We can learn a lot from Crayons. Some are sharp, some are pretty, some are dull, some have weird names, and all are different colors...but they all have to learn to live in the same box.”

Author Unknown

OUR MISSION: The Union County Human Relations Commission (UCHRC) serves to promote and encourage a more peaceful and ecumenical society in Union County, by providing support to bias crime victims who are targets of a crime because of their race, creed, color, religion, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, sexual identity, socio-economic status, or physical or mental challenges, and by intervening to eradicate the conditions that ultimately cause them.

The UCHRC addresses the issues of prejudice, bias and racism and their impact on our local schools, workplaces and neighborhoods.

Our mission, and the focus of our efforts and activities, is to actively encourage, develop, promote and strengthen respect for human rights and cultural diversity among the people of Union County.

Simply stated, the UCHRC celebrates the richness of life that cultural diversity brings to our communities and ourselves.
MEMORANDUM

TO: The Honorable Theodore J. Romankow, Union County Prosecutor
FROM: Peter McTiernan and James F. Keefe, UCHRC Co-Chairs
DATE: May 1, 2012

Dear Prosecutor Romankow:

This annual report offers an update on the focus and efforts of the Union County Human Relations Commission (UCHRC) over the past two years. The UCHRC has continued to take an active role in fostering harmony and good will among the diverse citizenry of Union County. We also have worked diligently to maintain past programs which have been successful.

The Police & Teens Together (PATT) program has accomplished its goal to engage every school district in the county. This interactive program continues to be presented as part of the regular curriculum at New Providence High School, while returning to other schools throughout the county on a rotating basis.

The Pass The Message On bias-prejudice reduction program which has been piloted at Linden High School for the past three years has received local accolades, and was honored by the New Jersey Bias Officers Association in 2011 and 2012. This program broadens the awareness and understanding of high school students about the Pyramid of Hate, and then has them mentor the younger students to encourage them to change their behaviors and be careful of their word choices.

The InterFaith Community Network has launched two well-received public forums: "Foreclosure: Moving from Fear to Positive Action", and Gang Awareness: Continuing The Dialogue." The Foreclosure forum has provided participants with free options that are immediately actionable and provide hope; while the progress and momentum of the ongoing Gang Awareness dialogue go up a notch with each session. We continue to work to energize and expand the InterFaith Community Network, an association of houses of worship that provides a safe haven for dialogue in times of crisis, and, continually, as a venue for ongoing education.

We are also proud to still be perceived as an expert resource in the county and state in the realm of bullying, cyberbullying, harassment and intimidation, particularly those that are bias-based. We have continued to partner with your office and the Office of the Union County Superintendent of Schools to provide ongoing education for the educational and law enforcement communities.

We have a highly motivated commission. A number of the group have used personal time and resources to receive ongoing training in conflict mediation, to attend the New Jersey Human Relations Commission’s and New Jersey State Bias Officers’ Annual Conferences, and Kean University’s International Conferences focusing on global relations issues.

The Commissioners individually and collectively continue to look into the complex issues that are reported in the news on a daily basis -- the immigration controversy, bias incidents and hate crimes, genocide, and even devastating natural disasters, and specifically how they impact our community. We have benefited from presentations on various cultures within our diverse county and are reviewing ways to improve multicultural understanding among Union County residents. We will continue to expand our knowledge of the many human relations issues that exist in our shrinking world, and to educate and encourage the community at large concerning these issues and to find creative and constructive solutions.

The world can be a better place and we can all help it to become that better place.

We sincerely appreciate your unequivocal support for the Commission and its many endeavors. You are to be commended for recognizing the diversity of citizenship we enjoy in Union County, and for providing a means to address the sometimes difficult issues that arise as a consequence.

The Commissioners are grateful to you, your office and the Bias Crimes Unit, the local police departments and their bias officers, and the Union County Superintendent of Schools and his staff, for encouraging us, networking with us, and for co-sponsoring important initiatives and activities.

Our annual Unity Achievement Award event stands as a beacon of inspiration and hope, honoring individuals and organizations who dedicate themselves to improving the human condition in all regards. We offer our sincerest thanks for supporting and funding us in this endeavor.

We appreciate your continuing support, without which none of these programs and outreach efforts -- or the real and perceived differences we are making with those we connect with -- would be possible.
Celebrate the Richness of Life

UCHRC Unity Awards

The Commissioners who volunteer their time and energies to serve on the Union County Human Relations Commission unequivocally agree that the best way to strive to accomplish our mission -- to actively encourage, develop, promote and strengthen respect for human rights and cultural diversity among the people of Union County -- is to publicly honor those who already do it well.

