



Executive Session Papers

Human Rights Commissions and Criminal Justice

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Performance Measures for Human Rights Commissions

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In bold typeface, the introduction to the Iowa Civil Rights Commission's FY 2006 Performance Report states: "The biggest challenge the agency faces is society's perception that civil rights in Iowa is no longer an urgent, nor compelling, issue." The report asserts this perception stems from a misunderstanding that "the problem" of civil rights is getting better, is resolved or never existed. Struggling with this assumption in absence of hard data to counter it, the Commission lost funding and many staff positions over a period of years.

There is no question that the world in which human rights commissions first came to function has changed. Michael Cash, director of the Fairfax County, Virginia Human Rights Commission, notes that targets for human rights and human relations commissions have shifted and new minority groups have emerged. As Cash puts it: "the entire spectrum has become wider and more colorful." Changed circumstances in no way diminish the value these agencies bring to American communities. They do, however, require commissions to adapt and to adopt new ways of doing business. Implementing an effective performance measurement system is one of the ways human rights

commissions can assess and communicate the importance of services they provide.¹

Commissions can benefit in at least three ways from undertaking performance measurement. Measurement can: 1) help a commission decide where to focus its limited resources; 2) make the importance of a commission's work more vivid for the public; and 3) help a commission improve the effectiveness of its work. Further, the mere act of undertaking transparent performance measurement can bolster a commission's credibility in the eyes of stakeholder groups, elected officials and the public. Some human rights commissions take an interest in performance measurement only when they are required to do so by their state, city, or county governments to justify their budgets. But even where commissions are required to develop better measures, it

¹ Human rights, human relations, civil rights, community relations: the commissions discussed here operate under these and still additional names. Whether they march under the banner of human rights, human relations, civil rights, community relations or inter-group relations, these commissions share a basic mission: to eradicate discrimination and promote equal opportunity. For convenience, the term "human rights commission" is used in this paper to refer to all such agencies, despite their varying names.

makes sense to embrace the requirement. Good performance measures can help an agency in numerous ways.

Once a commission focuses on measuring performance, it faces some difficult issues and choices. How can the commission adequately capture the *value* of the many things the commission does? Can things such as value and effectiveness be measured at all? Is it possible the measurement will be used against the commission? Should a commission see performance measurement as a tool to improve its performance, as a tool for fundraising, or as part of its service to the public—and are there trade-offs among these? Is it sufficient to keep simple counts of *activities*, such as the number of complaints answered or the attendance generated at trainings, or should the commission try to measure the *impact* of these actions?

Human rights commissions, like many government services, have traditionally measured the work they actually do by tallying outputs, such as the number of cases handled. However, output measurement alone is unlikely to capture the full range of tasks performed by commissions, including education, training, and outreach. Moreover, if the number of outputs, for instance, the number of complaints filed, decreases, this simple measure of workload can create a misleading impression of falling customer demand. Do fewer complaints filed imply that discrimination is being eradicated? Did the economy improve? Does it mean that human rights commissions have been successful? Or have they become less visible? The variety of possible explanations demonstrates that measuring caseload alone might not be an adequate indicator for measuring performance. Particularly in a changing environment where elected officials are holding government agencies more accountable,

human rights commissions need a more effective way of measuring their value than merely tallying things, such as the number of cases handled or the number of attendees at trainings and hearings.

This paper discusses several strategic issues around performance measurement for human rights commissions and provides examples of different ways those commissions can actually measure performance. Section one of the paper explores reasons why human rights commissions would want to measure their performance. Whether a commission is caught up in a larger performance initiative or has chosen to evaluate its own performance, commissions can use performance data strategically. Section two reviews some specific approaches human rights commissions have taken to measure their performance. This section examines a variety of performance indicators that go beyond caseload, such as customer satisfaction and public perceptions of a commission's work. Finally, the third section explores the possibility of implementing methods that would permit human rights commissions to compare their performance with that of other agencies and thereby help foster a national understanding of what is expected of these agencies.

