WESTCHESTER COUNTY HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

ANNUAL REPORT 2023-2024

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Message from the Executive Director Tejash V. Sanchala

The Human Rights Commission is the "single most important force in dealing with prejudice against Black, Asian, Jewish, LGBTQIA+, Latino, and Muslim members of our community." –

County Executive George Latimer, April 17, 2024¹

The Westchester County Human Rights Law (the "Human Rights Law") was pioneering and addressed a need for a serious civil rights enforcement agency at the time it was enacted. Twenty-four (24) years after the Human Rights Law's passage, the Westchester County Human Rights Commission's (the "Commission's") work today is as important as ever. This report provides a snapshot of the Commission's activities in 2023-2024.

The Commission has experienced tremendous growth since I returned to the agency in April 2019, this time as its Executive Director, after proudly serving on the Commission's Board.

Under my leadership, the Commission focuses its enforcement actions on protecting the public's right to equal and safe enjoyment of key areas of their lives, including their homes, workplaces, and public accommodations.

In 2023 and 2024, there were many highlights, including comprehensive legislative updates (2023), and continued robust Countywide community engagement, which remains ongoing.

• Legislative updates to the Human Rights Law, as well as to the Westchester County Fair Housing Law (the "Fair Housing Law"), are discussed further beginning on **page ten (10)**.

¹ The Inside Press, (April 17, 2024), https://www.theinsidepress.com/how-westchester-county-executive-george-latimer-gets-results/.

The Commission continues to use a multi-faceted community engagement approach of proactive and responsive measures to educate and empower the public on preventing and addressing discrimination and hate, and fostering belonging and solidarity. The Commission participated in every County heritage fair at Kensico Dam and Ridge Road Park, in addition to many other events. Dedicated Commission employees and Commission Board Members worked long hours and engaged with the public on nights and weekends about the Commission's mission, as well as the protections and obligations under the County's Human Rights Law and Fair Housing Law, and provided resources for combatting hate and discrimination. The Commission's engagement efforts are discussed in more detail beginning on page eighteen (18).

The Commission is also tasked with safeguarding the public's interest in being free from discrimination within the County. Executive Director Initiated cases eradicate these unlawful activities and remedy the harm, pursuant to the County's robust Human Rights Law and Fair Housing Law.

The following successes from 2023 and 2024 are in addition to multiple other recent settlements achieving groundbreaking and meaningful relief for community members and the public.

• Six (6)-Figure Housing Discrimination Settlement Resolves Seven (7)-Year Pattern of Sexual Harassment: In a major settlement resolving an Executive Director Initiated housing discrimination investigation, the owners and managers of nearly thirty (30) residential apartment buildings in the County agreed to extensive reforms after multiple individuals raised allegations of persistent sexual harassment and retaliation at a low-income residential housing complex. The impacted individuals, including parents alleging their minor child is the survivor of statutory rape perpetrated by the superintendent at the apartment building, sought assistance from multiple organizations to no avail, and thankfully found help at the Commission.

It was alleged that the superintendent abused his position of power and access by using the superintendent key to break into female tenants' homes, including when they were home alone, and to surveil them by using security cameras. It was further alleged that the superintendent made repeated and frequent unwelcome sexual comments to female residents, threatened to drag a female resident with a car, stalked female residents, and shared sexually explicit material with them. The Commission alleged that the management company prioritized profits over tenant safety and enabled prolonged years of victimization.

As part the Commission's settlement, the owners and managers:

- paid to the County and a fair housing community partner over <u>\$100,000</u> total to further the
 Human Rights Commission's mission to eradicate discrimination;
- o adopted a new anti-discrimination and anti-fraternization policy;
- o must complete mandatory training on the Fair Housing Law and compliance;
- o must display fair housing posters in prominent areas at the property; and
- must undergo multi-year monitoring by the Human Rights Commission on compliance to prevent future discrimination and protect residents.

Separately, individual victims reportedly reached private settlements totaling \$12.5 million dollars, which I believe is one of the largest settlements nationwide addressing sexual harassment in housing. Tenants have the right to live in their homes free from sexual harassment and retaliation by their landlords. The Commission will continue to vigorously enforce the County's Fair Housing Law against landlords, superintendents, and other responsible parties who seek to take advantage of vulnerable residents.

• High Five (5)-Figure Employment Gender and Marital Status Discrimination Settlement: In a companion case to the matter above, the Human Rights Commission resolved an employment discrimination case against the same management company and its president.

The Human Rights Commission alleged that the employer's hiring practices were discriminatory based on gender and marital status. The settlement provides for significant employment reforms, including mandating the company to:

- pay <u>\$70,000</u> to the County to further the Human Rights Commission's mission to eradicate discrimination;
- o restrict the company president from hiring and firing certain staff and agents;
- o create and follow a detailed hiring, recruitment, and retention-related remediation plan;
- be monitored by the Human Rights Commission for five (5) years on compliance to prevent future employment discrimination;
- o complete employment non-discrimination training;
- o adopt a new non-discrimination and anti-fraternization policy; and
- display employment non-discrimination posters.
- Five (5)-Figure Housing Discrimination Settlement to Resolve Decade-Plus Pattern of Disability Discrimination: In 2023, following an extensive investigation of an Executive Director Initiated Complaint and a subsequent filing in federal court, the Commission reached a significant settlement in a case where a housing provider allegedly failed to provide equal access to its community for over a decade. The comprehensive settlement included important relief for current and future residents, such as installing permanent ramps at multiple access points of the property and automating their entryway doors. The settlement also provided a five (5)-figure monetary payment to the County, and additional public interest relief designed to prevent future discrimination, including compliance monitoring, completing fair housing training, adopting and distributing a Fair Housing Board-approved reasonable accommodation/modification policy, and prominently posting fair housing notices in all buildings.