The UCHRC’s annual Unity Achievement Awards honor individuals and organizations that have contributed in an extraordinary manner to promote respect for human rights, human dignity, and cultural diversity throughout Union County.

Spring 2012 marks our eleventh annual Unity Award Presentation. Year after year, the inspirational and heartfelt event embraces the best we, individually and collectively, give of ourselves on behalf of others, and touches the spirit of our Award recipients, their guests, and ourselves.

We gratefully acknowledge the support of AGL Resources/Elizabethtown Gas Company for graciously permitting the use of their atrium for our reception and ceremonies, and to the Union County Prosecutor’s Office for its continued support and funding.

The photo at the right captures our 2011 Unity Award Recipients, who were honored for their achievements, as follows (front row, from left.)

by a Non-Profit Organization

Lin’s Linens -- Gail Leiberman, Liz Belogh and Lin Salerno
Recognition for harnessing and illuminating the value and power of brightness, serenity, peace and healing in our physical world through our simple and spiritual human connections

by a Student

Johnna Booth, Hillside High School
Recognition for demonstrating an outstanding character and unselfish, caring nature that serves as a role model for her peers and community

Special Recognition

Clara Kramer
Recognition for providing a written and living testament to the dual nature of people: for as bad as things may be, they can always be balanced by goodness

Special Recognition

Mary Beth Kelley, Trinitas School of Nursing
Recognition for providing visionary and progressive leadership which has resulted in a top-notch nursing school, while simultaneously creating opportunities for students of diverse backgrounds and need to participate and achieve a nursing degree

by an Individual

Lillie Brown
Recognition for dedicating her entire life to selfless giving, fellowship and service to improve the quality -- and spirit -- of life for others

(by back row, from left)

Special Recognition

Commissioner Brian Levine, a Senior at Westfield High School
Recognition for his enthusiastic participation and meaningful contribution representing youth in his two years of service as a UCHRC Commissioner

by an Educator

Henry Varriano
Recognition for emphasizing the importance of a learning environment that embraces the arts, culture and citizenship and promotes and encompasses the entire community for the benefit of all students

by a Community Organization

Dawson Yeomans / Furniture Assist
Recognition for carving a unique niche to provide hope and a home to those they serve, while also generating ripples of hope, satisfaction and service to those who help them make it happen

2011 Unity Award Recipients

by a Corporation/Business

Tim Williams, AGL Resources/Elizabethtown Gas Company
Recognition for developing a program for students and at-risk youth to learn valuable lessons today that can earn them a better future

Special Recognition

John Miller, accepting the Award honoring his late wife, Assistant Prosecutor Jo Ann Miller, Union County Prosecutor’s Office
Recognition for a legacy of a woman which is deemed to be great, and for professionally and personally “always doing the right thing”

by the Clergy

Rev. Dr. Gerald Lamont Thomas, Shiloh Baptist Church
Recognition for his visionary leadership of his congregation and community to embrace each other as they work to build a brighter future for themselves and each other

in Law Enforcement

Lt. Keith Aslin, Linden Police Department
Recognition for his ongoing efforts to sensitize students and the community to the injustices of bullying, bias, prejudice and hate while empowering them to stand up and speak out for themselves and others who are being victimized

in Public Service

Union County Firefighters Edwin Donnelly (Union), Al Srnka (Union), Andy Stratton (Cranford), and William Lavin (Elizabeth)
Recognition for paving the way for burned youth to find their own way past their physical and emotional scars to find friendship, joy and peace for a day, a week, and a lifetime
Intervene to Eradicate the Conditions that Cause Bias & Hate

“PASS THE MESSAGE ON” – A Bias & Prejudice Reduction Pilot Program for Youth

One initiative the Union County Human Relations Commissioners have actively pursued is the creation of a program targeting impressionable middle- and elementary school students focused on Bias and Prejudice Reduction. Linden High School history teacher Monica Goncalves (top photo, left front) has graciously allowed the Union County Human Relations Commission to explore ways to engage her juniors and seniors in dialogue and education about the important issues of our time, including sensitizing them to the ways words and actions can foster bias, prejudice, hate and violence; empowering them to take a stand to watch their own behaviors; and to stand up and speak out on behalf of others who are being targeted and victimized. The goal of this program and all of the programs we undertake, is to create awareness and, ultimately, foster understanding and respect.

The name of this program captures another key ingredient of this program: PASS THE MESSAGE ON.

The key partners who are developing, presenting and ultimately packaging this program to roll out to other Union County schools are Lt. Keith Aslin, Linden Police Department’s Juvenile and Bias Officer, Dr. Paula Rodriguez Rust (Spectrum Diversity LLC), a sociologist and diversity educator specializing in social psychology, survey research, statistical analysis, racial and ethnic relations, and gender & sexuality, Linden High School teacher Monica Goncalves, and UCHRC Commissioner Karen Positan.