I. Why Measure Performance?

All government agencies feel an increasing obligation to measure their performance. Since 1999, the government of Fairfax County, Virginia, for instance, has taken great efforts to refine its performance measurement system. Instruction manuals, which are posted on-line, ensure that all county agencies are consistent in reporting performance measurement information. The county's methodology attempts to present a balanced picture of performance rather than focusing on a single aspect, such as quantity

produced (output) or cost (efficiency). The approach used takes into consideration at least five indicators: input, output, efficiency, service quality and outcome. The county also posts annual information on how well agencies performed, and identifies their targets for the coming year. Results are used to allocate resources among agencies.

Likewise, at the urging of successive governors, the state government of Iowa has required all state agencies to measure their performance. Individual agencies' performance goals are expected to tie into overall state government goals and plans. The human rights organizations in both Fairfax County and the State of Iowa develop their own goals and choose their own performance measures, but, as we will see later in this paper, both Michael Cash, director of the Fairfax County Human Rights Commission, and Ralph Rosenberg, director of the Iowa Civil Rights Commission, had to think about how to adequately measure their work in terms of outputs and outcomes, as well as impact on the broader environment.

The federal government is another promoter of performance measurement. Many commissions have contracts with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to investigate complaints of suspected employment and housing discrimination. Commissions must provide specific measures that then determine the amount of funding they receive from these federal agencies. For example, HUD's Fair Housing Assistance Program (FHAP) pays commissions \$2,900 for cause cases and \$2,400 for all other cases that are processed within 100 days or less.² For those cases processed in more

than 100 days HUD reduces payment. The EEOC currently pays \$540 per case³ but limits payment according to the size of an agency's inventory and the age of those cases. Commissions working under these contracts must, at minimum, collect information on the number of cases they handle as well as the time they take to process them. For the state human rights commissions in Pennsylvania, California, Ohio, and New York—which get substantial funding from these federal agencies—measuring the age of cases and thinking about this measurement have become routine. City and county commissions, such as that in Fairfax County, receive relatively little funding from the federal government and do not face this particular pressure to think in terms of the age of cases. Still, a majority of human rights commissions measure their productivity by counting how many cases they handle.

Some human rights commissions are reluctant to go beyond counting cases to measure the work they perform. And even in agencies engaged in more comprehensive analysis, not all staff members are convinced of the benefits of measuring performance. Ralph Rosenberg notes that not everyone at the Iowa Civil Rights Commission “sees the connection between accountability and the quality of our work.” Some staff feel that time devoted to performance measurement could be better spent working on their cases. But Rosenberg stresses the importance of accountability. “I know people want their government and government agencies to be accountable,” and performance measures give guidance to an agency to make it more responsive to public needs and to bolster its credibility. Rosenberg says, “I tell my people, one and a

² "Cause" cases are cases in which the respondents are found to have violated the fair housing law. They

require more work, such as preparation for and attendance at hearings.

³ The figure increases to \$550 in FY 2008.

half years for a case: that is too long. We told the governor and the public that we would be faster, so we have to be faster, and we have been. Putting such pressure on ourselves helps us to improve our performance.” The balance to maintain is ensuring that quality does not become compromised in an effort to reduce case inventory.

Rosenberg acknowledges that measuring performance can be a risky enterprise. “The management has to know what it is doing. There is always a danger in quantifying your efforts and bringing them down to numbers. They might not adequately capture your work. And of course there have to be consequences when it turns out that the Commission is not doing well.” Michael Cash, director of the Fairfax County Human Rights Commission, feels that “not all human rights commissions are yet paying attention to the fact that times have changed. We have to show the public that we offer value for the public dollar. However, the commissions that *do* pay attention often find it very hard to adequately bring their value down to numbers.” Moreover, commissions might be afraid to be truly transparent. As Cash puts it, “many commissions are afraid to publicly publish their basic caseload and processing time because they are embarrassed that they are not doing well.”