Five (5)-Figure Housing Settlement to Resolve Disability Discrimination Case and to Make Condo Community Room and Pool Accessible: In this Executive Director Initiated housing discrimination case, the Commission achieved a settlement which includes \$50,000 paid to the County, along with significant public interest and equitable relief, to require a condominium association, their board, and management company to complete 2 construction projects to make both the community room and outdoor pool area – amenities all residents pay for – accessible to residents with disabilities. After many years of residents with disabilities being illegally excluded and missing out on card games, pool use during hot summer days, and community barbeques, these areas of the property will be made accessible. Pool segregation is a seminal and disgraceful example of discrimination that the Commission is proud to remedy in this case. Accessible housing is a civil right for individuals with disabilities, and under these settlements, people with mobility impairments will have an equal opportunity to live in and enjoy their homes and amenities.

The message to our Westchester communities is clear – our laws are more than words on a page. Discrimination will not be tolerated, and unlawful conduct against residents, employees, and patrons will be addressed and remedied. The Commission will continue to enforce our laws to achieve creative and impactful solutions to even the most longstanding and entrenched discrimination problems.

The Commission's community connections and presence also have continued to thrive and expand. For example, the Commission proactively informs the greater Westchester County community, including residents and housing providers, alike, of the available legal protections, obligations, and protected categories under the County's Fair Housing Law – with the goal of preventing future discrimination, in addition to remediating existing violations as promptly as possible before further harm occurs.

The Commission also partnered with the Westchester County District Attorney's office on events

reaching over ten thousand (10,000) middle school and high school students in the County to share how

to combat hate and bias and the importance of standing up and standing with individuals who experience

hate or discrimination. More details on the Commission's enforcement is detailed beginning on page

fourteen (14).

In the year ahead, we will remain committed to expanding our reach, deepening our impact, and

engaging more individuals in our mission to eradicate hate and discrimination. Let us remember the

sentiment shared by acclaimed author Heather McGhee: human rights is not a pie or a zero sum game –

more rights for one person or group does not mean fewer rights for another. Belonging and solidarity

uplift us all.

Anyone who feels they have experienced or witnessed discrimination or retaliation in Westchester

County may reach the Commission at (914) 995-9500 or <u>HumanRights@WestchesterCountyNY.gov</u>.

Hate incidents in Westchester County may be reported at https://humanrights.westchestergov.com/report-

<u>a-hate-incident</u>.

With gratitude and hope,

Tejash V. Sanchala

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Mission and History of the Commission and the Law

The mission of the Westchester County Human Rights Commission, an independent agency of Westchester County government, is to (i) enforce Westchester County's Human Rights Law and Fair Housing Law, (ii) engage in education and outreach to educate the public on their rights and obligations under these laws, and (iii) help promote equality and dignity.

The Pioneering Human Rights Law and Fair Housing Law

On December 10, 1999, the Board of Legislators passed the Human Rights Law. Champions of the Human Rights Law's passage included then-Chair of the County Board of Legislators and future-County Executive George Latimer, and then-County Legislators Andrea Stewart-Cousins and the late Lois Bronz. A key goal – which the Commission and its proponents have achieved – was to fill gaps in legal protections in multiple areas of prevalent discrimination.

The Human Rights Law was pioneering as it included anti-discrimination protections against sexual orientation discrimination at a time when they were not covered under federal or many states' laws, including New York State (or "State"). The Human Rights Law included anti-discrimination protections for sexual orientation found in the New York City Human Rights Law. After much public debate, the Human Rights Law passed and the Commission was created in 2000. As discussed herein, the County's Human Rights Law and Fair Housing Law remain pioneering and a beacon for justice.

The Commission was empowered to receive, investigate, and adjudicate allegations of discrimination in Westchester County based on a person's actual or perceived protected group identities in the areas of, among others, employment, public accommodations, and credit lending. Over the years, the definition of protected group identity has been expanded and now includes more than seventeen (17) covered identities – race (including traits historically associated with race, such as hair texture and hairstyles), color, gender (including gender identity and gender expression), sexual orientation, age, disability (including physical and mental impairments), familial status (including pregnancy and adoptions), marital status, a person's status as a victim of domestic violence, sexual abuse, or stalking,

religion, ethnicity, national origin, alienage/citizenship status, and veteran/military status.² Retaliation for filing a discrimination complaint, helping someone else with a discrimination case, or opposing or reporting discrimination, among other things, is also prohibited.

In addition to granting anti-discrimination protections based on sexual orientation and citizenship status – not found in analogous federal and state laws at its inception – the County's Human Rights Law and Fair Housing Law continued to be ahead of the curve. As further examples, in 2005, the County's Human Rights Law became the first human rights law in the State to provide anti-discrimination protections in employment and housing for survivors of domestic violence, sexual abuse, and stalking; and in April of 2009, the definition of gender was updated to include protections for gender identity and gender expression. Protections based on gender identity/gender expression were not included in federal or New York State civil rights laws at that time.

