

COUNCIL BLUFFS CIVIL RIGHTS COMMISSION: FACTS, FOCUS & FUTURE

As a city in Iowa with more than 29,000 citizens, Council Bluffs is required to have a Civil Rights Commission (“Commission”) pursuant to state law. This law grants such commissions wide authority to help people who may be the victims of many types of discrimination and to provide community-wide education and awareness of issues involving diversity. The nine-member Commission is appointed by the Mayor.

For example, the Commission hosts a variety of events to highlight current diversity issues and increase public awareness. In the past the Commission has hosted movie screenings like “Little Salsa on the Prairie”, facilitated forums to discuss new state laws impacting gender identity and sexual orientation, and hosted state-sponsored training on fair housing.

In 2009, the Commission’s focus is issues affecting the elderly. To kick-off this year’s events, the Commission is holding an Elder Forum on March 31st at the Senior Center at 6:00 p.m., which will feature a variety of panelists addressing issues affecting the aging population and their friends and families. The Forum will also include a question-and-answer portion, and refreshments will be served.

Recently, the Commission has participated in the Celebrate Council Bluffs Parade in May with an entry focused on the Commission and its mission. Last year, pencils with the Commission’s information were given to parade attendees; this year, colorful magnets proclaiming: “Celebrate Council Bluffs! Celebrate Diversity!” will be distributed.

Another very important facet of the Commission’s work is its case-load in dealing with specific complaints brought by citizens suffering from discrimination which occurred within the city limits of Council Bluffs. The complaints must be filed with the Commission within 180 days from the last date of discrimination, although complaints with the State may be filed up to 300 days from the last date of discrimination. The areas of protection from discrimination include employment, housing, public accommodation, education and credit. The protected classes of persons include those who suffer discrimination based upon age, color, creed, familial status, gender identity, marital status, mental disability, national origin, physical disability, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, and perhaps most importantly, retaliation based on any of these types of claims.

As the Commission looks to the future, its goals include increasing its educational efforts to create better community awareness of diversity issues, respect for others, and the need to treat everyone equally. However, if discrimination does occur, the Commission wants to encourage those who have been harmed to seek relief for themselves and to thereby create a better city for the future for all citizens.