Yet these are precisely the commissions that could profitably embrace a broader range of performance measures. As a first step, Cash suggests that commissions could perhaps better justify their work by looking at the number of cases per staff member or the costs per case, thus taking into account the size and resources of the agency. And even these measures say little about customer satisfaction or the impact of the cases pursued. For every commission, there could be advantages in embracing a wider range of performance measures that reflect

improvement in civil rights or human relations and respect for basic rights.

In Iowa, Rosenberg has found that accountability and improved performance go hand in hand. Communicating performance goals to the broader community and measuring the achievement of these goals creates incentives for a commission’s staff to aim for the achievement of the goals they set for themselves. After all, failure to satisfy those goals carries possible consequences, such as criticism by the media, loss of public confidence or reduced funding. But in order to be truly accountable, agencies have to be transparent. Very few human rights commissions produce public information on what they are doing, let alone on how well they are performing. Both Cash and Rosenberg found it difficult to find performance information on other commissions. When developing performance measures for his program, Cash reviewed 34 other state and local human rights commissions’ websites to get a feel for what statistics they posted in the areas of mediation, alternative dispute resolution, and other things. Only four of the 34 posted any performance measures on-line. When researching the possibility of expanding the protected classes in Iowa, Rosenberg tried to do some on-line research into how different commissions handle gay and lesbian rights, but he could hardly find anything. The experience prompted Rosenberg to undertake a project to permit public access to his database, allowing citizens and other commissions to easily conduct their own data queries, selecting the data they need.

Performance measures can also enhance a human rights commission’s fundraising efforts. Funders, whether public or private, prefer to support institutions that are accountable and transparent, so they can assess whether their money is well spent.

Performance measures can help human rights commissions market themselves to increase funding. Their benchmarks convey what they are aiming at and link prospective financial contributions towards these goals. Results will equip commissions to discuss and promote the progress they have made so far. For instance, they can point to rising numbers of satisfied customers or they can show that citizens' attitudes and perceptions about the criminal justice system have improved through their dealings with human rights commissions.

Even poor performers can use performance data strategically. Poor performance might be explained to some extent by inadequate funding, flawed communication with other organizations, or a limited mandate. All of these factors provide an opportunity for dialogue with funders. For instance, a state commission could point out to state officials that a lack of funding prevents it from doing certain things that commissions in other states are successfully doing. A municipal commission could talk to city government about how to improve communication with the public. If a limited mandate prevents a commission from doing certain things, the commission could point to good examples in like jurisdictions as an argument for a broader mandate.

If performance measures are used strategically, they do not have to pose a threat to a commission. An important first step is that the commission sets goals in accordance with its resources and capacities. These goals ought to be tailor-made, as every human rights commission operates in a different environment, under a different government, under different regulation, and under a different mandate. As such, the goals should be shared with and receive the blessing of appropriate policy makers. A commission should think strategically about its goals, keeping them realistic and aiming

at gradual improvement. Once a commission has set such goals, it is confronted with the question of how to measure its achievement: which performance measures to use. The next section describes several such measures currently being used by human rights commissions. While not an exhaustive survey, it gives a sense of what can be done beyond measuring the number and age of cases.

II. Experiences Measuring Performance

It is customary today to distinguish measures of *output* from measures of *outcomes*. Outputs are the immediate products of a human rights commission's work: cases opened, cases closed, meetings held, people trained, legislation proposed, reports issued. Outcomes, in contrast, are the results that matter: more equal opportunity, fewer hate crimes, increased feelings of safety, heightened mutual respect. Measuring outcomes requires a commission to gather information on the broader effects of its work on the human rights environment in which it operates. It is almost impossible to establish with certainty that changes in outcomes have been caused by a commission's work, but if a commission can demonstrate that it has produced the outputs it planned and that the desired outcomes were achieved, precise proof of causation becomes less important. On the other hand, if the desired outcomes are not being achieved, it matters little that a commission is hitting its output targets.

