

October 6, 2022

Councilmember Robert C. White, Jr.
Committee on Government Operations
& Facilities
Council of the District of Columbia
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20004

Councilmember Charles Allen
Committee on the Judiciary
& Public Safety
Council of the District of Columbia
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20004

Re: Support for Bill 24-446, the Attorney General's Civil Rights Enforcement Clarification Amendment Act of 2021

Dear Councilmembers:

As civil rights and legal services organizations and advocates for fairness and equity in the District, we write in support of Bill 24-446, the Attorney General's Civil Rights Enforcement Clarification Amendment Act of 2021. This legislation would ensure that the Office of the Attorney General (OAG) has all the tools it needs to combat discrimination and deliver on the promises of the District's Human Rights Act.

The goal of the Human Rights Act (HRA) is to end discrimination against, and ensure equal opportunity for, all District of Columbia residents. D.C. Code § 2-1401.01. To that end, the D.C. Office of Human Rights plays an important role in pursuing the goals of the HRA, including investigating complaints, conducting educational campaigns, assessing local and federal laws and policies, and protecting the equal employment rights of District government employees. What the OHR cannot do, due to chronic understaffing, is bring pattern and practice or disparate impact cases. The current bill will expand this important work by adding an additional enforcement mechanism through the OAG.

The OAG has a history of bringing systemic cases relating to discrimination in housing and public accommodations, as well as source of income discrimination. The agency is uniquely situated within the DC government to enforce pattern and practice violations and disparate impact cases through systemic litigation. By codifying the OAG's authority to litigate violations of the HRA, this bill will further the District's ability to expand enforcement of the HRA.

OAG's recent focus on housing discrimination is a timely example. Many of the undersigned organizations represent and advocate for unhoused and marginally housed individuals and families to secure safe, stable, affordable housing. The tenants we work with continue to encounter significant discrimination from prospective landlords based on their source of income, not only harming these individuals and families but also impeding the Council's goal of using locally funded vouchers to reduce homelessness and expand opportunity for tenants to live in neighborhoods across the District. OAG's work bringing these types of pattern and practice cases against landlords is helping to deter this type of illegal conduct. Bill 24-446 will allow the OAG to continue to do this important work and will expand the District's capacity to address the ongoing systemic forms of discrimination that many District residents face.

At the end of the day, District residents need more civil rights enforcement. As organizations that are committed to eliminating all forms of discrimination, we welcome this legislation's permanent codification of OAG's enforcement authority under the Human Rights Act and its clarification of investigative tools and penalties available to the Attorney General to help uncover discrimination and hold perpetrators accountable.

We urge the Council to enact this legislation without delay.

Sincerely,

AARP DC

Children's Law Center

D.C. Bar Pro Bono Center

Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia

Legal Counsel for the Elderly

Rising for Justice

Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs

Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless

Cc: Councilmembers Henderson, Nadeau, Pinto, and T. White, Sr., Committee on
Government Operations & Facilities

Councilmembers Bonds, Cheh, Gray, Pinto, Committee on the Judiciary & Public Safety