

# Onondaga County/Syracuse Human Rights Commission

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ANNUAL REPORT 2020

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## Statement from Chief Diversity Officer

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I want to take this opportunity to let you know how grateful I am to the Commissioners who volunteer their time to serve on the Human Rights Commission (HRC).

In a time like no other our nation has seen the civil discord and unrest of people whose basic Human Rights have been violated. It has never become more evident of the importance of the work that this Commission has done and will continue to do. The Human Rights Commission is a multi-function program which demonstrates its commitment to Human Rights for all of the citizens of Onondaga County.

This Commission responds to requests for information and provides other forms of assistance for community members in relation to human and civil rights concerns; investigates allegations of discrimination; takes actions designed to promote cross-cultural understanding and alleviate inter-group conflict; and also educates the public on human and civil rights.

As you read their prepared Annual Report, you will see the dedication and commitment to the work that this Commission does on behalf of the citizens who live in our County. I look forward to the Commission's continued work in the upcoming year.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Monica Williams". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Monica Williams  
Chief Diversity Officer  
Onondaga County

## Statement from Administrator

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For me, the year 2020 will be one of the most memorable years yet. The pandemic and civil unrest underscored the social and racial injustices in our country, which prompted local protests and uncomfortable conversations about race.

The Commission has been part of the conversation and the solution. Commissioners held forums that addressed racism, assisted the New American Community with information on Covid-19, the 2020 Census and initiated conversations about social, cultural and racial disparities with top leaders in the City and County.

As Administrator of the Human Rights Commission, it has been a privilege to work alongside the Commissioners who have a passion for this work on behalf of this community.

As our community continues to heal, I am excited about our future and the continued efforts by Commissioners to drive the conversations that will transform our way of thinking and transform our communities.

Montanette Murphy

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of stylized cursive letters followed by a horizontal line.

Administrator  
Human Rights Commission

## **Human Rights Commissioners 2020**

Ali Adan  
Rev. Roosevelt Baums  
Mbonimpa Banabas  
Sanjay Chhablani  
Crystal Doody, ESQ.  
Rabbi Dan Fellman  
Barbara Johnson  
Chol Majok

Suzette Melendez, ESQ.  
Liban Mohamed  
Al-amin Muhammad  
Dave Pasinski  
John Rushing III  
Leonardo Sanchez  
Tricia Wittkowski  
Rosalie Young

### **Human Rights Commission: Mission**

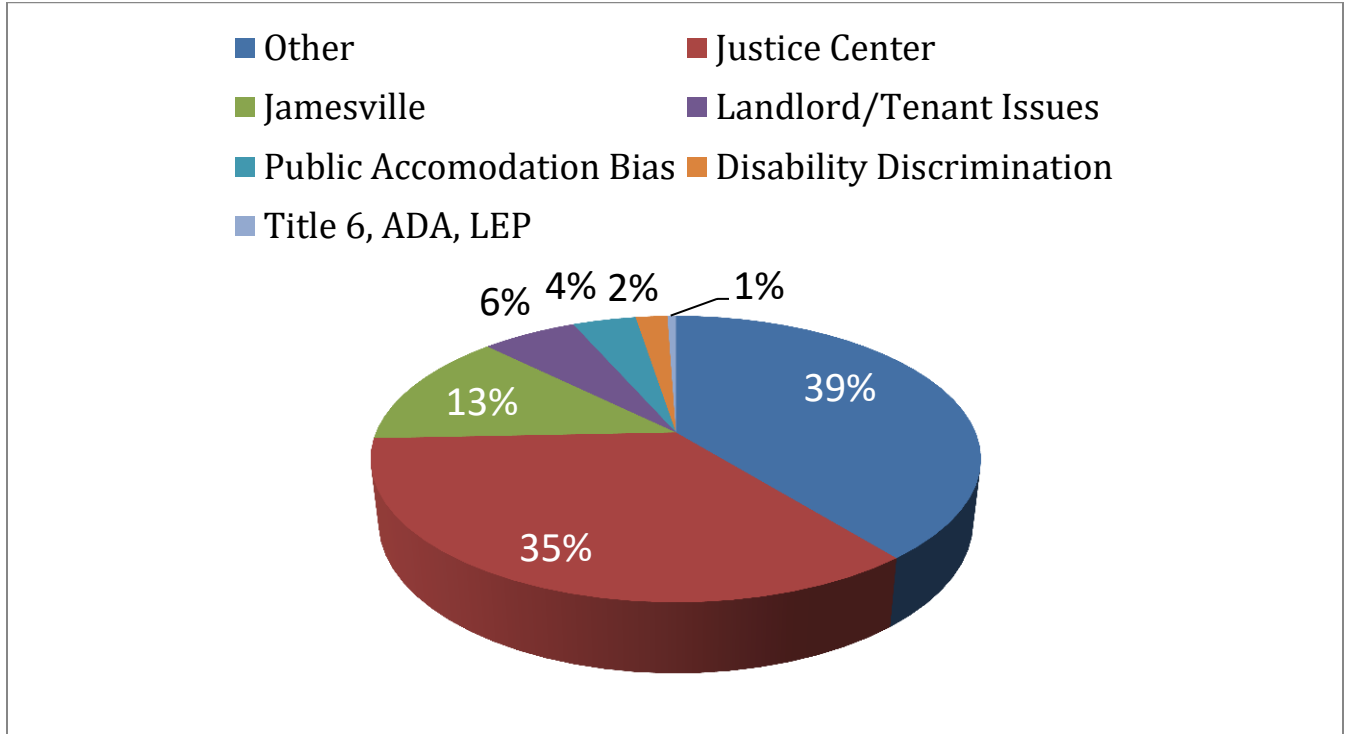
The Onondaga County/Syracuse Human Rights Commission exists to foster the growth and development within Onondaga County in the field of human rights and to examine the ways in which various groups of persons within the community relate to each other. The mission is to facilitate communication among such groups, creating a climate in which citizens can understand and respect each other, and resulting in the elimination of conditions leading to discrimination against members of any such groups.

