



The quicker fixer-upper

The Canadian Human Rights Commission (CHRC) in the past year has streamlined its handling of complaints filed under the Human Rights Act, according to its recently-released annual report.

During 2006, the CHRC strengthened its focus on delivery of services involving dispute resolution, prevention of discrimination and knowledge development in the human rights field. The approach, Commissioner David Langtry says, will allow the commission to more quickly resolve disputes, aim for “a healthier future marked by fewer disputes,” as well as improved representation of the four designated groups covered by the Employment Equity Act.

Better use of tools now at the commission’s disposal has resulted in more efficient resolution of complaints. Proportion of complaints less than a year old increased to 75 percent by year end, compared to just 60 percent a year earlier. Emphasis on conflict resolution allowed some parties to settle disputes even before the filing complaints, Langtry adds.

One improvement was streamlining of the employment equity audit process, along with creation of an Employer Advisory Council made up of senior commission staff and organizations that have agreements with the CHRC. The council offers a forum to act on discrimination prevention and to share best practices and resources.

Other new CHRC initiatives include:

1. A Discrimination Prevention Branch assisting employers to avoid workplace discrimination.
2. A Prevention Initiatives and Liaison Division working with employers to prevent discrimination and develop strategies to resolve complaints quickly.
3. A forum last fall focusing on challenges associated with disability and accommodation.
4. The launch last spring of an Employer Advisory Council.
5. An aboriginal program created by the commission in September in preparation for expected repeal of a section of the Human Rights Act which denies First Nations people access to same human rights redress available to other Canadians.

The aboriginal program’s longer-term objective is to strengthen relations with aboriginal groups and foster dialogue on incorporating the needs of First Nations communities in human rights protection mechanisms, the report added. The commission plans to work with First Nations communities and key stakeholder groups, it said.

Regional offices of the commission also work with many organizations and groups, such as public and private sector employers, unions, federal councils, First Nations communities and various associations representing visible minorities and persons with disabilities.

Three employers with a combined workforce of 34,000 signed agreements, including measures aimed at reducing discrimination and duty-to-accommodate training, which involves changing discriminatory behaviours on the basis of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, marital status and disability. Similar agreements also had been signed previously with seven other employers.

The CHRC’s Employment Equity Compliance Program requires employers to identify barriers to employment and implement best practices to increase representation of the four designated groups under the Equity Act, which requires the commission to conduct audits of public sector and federally-regulated private sector workplaces.

“The commission’s experience with the audit program reveals that employers need more support in building on the information and knowledge they require to help them increase their employment equity compliance and sustain gains achieved,” the report says. “Sharing this knowledge and intelligence with employers on hiring and promoting practices that help encourage equality in the workplace for designated groups is an important aspect of the program.”

The CHRC’s Knowledge Centre includes among research projects an historical overview of how sexual orientation became a human right in Canada. “Compared to other forms of discrimination that the commission deals with, major progress has been achieved in recent years in eliminating obstacles to equality with respect to sexual orientation,” the report says. “The lessons learned from this research will therefore be used to design corrective actions for other prohibited grounds of discrimination.” **DI**

