

Testimony for
Bill No. 140230 and Resolution 140244
Philadelphia Commission for Women
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Committee on Law and Government
Hon. William K. “Bill” Greenlee, chair
February 18, 2015

Chairman Greenlee and members of the City Council Committee on Law and Government, good morning. I am Rue Landau, Executive Director of the Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations (PCHR), and I am here to express support for this measure, which seeks to resurrect an entity expressly focused on the concerns and plight of women in this great city. And I'd like to thank City Councilwoman Blondell Reynolds Brown for advancing this legislation.

It could be argued that our agency, PCHR, already does much of this work of ensuring that women are protected from discrimination, and that instituting a Commission for Women would be repetitive. We are the agency authorized to investigate and levy judgments against those who would violate the city's civil rights laws. We help ensure that discrimination does not occur against women who are pregnant, nursing, or recovering from childbirth in work, housing, and, or public accommodations instances. We uphold the Domestic and Sexual Violence Unpaid Leave law. We are charged with enforcing all aspects of the city's Fair Practices Ordinance, which includes protections from sex and gender identity discrimination.

All of these things help to improve the livelihood of women in this city. Yet, PCHR is not expressly responsible for reviewing proposed policies and legislation on the front end of things. Our role largely was established to *react* to claims of discrimination, to address the back end of situations that may have gone awry. Given that reality, a Commission for Women would be a constructive front-end partner, providing guidance that would lessen the need for our intervention in the first place. We may not be able to eliminate discrimination altogether, but we certainly could – in tandem – proactively narrow the chances of it occurring.

Looking deeper, it is evident that the conditions that led to the creation of such commissions across the country – beginning with President Kennedy's call to examine the needs and welfare of America's women back in 1962 – have shifted, but not disappeared. In fact, for many women here, structural inequities leave them, and by consequence, their families, at a socioeconomic disadvantage that continues to threaten this city's potential prosperity. Put simply, when women do well, we all do well. And that goal does not have to come at the detriment of men;

creating the climate for parity need not be a zero-sum game. Providing thoughtful reflection on how to get there in tangible, cost-effective ways would serve the taxpayers of this city well in the long run, and I see that as the central charge and essential mission of any proposed Philadelphia Commission for Women.

There are other recognized, government-convened commissions on women – Chester, Montgomery, and Delaware counties each have one, as does the Commonwealth itself. As the largest city in Pennsylvania, one with a majority female population – at 53 percent – enacting a similar commission here holds logic and promise.

It's no secret that Philadelphia struggles as the poorest large city in the United States, or that women often are among those most entrenched in generational poverty. U.S. Census Bureau figures reflect that deep poverty impacts women disproportionately more than men. In this city, nearly 1 in 4 adults live at or below the poverty line, and female-headed families are three times likelier to live in poverty – a statistic that holds across all races. For transgender women – particularly those of color – securing and maintaining viable employment can be an elusive task. According to a 2006 study funded by the UCLA Center for the Study of Women and the University of California Institute for Labor and Employment, transgender women report losing respect and income during and after their transition. Reports locally to the Mazzone Center and others show these women are left vulnerable to abuse and crime as a result.

Nationwide, nearly 7 in 10 women responsible for children under 18 are in the workforce. In Philadelphia, 1 in 8 households have a member under 65 with a disability of some sort, many of whom requiring additional help in their day-to-day living. Consequently, as the often default caregiver in families, pressures on women can be immense, impacting both physical and mental health for them and everyone in the household. And those who have low-wage jobs tend to have greater familial responsibilities, but fewer workplace benefits, according to recent Kaiser Family Foundation reporting. The outcomes of these stresses often turn up in our case file – be it intergroup conflicts or eviction fights as families teeter on the edge of survival. Leaving these conditions unaddressed does not befit a world-class city, and Philadelphia certainly is that. But to truly lay claim to that mantle would require focusing on these vexing challenges.

We know economic opportunities often tell the tale of disparities, and that without careful examination, it will be that much more difficult to reverse the painful trajectory we witness. Despite prevailing demographics, fewer than 1 in 3 businesses here are owned by women, according to the U.S. Census – and that's for existing industries. Even with a proliferation of globally-recognized research institutions and hospitals in our area, STEM programs – for science, technology, engineering, and math – still leave behind too many school-aged girls and women seeking positions or leadership in these burgeoning fields.

Conversation continues about Philadelphia's expanding role as a 21st century energy hub, and the potential employment possibilities such a designation would yield. Yet, according to The Clinton Foundation, women represent less than half of the clean energy workforce. Conversely, the Center for Energy Workforce Development reports that 55 percent of the energy industry's

workforce – from lineworkers to plant operators to engineers – will need to be replaced within the next 10 years. Still, it won't matter if this area becomes Eds, Meds and Energy Central if the highest post half our population can rise to is minimum- or stagnant-wage employment. Addressing these and other rapidly unfolding scenarios smartly and effectively could be the work of a Commission for Women, because evaluating policies that come with rising immigration or shifting employment sectors, for instance, would help alleviate the persistent and growing poverty Philadelphia currently faces. Better alignment of workplace rules and procedures can help avoid costly litigation for taxpayers. Deeper thought on improving access to services, be they medical or educational, will help decrease burdens incurred and increase our tax base. These are just brief examples of how authorizing another set of eyes to consider the implications of such matters could help make the difference for a wealthier, and, ultimately, a healthier Philadelphia.

Yes, updating the city's charter is a serious step, but statistics bear out that we are facing serious challenges ahead. Be it by ballot or executive order, creating this Commission poses to be a benefit. It could directly support avenues that lead toward greater equality by offering research-based perspectives to City Council and future mayoral administrations to better inform decisions by both.

That's a win-win situation.

Thank you for allowing us to testify on this important measure. I will be happy to respond to any questions.