Output indicators are the most readily available indicators for human rights commissions, as they are for human rights institutions around the globe. A comprehensive survey by the United Nations concluded that, globally, national human rights institutions primarily measure how many cases they handle, and sometimes

measure how quickly they resolve them.⁴ There is nothing wrong with this; indeed, commissions can use such information to improve their performance on case processing times. The Office of Human Rights in the District of Columbia, for instance, has set the following goals for itself:

- 1) process 90% of the new docketed cases within 5 working days,
- 2) transfer 75% of the cases to investigations within 45 calendar days,
- 3) train 75% of district agencies in EEO policies,
- 4) complete 80% of the target cases to be completed each month,
- 5) reach at least 3,000 district residents, workers and employees through education and outreach seminars, and
- 6) reduce the number of backlog cases to 200.⁵

The Office of Human Rights does not merely count the number of cases but also sets goals for gradual improvement on case processing times, education, training, and other key outputs. Other commissions use output measures such as how many brochures they have distributed or how many visitors they have attracted to their website.

Yet these commissions could take a step beyond measuring output to also measure outcomes. A first step might be to report if the resolution of a case actually improved the situation of the complainant, from this customer's point of view, or at least if the case was, in their view, handled fairly. Vanessa Boling, Director of the Community

Relations Commission in Fort Worth, Texas, has switched from emphasizing outputs to talking about outcomes. She no longer reports on the aggregate number of cases the agency handles. Rather, she tries to focus on actual results. So, for example, in fair housing cases, she will report on the number of cases that concerned rental issues and how many resulted in an outcome that improved the quality or condition of the tenant's rental property.

A next step in measuring output is to try to get information on customer satisfaction by asking customers about their experience with the commission. Customer satisfaction need not necessarily be related to a material result for the customer. Many people report being satisfied with the work of a commission if they were treated fairly and with respect, regardless of the way their case turned out.

The Fairfax County Virginia Human Rights Commission is one that measures customer satisfaction. It asks complainants as well as attorneys and respondents to grade 1) the overall quality of the commission's services, 2) the timeliness of responses, 3) the clarity of the information received and 4) the courteousness of the staff. It produces aggregate results of the responses as well as separate analyses broken out by responses from complainants, respondents, and attorneys.⁶ The commission publishes the resulting outcome measures on its website, along with more traditional output measures such as cases processed and closed, costs per case, average staff investigative hours per case, and cases processed per investigator.

There are other ways to go beyond outputs. The Community Relations Commission in Columbus, Ohio, produces monthly and

⁴ International Council on Human Rights Policy, *Assessing the effectiveness of national human rights institutions*, UNHCHR (2005) (Online available: http://www.ichrp.org/paper_files/125_p_01.pdf)

⁵ D.C. Office of Human Rights, *Key Result Measures and Strategic Result Goals* (2006).

⁶ Fairfax County Human Rights Commission, *Customer Satisfaction Analysis* (2003).

annual data counts on an array of activities across a range of service categories: Administration, Community Relations, Civil Rights, Training, Educational Outreach, New Americans, and Special Events. The outputs of many of these services can be quantified, such as the total number of calls and inquiries; the number of complaints received, resolved, referred and reviewed by commissioners; the number of trainings and training participants; the number of interpretation or translation services provided. Complaint response is further tracked by noting what percentage was resolved within a particular timeframe, e.g., within five to seven days for community relations complaints and 365 days for discrimination complaint investigations.

Some of the CRC's work, however, does not lend itself to simple quantification. New projects that the CRC is developing are tracked using a spreadsheet that lists the initiative, the lead staff person, a brief description of the project and an update on the current status. This format allows staff and those outside the agency to easily track progress. For example, the CRC has a New Americans Initiative that seeks to implement a citywide strategy that enables immigrants to easily connect with city translation services when calling any city agency, therefore insuring broader access to city services for people with language barriers. In the CRC's Initiatives Progress Report for February 2006, the status report column noted that the CRC was to meet with all city departments to educate them about the New Americans program. The combination of the Progress Report and the "output" tallies are used in conjunction with other printed materials that provide descriptions of project goals and accomplishments.

The Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations does not process individual complaints at all, but rather

focuses on education and organizing: hoping to foster harmonious and equitable inter-group relations, empower communities and institutions, and promote an informed and inclusive multicultural society. This type of work is not easily quantified. To gauge performance, then, the Commission has made a systematic effort to measure customer satisfaction with its different programs.⁷

For its program on community crisis response and public safety, the Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations asks community representatives, individual residents, and community organizations to rate the services provided by the Commission and tracks the percentage of requests for service to which it actually responds. The latter is an output measure while the former is an outcome measure of customer satisfaction. The Commission asks those who participate in its training sessions on hate crime and on bias and discrimination awareness to rate the training. In addition, it asks hate-crime victims to rate the services provided by the commission as well as the quality of law enforcement services. This way, the Commission gets an indication of the victim's perception of the criminal justice system as a whole, and thus is better equipped to develop programming to address perceived problem spots. Most notably, for its program to promote positive inter-group relations, the Commission administers basic attitudinal surveys before and again after the program, allowing it to measure the extent to which a participant's values, attitudes, or behavior towards the relevant group have changed as a result of the program. This is a particularly valuable outcome measure.

⁷ Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission, Departmental Performance Measures (2006).

Another outcome indicator that can be relatively easy to collect is the volume and content of media coverage of a commission. Media coverage can be seen as an outcome of the public outreach work of a commission. The New York City Human Rights Commission, for example, has made this an important part of its annual report. The report elaborates on how often the Commission received media attention and from which media (radio, newspaper, television, etc.). Also, it provides a two-page spread featuring headlines and highlights from its newspaper coverage. This is a more credible measure of impact than the output measures of the number of press conferences held or reports released.

Commissions can rarely afford to conduct their own public surveys, but they can try to get a question or two included in surveys being mounted by another government department. For example, the director of the Human Relations Commission in Fort Worth has been able to embed questions in the city's periodic survey of citizens. Director Vanessa Boling reports there was some trial and error involved in crafting questions that would solicit answers tying Commission outcomes to the city's goals of creating a safe and attractive community. In the first survey that included a question suggested by the Commission, respondents were asked if they felt that they had been a victim of discrimination. The question elicited primarily negative responses. In later surveys, however, when the questions were refined to ask 'do you feel safe in your neighborhood,' 'does your landlord maintain your home,' and 'do you feel you can work anywhere in the city,' the responses showed the breadth of underlying problems, demonstrating the need for and value of the Human Relations Commission's services. Boling's experience underscores that when human rights commissions are able to include questions in a larger survey, where

there will only be room for very few questions, they must think carefully about which questions to include, and should test their initial ideas on a small sample before committing to the precise wording for the questionnaire.

In many states and localities, citizen surveys are conducted by either government or non-governmental entities that ask about issues directly relevant to the work of commissions. With a little creativity, results from such surveys can be leveraged to justify commission programs and set program priorities. For instance, in 2006, citizens in 21 communities throughout the country were surveyed about their perceptions of their community's social capital, or community connectedness.⁸ Questions covered many areas, including the level of participation in faith-based organizations, electoral politics, and charitable projects. Questions particularly relevant to human rights commissions probed how much citizens trusted the police in their communities and how trusting they were of members of other races. Residents in Greensboro, North Carolina, showed a much higher level of distrust in local police than did residents in other communities. That is the sort of powerful finding that a human rights commission can use to develop programming focused on improving police-community trust. Human rights commissions can discover what surveys on citizen perceptions of safety, justice, racial discrimination, or satisfaction with police services are being conducted in their

⁸ See Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey, conducted by the Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America, a project at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.
<http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/saguaro/2006sccs.htm>. The study was first conducted in 2000 in 40 communities.
<http://www.cfsv.org/communitysurvey/results.html>

communities and compare the results with outcomes they have been tracking, for instance in customer satisfaction surveys. To effectively fine-tune outreach programming, it is important to get this sort of perception data disaggregated by race and, if possible, also by gender and age.

