

1 VIRGINIA HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL
2 AVERETT UNIVERSITY
3 DANVILLE, VIRGINIA
4 August 10, 2007
5

6 Report of Public Forum
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9 On Monday, June 4, 2007, the Virginia Human Rights Council
10 convened a public forum at Averett University in Danville,
11 Virginia. Representing the Council were Jon Strother, Chairman;
12 David Drachsler, Vice Chairman; Donald Campen; Dyana Mason; and
13 Deborah Segaloff. The Council staff was represented by Sandra
14 Norman, Director; Timothy Wilson, Administration/Operations
15 Manager; and Cortley West, Intake/EEO Manager. In addition,
16 Marilyn Booker, Outreach Coordinator for the U.S. Equal
17 Employment Opportunity Commission's Norfolk office was present
18 and invited to sit with Council members. A court reporter was
19 also present.
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21 Advance notification of the forum was made via the state's
22 public relations office and their contacts with appropriate
23 newspapers, television stations and radio stations in the
24 Danville area to request their assistance in publicizing the
25 date, time, location and subject of the forum. Director Norman
26 was interviewed, on-air, by one local radio station. Also, the
27 Council staff mailed several notices to Danville area individuals
28 and organizations thought to be interested in such a forum.
29 There were also personal contacts made by council and staff
30 members.
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32 Turnout was unexpectedly low, but the forum began at
33 approximately 6:45 PM. Mr. Strother welcomed those in attendance
34 and introduced council and staff members and explained the
35 purpose of the forum.
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1 The first speaker was Mr. Willie T. Fitzgerald, President of
2 the Pittsylvania County Branch of the National Association for
3 the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Mr. Fitzgerald
4 expressed his concerns regarding his role as a local leader when
5 he advises others who may have complaints of unlawful
6 discrimination. His concerns resulted from a series of
7 experiences he had with his employer and with three complaints he
8 filed with the U. S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission
9 (EEOC) and, in his view, received unsatisfactory responses,
10 despite significant expenditures on his part to cover legal fees.
11 In his most recent case, a court dismissed his case due to an
12 alleged error by EEOC. In that case, the judge advised him that
13 he could proceed with an appeal. According to Mr. Fitzgerald he
14 discontinued the case after his attorney advised him that an
15 appeal would be very costly.

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17 Mr. Fitzgerald based his lack of confidence in EEOC on his
18 perception that there was no on-site investigation by EEOC,
19 EEOC's apparently unchallenged acceptance of a written response
20 from the respondent and no face-to-face or telephonic interviews
21 of the respondent's employees.

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23 Based on Mr. Fitzgerald's experiences, he stated that he and
24 others believe there is nothing to be gained by filing
25 complaints. According to Mr. Fitzgerald, this view applied
26 equally to EEOC and to the Human Rights Council, despite the fact
27 that he had not filed either of his charges with the Council.

28
29 As President of the Pittsylvania County Branch of the NAACP,
30 Mr. Fitzgerald said he believes it is his responsibility to
31 provide accurate information and advice to his membership
32 regarding the filing of allegations of unlawful discrimination.
33 He stated, however, that the experiences he had with three cases
34 he filed with EEOC lead him to recommend that cases not be filed
35 with EEOC and that this perception had an impact on the low
36 attendance at this forum. According to Mr. Fitzgerald, people do

1 not believe that the government will give them a fair hearing or
2 carry out a fair investigation unless the case is one that might
3 be considered very significant. As for the smaller cases, he
4 said he believes that the complainant is left to fend for himself
5 or herself in court and most cannot afford the expense.

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7 Ms. Booker stated that she is familiar with Mr. Fitzgerald's
8 case and strongly suggested that he give EEOC another chance.
9 She advised that in the future, if he had information that he
10 thought was omitted or not properly considered, he should contact
11 the director of the office responsible for investigating the
12 case. If he does not receive clarity there, he should proceed up
13 the chain of command within EEOC.

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15 Ms. Norman invited Mr. Fitzgerald to work with the Council
16 in the future and to recommend the Council to others who believe
17 they have been discriminated against illegally. She asked Mr.
18 Fitzgerald to not assume that he will have a negative experience
19 with the Council. Further, Ms. Norman offered to return to the
20 Danville area along with Council members and meet with any group
21 of people who might benefit from a discussion about the Council
22 and what the Council offers in the way of services to individuals
23 alleging unlawful discrimination.

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25 Mr. Ralph Price, manager of the local office of the Virginia
26 Employment Commission, said he attended the forum with the intent
27 of learning more about the missions of EEOC and the Human Rights
28 Council. His stated desire is to be able to share the
29 information he gains with other individuals who come to him for
30 guidance on matters relating to unlawful discrimination.
31 According to Mr. Price, most of the discrimination issues that
32 come to him involve race and gender and he wants to be able to
33 send people in the right direction. According to Mr. Price's
34 experience, the larger corporations are more sensitive to the
35 issues of discrimination because they have had appropriate
36 training, but the smaller companies do not have equivalent

1 training and do not have the backing of a national organization
2 as one might find with the larger corporations.

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4 Mr. Price noted that he received a letter regarding this
5 forum and that is why he attended. He also said that he never
6 heard anything on the radio or saw anything in the newspaper
7 about the forum. Mr. Price suggested making the information
8 about the forum available to churches so that it can appear in
9 church bulletins on Sunday morning. He also suggested contacting
10 local service organizations such as sororities and fraternities
11 so they can pass the information to their membership. In doing
12 that, however, he said it was important for the people to know
13 what the Council's mission is and what to expect when they come
14 so that if they have issues relating to unlawful discrimination,
15 they can bring them to the Council.

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17 Ms. Norman restated her efforts to publicize this forum by
18 contacting the Baptist Association, the newspapers and the local
19 radio stations. She reminded Mr. Price that she had done an on-
20 air interview on one of the radio stations. She had sent two
21 letters and asked recipients to pass the word along to others.
22 Also, the letters included a pamphlet about the agency and
23 invited people to go to the agency's website to get more
24 information. Local legislators were also contacted. Finally,
25 Ms. Norman invited Mr. Price and Mr. Fitzgerald to assist the
26 next time a forum is scheduled for this area and they agreed.

27
28 Mr. Strother stated that whenever either Mr. Price or Mr.
29 Fitzgerald is aware of a gathering of people who would benefit
30 from the Council coming and talking, they should let the Council
31 know and the Council will do its best to get somebody there. Mr.
32 Strother, Ms. Norman, somebody from the staff or some of the
33 Council members will come to Danville, Pittsylvania County or
34 anywhere else to let people know what the Council does, how it is
35 done and what they can expect when they come to the Council with
36 a complaint.

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The forum ended at approximately 7:40 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Jon D. Strother
Chairman
Virginia Human Rights Council