### **Human Rights Commission: Highlights**

- Conducted a virtual public hearing on race relations in the town of DeWitt and East Syracuse and also a virtual forum on the impact of Covid-19 in the city of Syracuse and Onondaga County.
- Commissioners created, translated and handed out 2020 Census Pamphlets and COVID-19 Fact Sheets in numerous languages to local organizations to help inform new Americans about important events in the community.
- Commission advocated for two community members in 2020: one case involved a landlord/tenant dispute; the other racial bias at a local store.
- In 2020 the HRC office received over 1,500 inquiries regarding landlord/tenant issues, employment discrimination inquiries and questions about Justice Center oversight.

## Human Rights Department 2020 Total Intake Contacts

(Phone calls, emails, mail, walk-ins, and voicemail messages): **1,568**



**Other:** Police misconduct, mental health calls, crime victim, attorney/lawyer referral, family court, unclear or unknown calls, county services, homeless services, school-special education, healthcare complaints, school - bias, bullying, DASA, other government services, housing discrimination, employment discrimination: **609**

**Justice Center Intake: 553**

**Jamesville Correctional Facility Intake: 210**

**Landlord/Tenant issues Intake: 95**

**Bias/Discrimination in Public Accommodation with Follow-up: 62**

**Disability Accommodation or Discrimination with Follow-up: 31**

**Title 6, ADA, LEP Intake: 8**

## **Onondaga/Syracuse Human Rights Commission by Former Chair – Rabbi Dan Fellman**

The Human Rights Commission of Onondaga County and the City of Syracuse worked diligently to address issues of concern throughout 2020. While the pandemic created unique challenges, members of the Commission were involved in human rights issues throughout our community all year long.

The year began with an organizational meeting for the Commission, and we discussed pressing needs facing the community, and ultimately focused on two major areas throughout the year: Criminal Justice Issues and Voter and Civic Education.

Under the criminal justice issues umbrella, the Commission agreed to focus on bail reform and police relations, while within the civic education umbrella, Commissioners focused on voting rights, processes, and civics literacy. Plans at the time included continuing outreach from the Human Rights Commission to local law enforcement agencies, outreach to refugee populations to increase positive relationships with law enforcement, continued education on bail reform, and work with new Americans to encourage participation in the election process.

Then came March, and the arrival of the pandemic. Our March meeting was cancelled, and the rest of our meetings, from April to December, moved online. Commissioners remained involved and committed, though our work shifted to focus on challenges arising from the pandemic. At the same time, our community and nation witnessed civil rights protests on a scale not seen in decades. Commission members participated in marches and rallies throughout the community, and recognized that as much as we needed to work on the civil rights side of virus-related issues, we also needed to work on issues connected with racial inequality.

In a normal year, the Human Rights Commission accomplished much of the community interaction by being present at major events such as Plowshares, Juneteenth, Pride, Westcott Street Fair, and many others events. In 2020 all of those events were curtailed.

But throughout 2020, the HRC continued its practice of welcoming guests to speak at our monthly meetings so that we could build relationships and get a better sense of both needs and resources. Among our speakers in 2020: Peter McCarthy, Chair

of the CRB; Monica Williams, Chief Diversity Officer of Onondaga County; Syracuse Mayor Ben Walsh; and Linda Brown Robinson of the Syracuse/Onondaga County NAACP. Previous guests included Syracuse Police Chief Kenton Buckner and Syracuse City School District Superintendent Jaime Alicea.

In closing, 2020 was an active and challenging year. Our community faced unprecedented difficulties with the pandemic. We witnessed widespread public protests for equality at all levels and protests for police reform. And during the pandemic, even the Human Rights Commission was without change and restructuring. Through it all, the Commission worked tirelessly to preserve and protect the rights of all.

**In Memoriam and In Gratitude**  
**MARY ALICE SMOTHERS**  
**Former Human Rights Commissioner**



Photo by Syracuse.com /Mary Alice Smothers shares a laugh with longtime friend Marilyn Higgins.