

Testimony in Opposition to “an Act Reorganizing the Executive Branch of Howard County Maryland Government” (County Council Bill No. 4-2015)

February 17, 2015

TO: Honorable Mary Sigaty, Chair, and members of the Howard County Council, Howard County Maryland

FROM: Sherman Howell, *Vice President Research & Agenda Planning*, African American Coalition of Howard County

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss how changes proposed by the administration—the Howard County Executive (CE)—will negatively impact the work of both the Human Right Commission (HRC) and the Office of Human Rights (OHR) of Howard County. As a community organization, the role of African American Coalition of Howard County (*AACHC*) is to work with the community, the CE, HRC and the OHR in effectively carrying out duties and responsibilities of the HRC and OHR as prescribed by law--toward achieving solutions that ensure broad human rights protections and opportunities. AACHC thus encourages the following considerations with regard to proposed changes to the Howard County human rights structure, i.e., proposed County Council Bill No. 4-2015:

- *that Howard County has and sustain a truly strong human rights infrastructure that will enable the County to investigate, promote and effectively protect human rights in Howard County;*
- *that effective initiatives and programs are available for “informing citizens on practices and patterns of conduct which may be discriminatory,” programs, however, that are not duplicative of what we have in place; and*
- *that the HRC, rather than a proposed Hearing Examiner, retain the role, as is the case today, in managing and processing human rights cases.*

On the issue of the current organizational structure, or the working relationship between the OHR and HRC, proposed CC Bill 4-2015 changes would have a negative impact on the working relationship between the OHR and HRC. That is, the HRC should retain its role of assisting the County Executive in his role of “appointment of the Human Rights Administrator.”

As well, the OHR/Human Rights Administrator should continue to “serve as the Executive Secretary of the HRC” in contrast to the CE designating an Executive Secretary of the HRC or bringing in a “new” person that’s “not a member of the OHR.”

Better yet, as stated by the HRC: “The designation of an Executive Secretary to the HRC of a person not in the OHR office introduces the possibility of communication issues and could

result in complications in the routine operations of the HRC and the development and coordination of the HRC enhanced outreach and education efforts proposed in the bill, which is the second subject we would like to address.”

It is also *AACHC*'s understanding that CC Bill No. 4-2015 tasks the HRC with “conducting a public information, outreach, and education program to heighten public awareness of discrimination and methods for eliminating discrimination as well as educating the public about the complaint process.” The latter activity, we understand, is “already within the purview of OHR's mission as specified in the code,” thus not necessitating a change as called for by Bill No. 4-2015.

With regard to a study of “methods to ensure timely and efficient investigations,” Howard County would best be served by doing this by an “independent audit” or by an independent consultant. The latter would also provide better footing on whether the County should hire a Hearing Examiner—the latter being another major focus of Bill No. 4-2015.

To conclude, human rights, as they say, “are true core American principles.” It is within this context that *AACHC* sees considerable merit in standing in solidarity with the work of the Howard County Human Rights Commission and the Commission's call for the Howard County Council not to approve the proposed Bill (*CC Bill No. 4-2015*), and instead, work with the CE, HRC, OHR and the community in developing an effective and sustainable human rights infrastructure.