

NATIONAL NEWS

Ontario Human Rights Head Outlines Progress

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TORONTO, Ontario -- Barbara Hall, Chief Commissioner of the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC), is counting down the weeks to her retirement after 10 years at the helm of the first human rights commission established in Canada.

She does so being quite proud of the change in the role of the OHRC, from dealing with individual complaints to a mandate of addressing systemic issues.

Hall, who was appointed on November 28, 2005, after more than 30 years as a community worker, lawyer and municipal politician, was the keynote speaker at the 39th anniversary and awards dinner of the Urban Alliance on Race Relations (UARR) in Toronto on September 18.

She said the OHRC takes most of its authority and mandate from the Ontario *Human Rights Code* but some years ago, the organization developed a vision statement which said that "our vision as commissioners was an Ontario in which everyone is valued, treated with dignity and respect and where human rights are nurtured by all of us."

The chief commissioner said she could not think of a place that better embodies the concept of nurturing human rights than the UARR. She noted that the OHRC and *Code* have been around for 53 years and the UARR was established about ten years later.

"I often say that rights aren't given; governments don't come handing them out -- they're demanded and they're advocated for. And, the reason that the Urban Alliance was ten years after the *Code* and Commission was that the people that founded the Alliance were tired after fighting to get the human rights legislation and the commission in place in Ontario -- the first *Code* and Commission in the country."

The former mayor of Toronto, 1994-1997, said, when she first arrived at the OHRC, the role was principally focused on complaints, individual complaints, and that's where most of their energies and resources went. But the role changed some years ago and their mandate is somewhat different now.

"Our focus rather than individual complaints is on systemic issues and we secure human rights and change towards a culture of human rights and towards people recognizing that they have a nurturing role if we're going to have the kind of safe, healthy community we all want to live in."

She said the OHRC works on many different fronts, one of those areas being the development of policies.

Hall said the *Human Rights Code* is a pretty thin document, which states that it is contrary to the *Code* to the law of Ontario to discriminate on the basis of race or disability, or on the basis of sexual orientation.

As a result of advocacy from many people on issues like human rights and discrimination because of mental illness and mental health issues, the OHRC has put out a policy on mental health, which is the first in Canada.

Referencing a push from Debbie Douglas, executive director of the Ontario



OHRC Head, Barbara Hall (right) seen with two admirers at the UARR awards dinner, last Thursday. Photo by Rainer Soegtrop.

Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI) -- one of the recipients of the 2014 UARR race relations award -- and Jean Augustine, Ontario Fairness Commissioner, Hall said they worked closely and educated the commission, which resulted in a policy on Canadian Experience.

The policy said demanding Canadian Experience was *prima facie* discrimination under the *Code*.

"It's okay for employers to seek experience and certain skills when they hire people but who cares where they got that experience and yet we know that millions of people, over many years, have been kept out of contributing in the way they've been educated or trained to contribute because of the this thing called Canadian Experience.

On the issue of gender identity, she said the OHRC has been advocating for amendments to the *Code*, which did not contain protection for trans people in an explicit way.

The change in law happened in June 2012 after the OHRC "met hundreds of trans Ontarians and Canadians who came out from the margins where they had been for the first time in their lives feeling empowered to stand up."

The OHRC is doing a lot more public education using technology as well as going to schools, colleges and workplaces, and talking about and doing training on human rights in Ontario.

"We've seen a lot of progress but we've also seen a lot of things that don't seem to change that much and one of those areas is the issue of racial profiling. It does seem like we've been talking about racial profiling for a long, long time and we're still talking about it."

She said this is particularly a talking point among young black men, their parents and communities who are fearful of what will happen when they are out of the house at night. The same is true for aboriginal people of any gender identity, of any age in communities across the province.

Acknowledging that it is still a major problem, she mentioned Jim Rankin of the Toronto Star -- recipient of the UARR

Ashok Chandwani media award, alongside Enzo DiMatteo -- who has shone a bright light on this issue and underlying the need for there to be transparent data collection, in terms of provision of many services, but particularly police services.

The chief commissioner said the OHRC had just fairly recently taken on the issue of racial profiling. Up until early 2000, it did not deal with such cases instead relying on the Police Complaints Board to take them on.

In 2002, the OHRC started to play a role in enforcing the issues of discrimination and racism around racial profiling. It held an inquiry inviting people to come and talk about the impact of racial profiling and then developed a policy setting out the details of it. The OHRC also subsequently started intervening in cases.

Well-known lawyer, Julian Falconer, who introduced Hall, said the UARR has made an important contribution to society in spite of the federal government's effort to choke organizations like it.

"Anyone who understands the Urban Alliance on Race Relations understands how they kept the lights on in the darkest of days," he said.

Falconer said Hall was the first big city mayor to march proudly in the Pride Parade when others refused and has been a champion of social justice, equity and healthy community.

Douglas wants employment equity brought back to the province of Ontario.

Employment equity legislation was passed in December 1993 by the provincial government led by New Democratic Party Premier Bob Rae to address issues of racism and inequality in the workplace.

However, the law was repealed two years later by the majority-winning Ontario Progressive Conservative Party led by Mike Harris.

Alluding to the Sheila Block and Grace-Edward Galabuzzi report, "Canada's Colour Coded Labour Market," put out by the Wellesley Institute, she said it is a reminder that inequality continues to grow and that the income of racialized women/women of

colour continues to be outstripped by the income of non-racialized men/white men.

She said the gap continues to widen and particularly for racialized immigrant women who experience unacceptable levels of underemployment and unemployment.

"This must change, we must bring employment equity back to Ontario," said Douglas who leads a sector of more than 230 agencies concerned with immigrant and refugee integration and social and economic inclusion.

She said the federal government has rolled back many years of accomplishments regarding a progressive immigration, citizenship and refugee policy.

"We've watched change made to our Citizenship Act and while there was a huge outcry from those of us in the activist community, the rest of Canada has remained so silent that the government has been able to make it more difficult to obtain citizenship while making it a hell of a lot easier to revoke that very same citizenship."

Lloyd McKell, educator, activist and community leader, also received the 2014 UARR race relations award.

He has devoted a lifetime to advancing equity and inclusion for racialized youth and families. He was the executive officer for Student and Community Equity at the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) for over thirty-five years.

In 2007, he led the process for establishing Canada's first Africentric school and helped establish the Race Relations Advisory Committee of the TDSB.

As co-chair of the Mandela Legacy Committee, he was recently successful in getting the Toronto city council to approve renaming University Avenue as Nelson Mandela Boulevard.

"The idea being floated is that it is important for us to have a collective citizen engagement event that visibly demonstrates our collective celebration of the progress that we have made in human rights and in equity and inclusiveness," he told those gathered at a Dim sum restaurant for the 39th anniversary and awards dinner of the UARR.

He is proposing that once a year, beginning with the 25th anniversary of Nelson Mandela's first visit to Canada next year, that there be a freedom walk on Nelson Mandela Boulevard from Front Street to Queen's Park.

This is something that he hopes will catch on across the country. The former South African president and anti-apartheid icon first came to Canada on June 19, 1990.

"UARR is currently a small organization but we have participated in movements and campaigns, delivered deputations, wrote letters, organized regular forums and participated in many more," said Gary Pieters, president of the non-profit charitable organization.

"These include policing, judicial diversity, education, community safety, Good Jobs for All, the ceremonial street naming initiative in honour of Nelson Mandela, media bias, callous advertising that injures the image of racialized peoples, employment insurance, gender-based violence prevention, and youth empowerment." **PRIDE**