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## **ADVOCATES CALL ON MAYOR ADAMS TO RESTORE CRITICAL FUNDING TO THE NYC COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS**

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discrimination*

**NEW YORK:** Today, advocates gathered on the steps of City Hall to demand funding for the NYC Commission on Human Rights (CCHR), the sole agency tasked with protecting low-income New Yorkers from discrimination.

Participants discussed how the catastrophic loss of funding and staff at the Commission since the pandemic has left it unable to fulfill its mission, leaving discrimination to run rampant in our city. CCHR enforces the rights of the most vulnerable New Yorkers, including housing voucher holders, undocumented migrants, LGBTQ+ New Yorkers, domestic workers, pregnant people, and more. Participants warned that especially in this presidential election year, the Commission will need to protect New Yorkers against emboldened racist politics if Trump wins. Participants urged the Mayor to increase the Commission's annual budget to at least \$18 million a year to get the agency back to a minimum level of operation.

The Commission's headcount has plummeted over time while its responsibilities have grown. In nearly every year in the past decade, the City Council has added to the NYC Human Rights Law in some way. Since 2013, the City Council has passed more than 40 separate amendments to the

laws. Most recently, the Council passed the Fair Chance Act to ban employers from using criminal records in hiring decisions.

Before the pandemic, the Commission's enforcement arm had nearly 50 attorneys. Today, in a city with over 8 million residents, there are only 17 staff attorneys working to enforce an ever-expanding list of protected classes. Years of budget cuts, vacancy reductions, and resignations have decimated the Commission, making NYC's progressive laws and protections toothless. Even if it were doubled, the Commission's entire budget would remain less than 0.01% of the City's total budget.

The press conference brought together New Yorkers impacted by discrimination, and advocates to demand funding for the NYC Commission on Human Rights. Advocacy participants included members of the Human Rights Law Working Group, including Unlock NYC, Neighbors Together, Legal Aid Society, Legal Services NYC, Make the Road New York, and others. After the rally, advocates headed to 250 Broadway to testify at the Committee on Civil & Human Rights budget hearing, chaired by Councilmember Nantasha Williams from District 27.

“The Commission is in crisis, and those impacted the most are our clients and all vulnerable, low-income New Yorkers facing discrimination in a myriad of settings,” said **Rebekah Cook-Mack, Senior Staff Attorney in the Employment Law Unit at The Legal Aid Society**. “We call on the City to reinvest in the Commission, exempt it from the hiring freeze, increase its funding, and ensure it can hire experienced attorneys to meet the City's needs.”

Underfunding and staffing shortages at the Commission directly contribute to the city's homelessness crisis, due to rampant source of income (SOI) discrimination. “I have a fully functioning Section 8 voucher, but I couldn't obtain housing for more than 3 years. The city must relieve the pressure of the unjust and discriminatory systems that keep us homeless by adequately funding CCHR's law enforcement bureau to hire enough staff. Without enough staff, there won't be enforcement, and the lack of monitoring and accountability will allow illegal discrimination across the city to continue unpunished,” said **Charisma White, a leader with Neighbors Together**.

Like Charisma, **Nycole Lanyse-Jacques, a CityFHEPS voucher holder and Leadership Collective member with Unlock NYC**, has been searching for housing with a voucher for two years, to no avail. Reflecting on her experience reporting SOI discrimination to the Commission, Nycole stated, “I firmly believe that if CCHR had a larger budget and more staff with better wages, this entity would be able to mitigate client's claims before their Statute of Limitation elapsed. Since that's not the case, some agents and landlords will continue to discriminate against voucher holders. To this day, I haven't been able to recover physically, emotionally, and mentally because justice wasn't served.”

Immigrant communities are heavily impacted by the staffing shortages at the Commission as well. **Elizabeth Joynes Jordan, Co-Legal Director of Make the Road New York**, said, “The NYC Commission on Human Rights plays a critical role in protecting our most vulnerable New Yorkers from abuse and discriminatory practices. As a result of underfunding and understaffing,

our people are experiencing unlawful harassment and discrimination without an agency equipped to enforce their rights. At a time when migrants are facing hateful rhetoric, it is crucial that Mayor Adams and the City Council restore adequate funding to ensure we have a fair budget that prioritizes the needs of every New Yorker and invests in the vital services our community members rely on.”

The Commission’s mandate is to protect New Yorkers from a wide range of discrimination in housing, employment, and public accommodations - but without a generous increase in staffing, the agency will continue to be unable to fulfill its mission. "For decades, New Yorkers have relied on the NYC Commission on Human Rights to help them fight discrimination, hate, and bias and hold bad actors accountable through the NYC Human Rights Law, one of the most protective and progressive anti-discrimination statutes in the country," said **Christine Clarke, the Chief of Litigation and Advocacy at Legal Services NYC**, which works closely with the Commission on discrimination cases. "But sadly, due to aggressive budget reductions and staff cuts, the Commission is now unable to perform its mission, leaving vulnerable New Yorkers without recourse. NYC must rebuild the Commission in order to protect the rights of all New Yorkers and to realize the vision of a just and fair society embodied by our Human Rights Law."

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*The Legal Aid Society exists for one simple yet powerful reason: to ensure that New Yorkers are not denied their right to equal justice because of poverty. For over 145 years, we have protected, defended, and advocated for those who have struggled in silence for far too long. Every day, in every borough, The Legal Aid Society changes the lives of our clients and helps improve our communities. [www.legalaidnyc.org](http://www.legalaidnyc.org)*