Although the Human Rights Law protected against discrimination in housing since its inception, in 2008, the County unanimously passed and enacted the Fair Housing Law to create more robust protections against housing discrimination and to partner with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development ("HUD"). The Fair Housing Law created the Fair Housing Board and empowered it to receive, investigate, and adjudicate allegations of housing discrimination in Westchester County. The Fair Housing Law was certified by HUD as substantially equivalent to the federal Fair Housing Act, and the Commission became a HUD partner through its Fair Housing Assistance Program ("FHAP").

In 2023, the Commission was one (1) of only two (2) FHAP partners in New York State; as of spring 2025, it was announced that the Commission will be the only such program in the State. This partnership reflects and supports the Commission's continued robust community education and outreach on the importance of fair housing. Housing discrimination is pervasive – it is estimated that,

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² In October 2018, Section 700.03(a) of the Human Rights Law was amended to include certain protections in instances where an applicant's criminal background information on an arrest record or conviction record is sought. This protection is not explicitly included in the definition of group identity.

nationally, four million (4,000,000) instances of housing discrimination occur each year, but only a tiny fraction of incidents are reported.³ According to the National Fair Housing Alliance's 2024 Fair Housing Trends Report, administrative housing discrimination complaints in a single year reached an all-time high of thirty-four thousand one hundred fifty (34,150) in 2023⁴. Disability-based discrimination is consistently the leading basis of illegal housing administrative discrimination complaints filed nationwide.

Over the years, the definition of protected group identity in housing discrimination cases has expanded to include more than eighteen (18) covered identities – race (including traits historically associated with race, such as hair texture and hairstyles), color, gender (including gender identity and gender expression), sexual orientation, age, disability, familial status, marital status, status as a victim of domestic violence, status as a victim of sexual abuse, status as a victim of stalking, religion, ethnicity, national origin, alienage/citizenship status, veteran/military status, and source of income.⁵

Between 2018 and 2023, the Human Rights Law and Fair Housing Law were amended to strengthen anti-discrimination protections in the areas of <u>cooperative ("co-op") disclosure</u>, <u>discriminatory harassment</u>, <u>salary transparency</u>, and <u>many others</u>.

<u>Comprehensive Amendments to Strengthen and Clarify Protections – June 2023</u>

Effective June 6, 2023, the Human Rights Law and Fair Housing Law were amended to, among other things: add protections available under federal and state law and to strengthen and harmonize the Human Rights Law and Fair Housing Law so that they are consistent.

Comprehensive legislative changes included, but were not limited to:

• expanding coverage of the Human Rights Law to include employers of all sizes;

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³ Testimony of Lisa Rice, President & CEO National Fair Housing Alliance, Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee Hearing, *How Invidious Discrimination Works and Hurts: An Examination of Lending Discrimination and Its Long-term Economic Impacts on Borrowers of Color*, (Feb. 24, 2021), hhrg-117-ba09-wstate-ricel-20210224.pdf (house.gov).

⁴ 2024 Fair Housing Trends Report – NFHA

⁵ In 2013, anti-discrimination protections based on source of income were added to the County's Fair Housing Law; such protections were not available under analogous federal or state laws at that time. This was just another area where the County's human rights laws were ahead of the curve.

- expanding the protections of the Human Rights Law to include all Westchester County-based
 employees (except County employees), including domestic workers and interns;⁶
- prohibiting discrimination against independent contractors, subcontractors, vendors, consultants, or other persons providing services pursuant to a contract in the workplace or who are an employee of such contractor, subcontractor, vendor, consultant, or other person providing services pursuant to a contract in the workplace;
- prohibiting discrimination based on military status;
- clarifying the definition of "race" to include traits historically associated with race, such as hair texture and protective hairstyles (e.g., braids, locks, and twists);
- defining the term "pregnancy-related condition" as "a medical condition related to pregnancy
 or childbirth that inhibits the exercise of a normal bodily function or is demonstrable by
 medically accepted clinical or laboratory diagnostic techniques, including but not limited to
 lactation." Pregnancy-related conditions are also to be treated as temporary disabilities;
- prohibiting harassment based on any protected category, and clarifying that harassment means
 inferior terms, conditions, or privileges because of actual or perceived group identity;
- extending the deadline to file an administrative complaint with the Commission, for allegations of sexual harassment in the workplace, from one (1) year to three (3) years, for allegations that accrue after June 6, 2023;
- under the Human Rights Law, aggrieved individuals may file a lawsuit in a court of competent jurisdiction based on allegations jurisdictional under the Human Rights Law that accrue after June 6, 2023;

⁶ County employees have other non-discrimination protections specific to that workforce.

- amending the definition of the term "sexual orientation" to "an individual's actual or perceived romantic, physical or sexual attraction to other persons, or lack thereof, on the basis of gender";
- amending the term "source of income" in the Fair Housing Law to, among other things, include any lawful source of income including, but not limited to child support, alimony, foster care subsidies, income derived from social security or any form of federal, state or local public assistance or housing assistance, including but not limited to a voucher under the federal Housing Choice Voucher program (known colloquially as "Section 8");
- clarifying that discrimination based on source of income shall be treated similarly to other protected categories under the Fair Housing Law and that it is subject to the same exemptions;
- similar to the State's Human Rights Law, limiting the owner-occupied exemption under the County's Fair Housing Law to premises with not more than two (2) families living independently of each other, so long as the owner actually resides in one (1) such housing accommodation;
- the provisions of the Human Rights Law and Fair Housing Law are to be construed liberally; and
- harmonizing provisions of the Human Rights Law and Fair Housing Law.

