



Michelle A. Henry
Attorney General

As the Commonwealth’s chief law enforcement officer, I protect the rights of all Pennsylvanians – no matter what they look like, who they love, or who they pray (or don’t) pray to.

In order to defend those rights, the Office of Attorney General works closely with federal, state, and local civil rights agencies to ensure that Pennsylvanians are free from discrimination in employment, housing, public accommodations, education, and other settings. The Office also has jurisdiction to seek civil injunctions or other equitable relief to protect against ethnic intimidation (hate crimes).

If you believe your civil rights have been violated, please reach out to the Office of Attorney General’s Civil Rights Enforcement Section to file a complaint.

Helpful Definitions

Discrimination:

The unlawful denial of equal treatment or the imposition of neutral criteria that have a substantial disparate impact without a strong justification.

Stereotype:

An oversimplified generalization about a person or group of people without regard for individual differences.

Prejudice:

Pre-judging; making decisions about a person or group without sufficient knowledge; frequently based on stereotypes.

Hate Crime:

A criminal act against a person or property motivated by race, color, religion, or national origin. The legal term for a hate crime against a person is “ethnic intimidation.” The legal term for a hate crime involving certain property is “institutional vandalism.”



CIVIL RIGHTS
Enforcement Section

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CIVIL RIGHTS

Enforcement Section

The Civil Rights Enforcement Section protects and advances the rights of Pennsylvanians through the enforcement of state and federal civil rights laws. We review every report of civil rights violations in order to correct the situation or to make the proper referral to another agency in a better position to help. The Section retains and pursues matters with a potential for high impact on people's rights, such as:

- Actions in the name of the Attorney General before the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission to challenge discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations (including education institutions) on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, age, sex, disability, holding a G.E.D., or familial status, when the case presents a pattern or practice of discrimination or presents an important issue of statewide significance;
- Civil rights actions under state and federal law as permitted by the Attorney General's standing as parens patriae (i.e., when warranted to protect the welfare of the Commonwealth's residents); and
- Civil injunctions or other equitable relief, in consultation with the local district attorney, under the Civil Redress Statute (42 Pa. C.S.A. § 8309) to protect persons or property against crimes motivated by hatred toward the race, color, religion, or national origin of another individual or group (18 Pa. C.S.A. § 2710 (ethnic intimidation) or 18 Pa. C.S.A. § 3307 (institutional vandalism)).

The Civil Rights Enforcement Section also conducts training and outreach; works with other governmental

agencies to share information about bias-related incidents and collaborate on strategies to respond; and publicizes findings concerning civil rights abuses in our Commonwealth.

Here are some examples of discrimination or ethnic intimidation that could lead to an investigation by the Civil Rights Enforcement Section:

Employment

- Employer ignores employees' complaints of sexual or racial harassment.
- Employer imposes a hiring criterion that has a substantial negative impact on applicants based on race, national origin, sex, or another protected characteristic – without a strong justification.
- Employer refuses to provide reasonable accommodations to employees with disabilities.

Housing

- Landlord refuses to rent apartments to families with children, stating that no children are allowed to reside in the building.
- Real estate agent refuses to show houses in traditionally white neighborhoods to persons of color.
- Apartment rental materials state that all residents must speak English when in common areas throughout the apartment complex.

Public Accommodations

- Restaurant prioritizes serving patrons of one race or national origin group over patrons of other races or national origin groups.
- Theater does not have bathrooms that are accessible to persons with disabilities.

- Hotel requires the pre-payment of room charges for senior citizens, but not for other guests.

Education

- School disbands the field hockey and girls' softball teams because these sports fail to bring in additional funding. As a result, girls are unable to participate in any school-sponsored athletic teams.
- College fails to respond to complaints that a professor only calls on male students during class, thereby ensuring that female students do not receive enough class participation points to pass the class.
- Teacher requires the African-American students to play the role of the slaves in a mock slave auction as part of a Civil War history lesson.

Ethnic Intimidation

- Individual physically attacks a person he believes to be Latino, while yelling derogatory statements regarding Latinos.
- Family regularly receives harassing telephone calls about their religion (such as Judaism or Islam) which include threats to burn down their house.
- Individual motivated by racial hatred toward African Americans paints racial slurs on someone's property.