It is virtually impossible to establish a causal link between a commission's work and most general outcomes, for example, reductions in the perception of racial discrimination. If the perception of the extent of race discrimination has decreased, this might have to do with a changed cultural and political environment rather than with the work of one government commission. Nevertheless, commissions can use these measures to set their priorities and demonstrate a need for their involvement. Then, if outputs targeted on the particular problem are delivered as planned and the problem subsides in later surveys, the commission is in a strong position to share in the credit.

Of the limited number of commissions for which we obtained performance assessment materials, the one that seemed to measure its performance in the most comprehensive manner was the Iowa Civil Rights Commission. It produces an Agency Performance and Action Plan at the start of each year, and then issues a Performance Report to report on how well it has fulfilled its Action Plan.⁹ The Action Plan begins by setting out the agency's mission:

Our mission is enforcing civil rights laws through compliance, mediation, advocacy, and education, as we support diverse economic growth, reap the benefits from a diverse

workforce, create safe communities, and create the image of Iowa as a state welcoming of diversity.

To translate an aspirational mission into concrete results, the report follows a three-step process that 1) presents specific strategic goals, 2) defines a performance measure to assess effectiveness at reaching each individual goal, and 3) assigns a recommended action to achieve that measure. Thus, for example, the strategic goal regarding timelines of complaints processing looks like the following:

- **Strategic Goal:** *People involved in civil rights complaints receive timely, quality resolution; all cases screened are screened in less than 120 days*
- **Performance Measure:** *Percent of cases screened in less than 120 days from date of filing is 80 percent or greater*
- **Recommended Action:** *Completion of screening process in less than 120 days from date of filing*

The Commission takes on assessment of achieving more generalized goals as well, for example:

- **Strategic Goal:** *People are knowledgeable about civil rights laws and issues*
- **Performance Measure:** *The percentage of customers rating presentations satisfactory or better*
- **Recommended Action:** *Effective and useful educational presentations*

The Commission attaches concrete tasks to these measures and actions that identify the responsible staff, the timeline and the resources available. For the goal regarding

⁹ Online available at:
<http://www.state.ia.us/government/crc/>

citizen knowledge of civil rights laws and issues, additional tasks or action steps include making all presentations available in both PowerPoint and hard copy and using current technology to enhance effectiveness of presentations. The Commission's action plan exemplifies the need to break goals down into realistic components with effective ways to gauge success.

The Iowa Commission's annual performance report describes the progress it made with respect to its goals set out in the action plan. In clear charts it shows the discrepancy between strategic goals and actual performance, if any. It elaborates on how the different measures were applied and assesses their reliability. The combination of the forward-looking action plan and the backward-looking, year-end performance report is a good example of how a Commission can hold itself accountable to the public. What makes the Iowa Commission's reporting efforts particularly noteworthy are their transparency and accessibility. As noted, each of the annual reports discussed here is posted on the agency's website. So, too, is an on-line customer satisfaction survey, from which the agency draws some of the conclusions about its annual performance.

III. A Move Toward Standardization?

In the previous section we discussed ways that human rights commissions can track their own performance and use information to help work toward achieving particular goals or charting improvement. Potentially, commissions could also compare their performance against that of other commissions. Such an approach suggests that it is possible to define standards of performance applicable to all human rights commissions. Of course, all commissions operate with different mandates, under different laws and in different political and

cultural climates. As a result, a full-press exercise of benchmarking might not be possible. But that does not mean that commissions cannot be compared to one other at all.

In an effort to describe the respective achievements of his Commission, Fairfax County's Michael Cash first sent out a team to uncover the best practices of sister agencies. The team found little of use, as the other agencies visited were not really engaged in measuring performance. As an alternative, Cash requested data from the EEOC and FHAP. The EEOC and FHAP receive information on employment and housing caseload and case processing time from all agencies with whom they have a contract. Once a year they release data on average caseloads and processing time. Cash requested the data in a format specifically tailored to his fiscal year so he could determine whether the performance of his Commission was above or below the national average. Other commissions might want to do the same thing and ask the EEOC and FHAP for national average performance data tailored to their fiscal year, too. Another possibility to consider is whether such national averages -- to the extent they are available -- could be distributed by a national platform such as International Association of Official Human Rights Agencies (IAOHRA). Along similar lines, Ralph Rosenberg suggests that it would be helpful if commissions gave each other access to their information and databases. Development of a basic website that contains links to all of the various human rights commissions -- both state and local -- would be a helpful starting point in collecting information on what other commissions are doing.