Commission Staff

The Commission experienced transition years in 2023 and 2024, as the agency had three (3) key vacancies each year. The Commission has a strong foundation, allowing us to navigate those transition years with confidence. This continuity ensured that our standards remained high, even as we prepared for future growth.

In 2023 and 2024, the Commission's full-time staff⁷ included:

Tejash V. Sanchala, Executive Director Julia De Persia, Deputy Director Joshua Levin, Fair Housing Director John Baker, Investigator Safa Saleh, Investigator (joined the Commission in 2024) Shepard Verbas, Community Work Assistant Niurky Reynoso, Staff Assistant (Spanish Speaking)

The Commission was also awarded a competitive grant from HUD to fund a temporary Fair Housing Administrative Assistant in 2023 and 2024.

Commission Board and Fair Housing Board

Under the Human Rights Law, the County Executive, subject to confirmation by the Board of Legislators, appoints individuals to the Commission Board. The Commission Board is to be reflective of the County's diverse population.

The following individuals served as members of the Commission Board⁸ during 2024:

Rev. Doris K. Dalton, *Chair* Rev. Dr. Stephen Pogue, *Vice Chair*

Maria Amado Zead Ramadan Harry Singh
James Lin Thomas Koshy Gary Trachten, Esq.

Jennifer Bernhard Hanade Sarar Hon. Selwyn Walters
André Early Lisa Do Hofflich Tom Watson
Sammy Gomez

The Fair Housing Board is appointed by the County Executive, subject to confirmation of the Board of Legislators, from the Commission's Board Members. The following individuals served as members of the Fair Housing Board in 2024:

⁷ Investigators Shivani Patel and Jamie Yu-Zepeda were Commission staff for part of this period.

⁸ David Imamura, Esq. served on the Commission Board in 2023.

Hon. Selwyn Walters, Chair

André Early

Harry Singh

Thomas Koshy

Jennifer Bernhard

Administrative Law Judges

Administrative Law Judges preside over hearings in cases where the Commission or the Fair

Housing Board has found probable cause to believe that a violation of the Human Rights Law or the Fair

Housing Law may have occurred.

The following individuals served as Administrative Law Judges to the Commission and/or Fair

Housing Board⁹ in 2024:

Hon. Kim Berg Hon. Kyle McGovern

Steven T. Sledzik, Esq.

Enforcement: The Human Rights Law and Fair Housing Law In Action

The Complaint Process

The Commission and Fair Housing Board are charged with enforcing the Human Rights Law and

the Fair Housing Law, respectively.

Step 1: Complaint Initiation

A complaint can be initiated with the Commission or, in the case of housing complaints, the Fair

Housing Board, in two (2) ways. First, the Executive Director of the Commission/Fair Housing Board is

authorized to initiate a complaint where the Commission/Fair Housing Board believes that a respondent

may have engaged in unlawful discriminatory conduct, typically where the alleged discrimination involves

a pattern affecting the rights of more than one (1) person and/or discriminatory conduct involving one (1)

person. More often, the complaint process begins when an individual contacts the Commission/Fair

Housing Board to request assistance.

⁹ Epifanio Castillo, Esq. served as an Administrative Law Judge to the Commission and/or the Fair Housing Board in 2023.

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When a member of the public contacts the Commission/Fair Housing Board, the Commission/Fair Housing Board first determines whether it has jurisdiction over the potential claim(s). Generally, the Commission/Fair Housing Board has jurisdiction over allegations of discrimination in employment, public accommodations, housing, and credit lending that took place in Westchester County within the preceding year. Additionally, the Commission/Fair Housing Board has jurisdiction over claims of discriminatory harassment that took place after December 7, 2021 with the same one (1)-year time limitation to file an administrative complaint.

If the Commission/Fair Housing Board does not have jurisdiction, it refers the complaining individual to appropriate resources, if available. If a matter appears jurisdictional, the prospective complainant is provided with a complaint form. Once completed, the complaint form is reviewed, perfected, and filed by the Commission/Fair Housing Board. To assist complainants, the Commission provides notary services upon request.

Step 2: The Investigation

Once filed, the complaint is served upon the respondents (*i.e.*, the parties alleged to have discriminated) and a thorough, neutral investigation is commenced. The investigation typically includes interviewing parties and witnesses; conducting field visits; and requesting and reviewing all relevant documents and information. Concurrent with the investigations, the Commission/Fair Housing Board engages with the parties to attempt to conciliate each complaint. The Commission/Fair Housing Board investigators work to find creative ways to complete investigations that are both timely and thorough.

Step 3: The Determination and Order After Investigation

The purpose of the investigation process is to determine if sufficient evidence exists to establish "Probable Cause" to support the allegations in the complaint that the Human Rights Law or Fair Housing Law may have been violated, such that there is a public interest in advancing the matter to a public hearing. Where it finds that there is insufficient evidence to support the allegations, the Commission/Fair Housing Board issues a Determination of "No Probable Cause" and the complaint is then dismissed. Where the Commission/Fair Housing Board finds that there is sufficient evidence to support a finding of "Probable Cause", the matter is referred to a public hearing before an Administrative Law Judge.

