reinforce Tacoma's intention of being a Welcoming City.

However, for the city to establish a separate Commission to support the Immigrant and Refugee population would require a supplementary budget. Services such as critical legal services, training for educators, and mental health providers who teach or provide treatment to immigrants and refugees exceed the capabilities of the Human Rights Commission.