

There's No Money For Human Rights

By DAVID OLINGER
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The one agency in New Hampshire that handles discrimination cases has been eliminated in the budget passed by the state Senate.

Each month, the New Hampshire Commission for Human Rights hears about 25 formal charges of discrimination. The commission now has about 170 pending cases and no authorization to function as an agency beyond the end of this month.

The human rights commission "should be called the New Hampshire agency on discrimination," said commissioner Nancy Richards-Stower. "It is the only agency to which formal complaints of discrimination can be taken. There is no other place in the state."

If state legislators agree to eliminate it, "they will have no place to enforce the state and federal civil rights laws," she said.

The commission is responsible for protecting New Hampshire citizens against discrimination in the areas of employment, housing and access to public accommodations.

Currently, sex discrimination in employment ranks as the most frequent complaint. Charges of discrimination based on age or a physical handicap represent the fastest growing part of the commission's caseload. Merryll Gibbs, the commission's executive director, said that the number of formal charges heard by the commission have doubled in the last year.

The commission's staff has not grown with its caseload. It has five paid employ-

ees, counting one parttime worker.

"The general fund money we're talking about is \$37,000 a year," Richards-Stower said. "Nobody knows who we are or what we do, and that's because we've never been adequately funded. The Legislature must be informed that they will have no place to enforce the state and federal civil rights cases."

Human rights commission decisions can be appealed to a Superior Court judge. But Richards-Stower said state law requires people to initiate complaints of discrimination with the commission.

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The commission was reviewed this year under the provisions of the Sunset Act, and its functions were routinely approved by the House and Senate.

"I wouldn't be so appalled if, during the Sunset process, the House or Senate had said, 'We don't like this agency. We don't think it operates efficiently,'" Richards-Stower said.

"But they didn't. So the Senate Finance Committee members have thumbed their noses at the full houses of both bodies. Which is not an intellectually honest way to deal with a statute they may or may not like."



Monitor/Ken Williams

Nancy Richards-Stower, head of the New Hampshire Commission for Human Rights.