

**Statement to State Government Committee Regarding
PHRC Inter-Agency Task Force on Community Relations**
By Margaret van Naerssen, Ph. D., June 6, 2007

To: Senator Mike Folmer and Senator Anthony Williams

I understand that on June 7, 2016, there is to be a hearing by the State Government Committee about the status of the Inter-Agency Task Force on Community Relations.

I am writing as a member of the PHRC Inter-Agency Task Force on Community Relations. Please note that as volunteers we receive no reimbursement of expenses for attending (from around the state) or payment for the services we willingly provide.

I am writing to advocate for continued strong support of the goals and role of the Inter-Agency Task Force on Community Relations. I see no reason for weakening the PHRC efforts.

Surely our senators are for promoting equal opportunity for all and for protecting people from unlawful discrimination.

When I first joined the Task Force (July 2010) I wasn't sure of what one does in an advisory capacity, but soon learned that the task force interactions are multi-directional. I also learned that we are one part of the outreach efforts of the PHRC.

We provide the State (and PA Human Relations Commission) the ears and eyes to the populations around the state that are in protected categories that we work with.

Please remember the purpose of the PHRC:

The PA Human Relations Commission promotes equal opportunity for all and enforces Pennsylvania's civil rights laws that protect people from unlawful discrimination. As Pennsylvania's civil rights leader, it is our vision that all people in Pennsylvania will live, work, and learn free from unlawful discrimination. (PHRC website)

This purpose cannot alone be effectively implemented across the state with only small groups of very committed office staff members in Harrisburg, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, and by community-based advisory groups. Yes, these are valuable sources of input. But the PHRC also needs additional arms to reach out the public.

The Inter-Agency Task Force is one such arm, a tool for implementing the legislated goals of the PHRC. The Inter-Agency Task Force provides regular input from a different level: across institutions/ organizations in Pennsylvania that also serve the protected populations. Our input helps to provide collaboration/ sharing, re-enforcement of efforts of efforts at these levels.

The law also empowers the commission to educate the public in order to prevent discrimination and foster equal opportunity; and to address incidents of bias that may lead to tension between racial, ethnic and other groups. (PHRC website)

We take the knowledge we learn about and share --back to our communities and beyond. Again, we are an additional set of arms for the PHRC.

Why would the Senate wish to cut off that arm?

Personal/ professional perspective

From a personal/ professional perspective I see the Inter-Agency Task Force members as

- providing input from the areas, institutions, communities that we know about, that are relevant to legal issues in PA communities
- receiving ideas/ information that can inform our individual work/communities, e.g., with teachers working with multilingual/ multicultural populations, making them aware of the issues they are concerned about in their schools. I can help them see that they are part of a larger picture in PA and an even wider community
- developing informal networks among the members of the Task Force

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a. In my work at Immaculata University, my participation on the Task Force

- has given me additional content ideas for a Multicultural/Multilingual Issues in Education course I teach;
- gave me a contact-- a guest speaker (one that had presented at a Task Force meeting);
- has given me additional resources for the PDE ESL Program Specialist Certificate program at my university;
- gave me a PDE contact for one of my graduate students working on an anti-bullying project
- gave me the opportunity to contribute knowledge and contacts about efforts in the state for supporting teachers of ELLs when the PHRC became involved with a school district case—hopefully reducing some “re-inventing of the wheel.”

b. Below are some examples of my participation as a linguist/expert witness/ consultant.

- When an incident is brought up related to work legal/ language/ cultural concerns, I am sometimes able to add information or provide questions to be asked.
- I report, at a general level, on cases that might be of specific interest to the task force and the populations served, perhaps pointing to an angle the PHRC might consider.
- The task force allowed me the opportunity to rehearse a presentation I was to give at a state-wide conference of trial judges on concerns with non-native English speakers in the courts. This also had implications for certain populations served by the PHRC
- Recently I've been able to share a professional document developed by an international group on Guidelines/ best practices for Communicating Rights to Non-Native Speakers of English the USA, Australia, England and Wales.

END OF STATEMENT

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