Step 4: The Public Hearing

The Commission/Fair Housing Board's Administrative Law Judges preside over public hearings after findings of Probable Cause. Every party is given a full and fair opportunity to present their evidence and witnesses before the Administrative Law Judge. When the hearing has concluded, the Administrative Law Judge issues their Recommended Findings of Fact, Opinion, Decision, and Order. The Commission/Fair Housing Board then reviews the Recommendations of the Administrative Law Judge and issues a Final Determination and Order After Hearing, either affirming the Recommended Decision, or amending it as necessary. Final Orders are appealable to the State Supreme Court.

Operating Statistics

Requests for Assistance

In 2023, the Commission received six hundred forty-two (642) individual Requests for Assistance ("RFAs"). In 2024, the Commission received seven-hundred and four (704) individual RFAs. These represent an annual increase in community contacts. The number of filed complaints in 2023 and 2024 increased as well from sixty (60) complaints to eighty-eight (88) complaints, representing an increase of over forty-five (45) percent.

<u>Complaints – Violations of the Human Rights Law or Fair Housing Law</u>

Complaints by Basis

	Human Rights Law		Fair Housi	Total	
Protected Group Identity	2023	2024	2023	2024	
Age	2	5	2	2	11
Alienage/Citizenship	0	1	1	1	3
Color	7	3	6	5	21
Co-op Disclosure	-	-	1	26	27
Disability	7	3	12	8	30
Domestic Violence/Sexual Abuse/Stalking	0	0	1	1	2
Ethnicity	9	8	12	6	35
Familial Status	1	3	3	0	7
Gender	6	4	7	4	21
Marital Status	0	0	2	2	4
Military Status	0	0	0	0	0
National Origin/Ancestry	3	4	9	4	20
Race	9	7	8	5	29
Religion	2	0	2	2	6
Retaliation	6	4	10	5	25
Salary Transparency	0	23	-	-	23
Sexual Orientation	4	0	3	1	8
Source of Income	-	-	4	9	13

The chart above shows the protected group identities of the complaints filed in 2023 and 2024. A complaint may allege discrimination based on multiple protected group identities.

In 2023, five (5) matters were withdrawn or administratively dismissed after a complaint was filed. The Commission/Fair Housing Board facilitated twelve (12) settlement conferences/mediations. Six (6) matters were referred to an Administrative Law Judge for public hearings.

In 2024, four (4) matters were withdrawn or administratively dismissed after a complaint was filed. The Commission/Fair Housing Board facilitated thirty-two (32) settlement conferences/mediations. Four (4) matters were referred to an Administrative Law Judge for public hearings.

The Commission/Fair Housing Board also strengthened their mediation program.

Co-op Disclosure

The table below shows the data regarding the cooperative disclosure provision of the Fair Housing Law.

Year	Cooperative Rejection Notices Received by the Commission ¹⁰	
Dec. 2018		4
2019		253
2020		183
2021		276
2022		306
2023		274
2024		226

Education and Outreach

The Commission continues to conduct robust education and outreach through its Education and Empowerment series in the community. In addition to enforcing the Human Rights Law and the Fair Housing Law, the Commission and Fair Housing Board conduct education and outreach regarding the laws and speak to the community about hate and bias. Several other County laws and Executive Orders direct the Commission's participation in other areas, including the Immigrant Protection Act, Safe Time
Leave Law, and Language Access. Below is a snapshot of some key education and outreach highlights.

¹⁰ The data in this chart reflects the date that the Commission received the rejection notice and not the date of the rejection.

2023 Highlights

In partnership with the Rye Human Rights Commission, the Commission organized a program celebrating the courage and tenacity of M. Paul Redd, a former member of the Human Rights Commission and a towering civil rights figure in the Westchester County community. In the late 1950s, Mr. Redd and his wife, Orial Redd, vigorously fought against housing discrimination they experienced in Rye. Mr. Redd and his family were denied housing at a cooperative because of their race. The Commission highlighted Mr. Redd's relentless efforts in court and administrative arenas to combat housing discrimination, and underscored the pivotal role of Dorothy Sterling, a key ally who had faced housing discrimination years earlier based on antisemitism. In one of the cases, the housing provider reportedly said, in sum or substance, "I have to think about the effect renting to African Americans would have on existing tenants and how that would endanger my investment in the property." Ultimately, the Redd family moved into the cooperative, and Mr. Redd eventually became the cooperative's president.

It is crucial to discuss incidents of discrimination that occurred within the County to foster awareness and promote justice. Continuing this theme, the Commission proudly collaborated with the Lenape Center to shed light on the history of the Lenape people in the Hudson Valley. The well-attended program at the County Center featured Curtis Zunigha, co-director of the Lenape Center, who delivered a moving presentation. Many attendees expressed gratitude for the opportunity to learn about the rich history and contributions of the Lenape people.