Cash feels that it is important for leaders of human rights commissions to engage in an ongoing discussion about these issues.

“There needs to be a dialogue by the leadership of human rights commissions on what it is we are doing, how we measure that, what we can recommend to each other and if there is a bottom line. I want a basic bottom line of functions that ought to be performed by a commission for it to be a human rights commission.” Cash sees this as something for IAOHRA to coordinate. Searching for a bottom line, or making efforts to compare one commission to the other with respect to case processing time, is not a full move towards standardization. That seems like something to consider in the more distant future, when human rights commissions have become more experienced with measuring performance and to the extent that commissions can be compared to each other.

IV. Conclusion

In this paper we have identified why commissions are pushed towards measuring their performance and discussed some of the advantages and disadvantages of measuring performance. In addition we have provided examples of what several commissions are currently doing to measure their performance.

Many commissions can improve on efforts to measure their performance. It is common for complaint-handling human rights commissions to track their caseload and case

processing time. Yet it might be beneficial for them to embrace a broader range of measures that get to the impact of their work both in their communities and in their clients’ lives. Also, commissions might want to consider making their goals and performance data more widely publicly available, for instance, through publicizing them on the Internet. Finally, in these efforts, it might be worth considering coordination and facilitation of possibilities for human rights commissions to compare themselves to one another. As Michael Cash observes: “We have to have to courage to stand up and tell the public what we are doing.”

The effort to systematically measure performance and demonstrate accountability truly can make a difference. In Iowa, the 2007 legislature appropriated the largest percentage increase for the Iowa Commission on Civil Rights in over a decade, allowing the agency to fill many long-time vacancies. In addition, it broadened the scope of its civil rights law, extending protection to cover sexual orientation and gender identity. Meanwhile, state administrators are crafting a statewide strategic plan that places heightened emphasis on diversity and tolerance. The “problem” of civil rights in Iowa, it seems, is becoming better understood, and receiving due attention.

About the Series

Executive Session Papers: Human Rights Commissions and the Criminal Justice System is a series of papers and case studies examining ways to expand the role of human rights and human relations commissions in addressing issues of discrimination in U.S. criminal justice systems.

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HRC #1: *Building Trust After a Police Shooting: Community Intervention Teams in Columbus, Ohio* (August 2006)

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About the Project

The Kennedy School of Government's **Executive Session on Human Rights Commissions and Criminal Justice** convenes human rights, civil rights and police leaders from across the United States in a series of discussions about how to expand the role of human rights and human relations commissions in addressing issues of discrimination in U.S. criminal justice systems. In addition, the project aims to strengthen the ways that state and local governments respond to violations of the rights of people involved with the criminal justice system by documenting innovative work of individual commissions and conducting research on emerging practices.

Human rights commissions—in some cases known as human relations or community relations commissions—have various levels of authority to enforce civil rights laws and human rights standards, particularly those prohibiting discrimination and promising equal justice. Many also actively work to reduce and defuse inter-group conflict.

Human rights violations in the criminal justice context can take many forms. Bias crimes, and failure of law enforcement to investigate them; police mistreatment of minority groups, including racial profiling or the use of excessive force; and systematic failure to recruit minorities into law enforcement agencies: all of these forms of discrimination not only harm individuals directly involved but also victimize whole groups of people, straining communities sometimes to the breaking point.

The Executive Session, which runs from January 2006 through August 2008, employs a combination of rigorous discussion, empirical research, practical innovation and professional mobilization to expand the work of the commissions. Harvard faculty and staff facilitate the group's discussion and research. The project draws inspiration from the work of human rights commissions and ombudsmen around the globe. However, the focus of the program remains domestic, filling a peculiarly American gap in the available institutional mechanisms for redressing human rights violations related to crime and justice.

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