

Tax & Budget

OHIO CIVIL RIGHTS COMMISSION

STILL FIGHTING DISCRIMINATION BUT WITH DIMINISHED STATE SUPPORT

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All people deserve fair treatment at work, at school, in housing and in public spaces, This is true whether they're black, white or brown, able-bodied or living with a disability, straight, lesbian, gay or trans, male or female. In Ohio and in the United States, a long legacy of racism, ableism and sexism has blocked many people from jobs, housing, good schools and more. While many laws are now on the books that make overt discrimination illegal, traditionally marginalized Ohioans need someone to make sure these laws are followed.

The Ohio Civil Rights Commission (OCRC) is a public service that protects residents from unfair treatment under the law. Funding for the OCRC has fallen by almost 20 percent over the past two decades, adjusted for inflation. In some years, work sharing agreements with federal agencies offset state cuts. However, the flow of federal work is inconsistent. Over time, the agency has been downsized.

In 2000, the Ohio Civil Rights Commission had a staff of 199 and several offices, including a central office in Columbus, and regional offices in Columbus, Cleveland, Akron, Toledo, Dayton and Cincinnati. There were two satellite offices within the most heavily populated regions as well. Today the agency has reduced staffing to 80, a loss of more than half the staff. It cut regional and satellite offices, curtailed education and outreach, and relied on obsolete equipment.

Several trends have escalated racial tensions in Ohio and across the nation, from police shootings of unarmed black people, to President Trump's attacks on immigrants, to white supremacist marches. Given this context, the work of the OCRC is more important than ever. The number of harassment cases filed with the agency rose by 41.4 percent since 2016, compared to an overall increase in cases of 26.5 percent. With the rise of the Me Too movement, more victims of sexual harassment have filed complaints. In 2018, the OCRC handled 47.4 percent more sexual harassment cases than it did in 2016.

The agency has responded to this rising caseload by becoming more efficient. The ratio of cases closed per investigator/mediator has risen by 7.6 percent since 2016 as number of cases rose but staffing levels remained the same.

Lawmakers need to fund the Ohio Civil Rights Commission to meet the new challenges of the day. There will always be a need to curb discrimination and teach respect. The rising number of cases filed with the OCRC should be met with increased support. The state can demonstrate its commitment to civil rights protections for all people by equipping the OCRC with the resources necessary to accomplish this work.