In celebration of Fair Housing Month, the Commission hosted a program focusing on the past, present, and future of fair housing. Despite over fifty-five (55) years having passed since the enactment of the Fair Housing Act, housing discrimination remains pervasive. Panelists included: Joshua Levin, the Commission's Fair Housing Director; Bryan Greene, Vice President of Policy Advocacy at the National Association of REALTORS; and Professor Debra Cohen of the Elisabeth Haub School of Law at Pace

University. Additionally, the Commission launched a successful fair housing campaign, with ads appearing on bus shelters throughout the County to inform residents of their rights.

During Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Month, the Commission partnered with community groups for a film screening of "And Then They Came For Us." Attendees heard firsthand experiences from Takeshi "Tak" Furumoto, a survivor of a Japanese internment camp in California. His powerful testimony illuminated an often-overlooked chapter of American history and emphasized the importance of vigilance against injustice.

The Commission was proud to partner with CURE and a mosaic of community groups on the "5 Towns, 1 Book" series, which centered on Professor Soyica Colbert's book, *Radical Vision*, a biography of Lorraine Hansberry. The Commission's Executive Director, Tejash V. Sanchala, and Lynda Jones of Croton's Lorraine Hansberry Coalition interviewed Dr. Colbert about her book and Hansberry's tireless work to fight discrimination and injustice. Lorraine Hansberry, renowned for her acclaimed Broadway play *A Raisin in the Sun*, was a resident of Croton, New York.

In 2023, the Commission continued its impactful partnership with the District Attorney's Office, reaching over ten thousand (10,000) middle and high school students across Westchester County – inspired by Nelson Mandela's wisdom that "[n]o one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite." Equipped with that wisdom, these presentations provided students with practical tools to become upstanders, helped them recognize hate before it escalates, and taught them how to foster a culture of empathy and respect as the foundation for a more inclusive society. Additionally, the Commission presented to school superintendents and leaders at a symposium to share strategies and resources for combating antisemitism, Islamophobia, and other forms of discrimination, fostering a proactive and united approach to these challenges.

On June 6, 2023, the Commission partnered with a mosaic of approximately sixty (60) community and interfaith groups on the "Gather Against Hate" event in White Plains at Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Plaza. Hundreds of attendees heard speakers from different community groups denounce hate and call for solidarity and unity. The Commission's Vice-Chair, Rev. Dr. Stephen Pogue, served as Master of Ceremonies of the event, and speakers included New York State Senate Majority Leader and "Mother of the Human Rights Commission" Andrea Stewart-Cousins, New York State Attorney General Leticia James, then-Westchester County District Attorney Miriam E. Rocah, and Chair of Westchester County Board of Legislators, Vedat Gashi. Westchester County Executive George Latimer provided moving closing remarks. The event was a powerful reminder of how strong we are when we unite together against the forces that seek to divide us.

The Commission also partnered with the New York State Department of Labor and local groups in Mamaroneck to discuss the intersectionality of wage theft and discrimination. According to the Economic Policy Institute, wage theft costs U.S. workers as much as fifty (50) billion dollars per year – more than robberies, burglaries, and motor vehicle thefts combined. Some incidents of wage theft include discrimination-related issues. The Commission provided insights on resources available when wage theft occurs alongside discrimination. This event was simultaneously translated into Spanish to reach a broader audience. To expand its outreach efforts beyond traditional means, the Commission joined the Westchester County Anti-Human Trafficking Task Force. Further, the Commission presented to immigrant communities about protections under the County's Human Rights Law and Fair Housing Law.

As has become our custom in recent years, the Commission also partnered on a coat drive that collected hundreds of coats, scarves, and hats for donation to individuals at homeless shelters.

To maintain its high level of visibility and robust community engagement, the Commission's team participated at every heritage fair and numerous other community events. Members of our team also travelled to national conferences in Colorado and Maryland to explore collaborative efforts and potential synergies with federal, state, and other County agencies. Locally, the Commission presented to the Westchester Municipal Officers Association to raise awareness of the Commission's resources.

The Commission partnered with The LOFT LGBTQ+ Community Center to speak at the Hudson Valley TransForum and the Rainbow Rally, standing in solidarity and speaking out against hate. The Commission works tirelessly to build community. The Commission's team, including its Deputy Director Julia De Persia, also presented on LGBTQ+ cultural competency issues to legal and community leaders during Pride Month and throughout the year.

Closing out the year, in December, the Commission presented at the United Nations Association's Human Rights Day program. We highlighted the robust anti-discrimination protections in the County's Laws and emphasized how everyone can play a role in fighting discrimination.

Finally, we remember and celebrate the late Harry Bright, a former Board Member of the Commission, who passed away on August 4, 2023. Like the late M. Paul Redd, Mr. Bright was a towering figure in the fight for civil rights within our community. His unwavering advocacy touched countless lives locally, nationally, and internationally, and his loss will be deeply felt by all who knew him and benefited from his unwavering commitment to justice. Executive Director Sanchala had the distinct honor of working alongside both Mr. Bright and Mr. Redd, and their passion for justice continues to inspire us all.

2024 Highlights

The Commission hosted a timely program on the differences between hate crimes, hate incidents, and discrimination. This program was held at the County Center and panelists included: Catalina Blanco-Buitrago, Esq., Senior Assistant District Attorney, Hate Crimes Unit, Westchester County District Attorney's Office; Mayo Bartlett, former head of the Hate Crimes Unit at the DA's Office, and consultant to the Human Rights Commission; and Tejash V. Sanchala, the Commission's Executive Director.

