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New Report Recommends Ways to Better Protect and Promote Human Rights Here At Home

The United States needs a more effective federal system of accountability that can provide critical support for human rights compliance at the state and local level

Washington, DC – Under the auspices of the Campaign for a New Domestic Human Rights Agenda, the Columbia Law School Human Rights Institute and the International Association of Official Human Rights Agencies released a report today highlighting ways in which an international human rights framework can advance the critical work of state and local human rights agencies. The report also recommends reforms at the national level to create a better system of accountability around the United States' domestic and international human rights obligations and to coordinate and support state and local efforts.

According to the report, "State and Local Human Rights Agencies: Recommendations for Advancing Opportunity and Equality Through an International Human Rights Framework," state and local human rights and human relations commissions can play a key role in ensuring broad human rights compliance within the United States. There are over 150 state and local government commissions or agencies mandated by state, county and city governments to enforce human and civil rights, and/or to conduct research, training and public education and issue policy recommendations.

"Many state and local institutions around the country are already using international human rights standards to promote equality, dignity, fairness and opportunity in their communities, and this report will help more agencies to make use of international human rights in their work" said Leon Russell, President of the International Association of Official Human Rights Agencies (IAOHRA).

Robin Toma, Executive Director of the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission, President of the California Association of Human Relations Organizations, and IAOHRA board member added, "To be on the cutting edge of intergroup relations and human rights and to make a real difference in people's lives in a global, diverse community like Los Angeles, we have to be cognizant of international standards and obligations." The Commission produces an annual report documenting hate crimes in LA County and is currently embarking on a campaign drawing on human rights to address rising violence against people who are homeless.

The report highlights ways in which state and local human rights agencies can use and have used international human rights standards and strategies to advance their work,

including monitoring and documenting human rights abuses, assessing local policies in light of international human rights standards, engaging in human rights education, incorporating human rights principles into advocacy efforts and local policy, and investigating human rights complaints.

The report also recommends reforms at the national level to create a better system of accountability around the United States' domestic and international human rights obligations and to coordinate and support state and local efforts. Specifically, the report recommends two key reforms:

Reconstitute and revitalize an Interagency Working Group on Human Rights, which will serve as a coordinating body among federal agencies and departments, as well as states and localities, for the promotion and respect of human rights and the implementation of human rights obligations in U.S. domestic policy; and

Restructure and transform the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights into a U.S. Commission on Civil and Human Rights, thus establishing an independent and non-partisan entity that would include as part of its mandate the monitoring and promotion of the United States' domestic and international human rights obligations, including at the state and local level.

"A reconstituted Interagency Working Group on Human Rights and a transformed U.S. Commission on Civil and Human Rights would strengthen our country's ability to address pressing human rights issues Americans are facing everyday, such as inequalities in access to housing, education, jobs and health care," said Risa Kaufman, Executive Director of Columbia Law School's Human Rights Institute and a Steering Committee member of the Campaign for a New Domestic Human Rights Agenda. "These structures must also provide critical support for the work being done by the state and local human rights commissions, through dedicated staff, education and training, and funding."

The Campaign for a New Domestic Human Rights Agenda is a coalition of approximately 50 national U.S.-based organizations that came together to support human rights at home and abroad soon after the election last year. Among them are major human rights, civil rights, civil liberties, and social justice groups.