In response to rising attacks against the LGBTQ+ community, the Commission partnered with Nonprofit Westchester on a program: *Pronouns, Allyship and the LGBTQIA+ Community – What it Means and Why it Matters*. We talked about the importance of solidarity and how to be an ally.

The Commission continued its film series to shine a light on critical civil rights issues. In partnership with community organizations, the Commission participated in a film screening of *Photographic Justice: The Corky Lee Story*. Corky Lee, known as the self-proclaimed unofficial Asian American Photographer Laureate, dedicated his life and career to documenting Asian American social justice movements, using his passion for photography as a powerful tool for advocacy and social change. The panel discussion included the film's director, producers and individuals who knew Corky Lee personally. Next, in partnership with local bar associations and community organizations, the Commission hosted a screening of the documentary *How to Sue the Klan*, which tells the story of "how five Black women from Chattanooga used legal ingenuity to take on the Ku Klux Klan in a historic 1982 civil case, fighting to hold them accountable for their crimes and bring justice to their community. Their victory set a legal precedent that continues to inspire the ongoing fight against organized hate." The film's producers and members of the legal team shared their insights on this groundbreaking case. This case highlights a hate crime perpetrated by the KKK in Chattanooga, Tennessee in 1980, reminding us that hate is not consigned to ancient history.

During Fair Housing Month, the Commission hosted a fair housing educational program. In partnership with community organizations, the Commission facilitated solidarity building workshops. In partnership with HUD, the Commission launched an education and outreach campaign including digital billboards.

The Commission also participated in program entitled The American Dream & the Hansberry Family, hosted by the Lorraine Hansberry Coalition, featuring a Q&A with acclaimed journalist Natalie Y. Moore, who discussed fair housing related issues including Carl Hansberry's landmark 1940 Supreme Court case and her book *The South Side: A Portrait of Chicago and American Segregation*.

This overview represents a snapshot of the Commission's outreach efforts.

Finally, in February 2024, the Commission honored Eddie Mae Barnes, former Board Member, for her decades of service, community leadership and unwavering dedication to advancing human rights. Eddie Mae was genuinely touched by this recognition, creating a wonderful memory for her family and the Commission's family. Her passing in 2025 makes this tribute even more poignant. Rest in power, Eddie Mae.

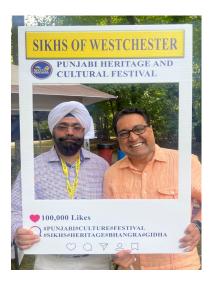
Looking Forward to 2025

Through these initiatives, the Commission reaffirms its commitment to promoting equality, educating the public, and combatting discrimination. We look forward to continuing this vital work to create a more just and inclusive society as we step into our 25th year of fostering a community of understanding and respect, empowering the community, and enforcing the County's human rights laws.

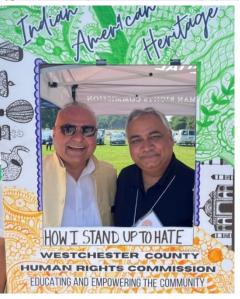
Scenes from 2023 and 2024

Commission Board Members, staff, and community members show how they stand up to hate at various festivals and celebrations.











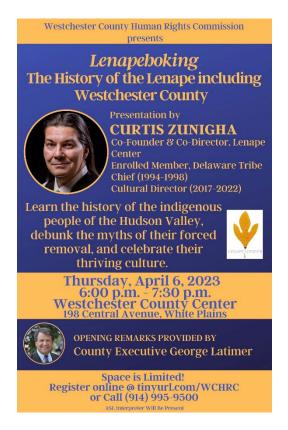








History of the Lenape in the Hudson Valley Program at Westchester County Center







Members of the Commission's Team in 2023



(Left to Right) Niurky Reynoso, Shivani Patel, John Baker, Joshua Levin, Tejash V. Sanchala, Jamie Yu-Zepeda, Julia De Persia and Shepard Verbas.

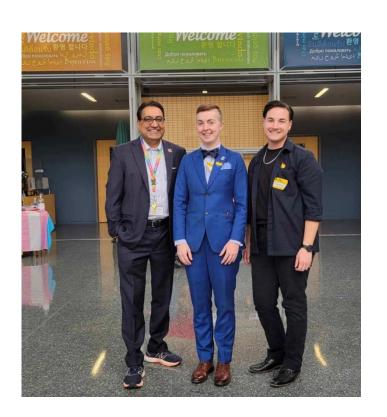


(Left to Right) Catalina Blanco Buitrago, Mayo Bartlett and Tejash V. Sanchala speak at a local high school on ways to combat hate.



(Left) Commission participates in the Rainbow Rally Against Hate (Left to Right, Tejash V. Sanchala, Diamondy Doux (DD), Julia De Persia.

(Right) Tejash V. Sanchala speaks at the Rainbow Rally in White Plains organized by The LOFT LGBTQ+ Community Center.





(Left) Commission presents at the Hudson Valley Trans Forum, organized by The LOFT LGBTQ+ Community Center.

(Left to Right) Tejash V. Sanchala, Shain Filcher, Esq., Executive Director of the LGBT Bar Association of New York, and Shepard Verbas.

Honoring former Human Rights Commission Board Member the late M. Paul Redd and his fight for fair housing in Rye



(Left) Paul Redd, Jr. and County Executive George Latimer.

(Right) The Commission partnered with the Rye Human Rights Commission and Rye Historical Society.

(Left to Right) Ingram Taylor, Mayo Bartlett, Paul Redd, Jr., Rita Capek, Tejash V. Sanchala, and Joshua Levin.



Engaging with National and Local Partners



(Left) Commission's partners at HUD and local fair housing leadership at Westchester Residential Opportunities, Inc.

(Left to Right) Marlene Zarfes, Andrew Smith, Demetria McCain, and Tejash V. Sanchala) at a HUD Conference in Denver.

(Right) Engaging with other County partner agencies in NYS.





(Left) Joshua Levin speaking with community leaders at event in Greenburgh.



(Above) Shepard Verbas at Yonkers Dominican Festival.

(Below) Tak Furumoto, Japanese Internment Camp Survivor, Koji Sato, President of the Japanese American Association, and Tejash V. Sanchala.





(Above) Commission Board Member Maria Amado and Tejash V. Sanchala at Hispanic Heritage Event.

(Below) Harry Singh and Tejash V. Sanchala at India Independence Event in Yonkers.



Gather Against Hate



(Above) County Executive George Latimer speaking to attendees at Gather Against Hate event in June 2023 in White Plains.

A look at Outreach in 2024



(Above) New York State Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins, the "Mother of the Human Rights Commission" with Executive Director Tejash V. Sanchala and Education and Outreach Coordinator Shepard Verbas.



Members of the Commission's Team in 2024



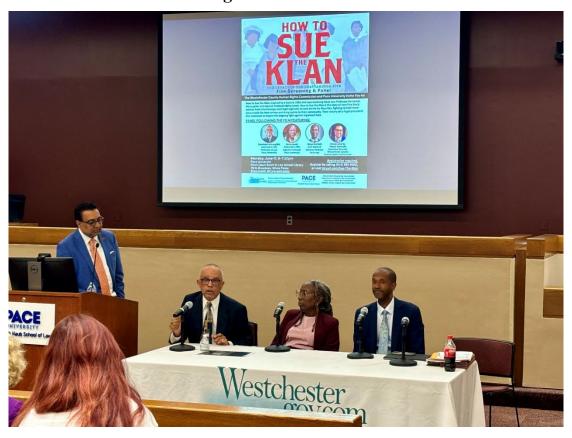


Film Screening Series: Photographic Justice The Corky Lee Story





Film Screening Series: How to Sue the Klan





How to Sue the Klan, inspired by a historic 1982 civil case involving Haub Law Professor Randolph McLaughlin and Adjunct Professor Betty Lewis. How to Sue the Klan is the story of how Five Black women from Chattanooga used legal ingenuity to take on the Ku Klux Klan, fighting to hold them accountable for their crimes and bring justice to their community. Their victory set a legal precedent that continues to inspire the ongoing fight against organized hate.

PANEL FOLLOWING THE FILM FEATURING:



Randolph McLaughlin Featured in Film Professor of Law Pace University



Betty Lewis Featured in Film Adjunct Professor



Mayo Bartlett Civil Rights & Criminal Defense



Tejash Sanchala
Executive Director
Westchester County
Human Rights Commissi

Monday, June 17, 6-7:30pm
Pace University
Moot Court Room in Law School Library
78 N. Broadway, White Plains
Free event. All are welcome.

Registration required.
Register by calling (914) 995-9500,
or visit tinyurl.com/Sue-The-Klan



George Latimer, County Executive

y Tejash V. Sanchala, Esq., Executive Di
Human Rights Commission



Westchester County Bar Association Westchester Women's Bar Association Westchester Black Bar Association Hudson Valley Hispanic Bar Association (Above) Panel discussion after the film screening with Prof. Randy McLaughlin, Prof. Lewis, Mayo Bartlett and Tejash V. Sanchala.

Celebrating Hon. Eddie Mae Barnes, former Commission Board Member



(Left) County Executive Latimer and Commission Chair Rev. Dalton present Eddie Mae Barnes with a proclamation for her years of service.

(Below) Eddie Mae Barnes and County Executive Latimer, Deputy County Executive Jenkins and County Legislators Williams-Johnson, Imamura, Pierce and Ulaj with Commission Chair Rev. Dalton and Tejash V. Sanchala.





(Left) White Plains Mayor Thomas Roach unveils a street sign dedicated to former Commission Board Member Harry Bright with Harry's daughter Miriam Bright.

(Right) Executive Director Tejash V. Sanchala presents at Mercy University in Dobbs Ferry.



Pride & Heritage Festivals



(Left) Commission team members including Board Members Jenny Bernhard and Tom Watson at Westchester Pride.



(Left) Commission team members including Board Member Sam Gomez at Yorktown Pride.



(Left) County
Executive Latimer,
State Senator Shelley
Mayer, Greenburgh
Town Councilperson
Ellen Hendrickx,
Director Crystal
Collins and
Commission team
members.

(Right) Commission team members (including Board Member Selwyn Walters) with community leaders at the African American Heritage Festival.





(Left) Education and Outreach Coordinator Shepard Verbas at Senior Law Day in White Plains.



(Left) Deputy Director Julia De Persia and Education and Outreach Coordinator Shepard Verbas engaging with the public.