The program has evolved over the three years it has been presented. The first session provides students with a historical overview of acts of bias, prejudice and hate. The second presentation, which addresses the social aspects, brings it home, with a discussion of how bias and prejudice affect our lives individually, and what we can do about it.

As a homework assignment, students are asked to write about their personal experiences and any insights this new awareness has given them. Although bullying is not mentioned, bullying and bias-based bullying is often brought up by the students. During the entire presentation, students are taught some known and effective methods for addressing bias, prejudice, stereotyping and bullying, and how to put them into practice.

Because the Commissioners understand that youth are better influenced by other youth rather than adults, the goal of the program has been to co-develop an insightful and sensitive
educational program that can be presented to high school students, that the high school students can then repackaged and present to middle school and elementary school students.

The seniors Pass The Message On to middle and elementary students through mentoring. To prepare for their field trips, the high school students work together in smaller groups to develop a brief program they can present to the younger students in a classroom setting to engage them in a conversation about bias, prejudice and bullying. Many choose to use role plays to demonstrate what can happen, and how the younger students can better respond. The program kicks off with an assembly presentation, with the high school volunteers reading some of the writings that have been collected through the three-year process to the younger students before returning to the individual classrooms, with each high school group presenting the program they developed to the younger students.

Last year, 25 high school students visited a local elementary school and a middle school to present the program. This year, the high school seniors will be mentoring high school freshman.

In the first two days of the program presentation, the initial attitude of most of the high school students was, “We can’t stop that here. This is HIGH SCHOOL! Are you kidding!” but at the debriefing following the elementary and middle school presentations, they had so absorbed and internalized the messages that they had tried to pass on to the young students that they said things like, “The middle schoolers wouldn’t listen to us!”

The high school students forgot that they had almost the same attitudes at the start of the program. Having to take the message and “Pass It On” to younger students caused them to internalize it themselves. They became representatives of the message, and as a result took the message to heart.

Afterwards, the elementary students also wrote letters to the high school students thanking them for coming for a visit, which are priceless to read and which reinforce that the Message had been Passed Along, delivered and understood.

Lt. Aslin (2011), Dr. Rodriguez Rust (2012) and Commissioner Positan (2012) were each honored by the New Jersey State Bias Officers Association, which recognized the significance of this program and their achievements in the field combatting bias intimidation.

Cultivate Dialogue, Communication, and Mutual Respect

Police & Teens Together (PATT) Program:

The idea for a program to improve understanding and communication between youth and law enforcement was born out of a discussion at a regular meeting of the Union County Human Relations Commission almost thirteen years ago. While discussing events in the news at that time about altercations between citizens and police officers, the discussion evolved to our own discomfort for ourselves and our licensed teenage children when a seemingly simple event such as a motor vehicle stop occurred.

The pilot program for the Police & Teens Together (PATT) program was launched at Elizabeth High School in Spring 2000, and has been presented countywide at all high schools in Union County’s 21 municipalities. Many departments have continued the program on their own, or invite us back from time-to-time.

In the first two sessions, the students speak out about their own perspectives of, and encounters with, law enforcement officers, and officers speak about themselves as people and as professionals. The third “Trading Places Role Play” session is the highlight, with the students as officers for motor vehicle stops and crowd dispersion role plays, stopping the officer “students.” (See photos below.)

By the fourth and final session, the students and officers have built understanding, rapport and mutual respect, while also having fun.

The photos below, from a high school program in Fall 2011, will give you some idea of the excitement, and learning, that takes place.

Junior Human Relations Commission

The Commissioners have continued to explore the concept of creating a Junior Human Relations Commission. Two recent youth Commissioners have added value and helped to guide the processes to ensure the best outreach to young people, and the creation of programs that are meaningful and engaging. With their assistance, this initiative is finally coming to fruition.

UCHRC Youth Commissioner Joseph Bonaccorso was a high school freshman when he received the UCHRC’s Unity Award for Achievement by a Student in 2010, and, immediately following, was asked to serve, representing youth.

One of his greatest contributions to the Commission thus far has been to oversee the creation of a Junior Human Relations Commission at the Arthur L. Johnson High School in Clark, where he is currently a junior.

He secured support from the administration, enlisted a faculty advisor, and received approval in August 2011 to move forward.

Its first meeting, held in September 2011, was held after school for one-half hour. In its brief existence, the Junior Human Relations Commission has selected the following activities as their primary focus: Advocating and taking action to prevent bullying from occurring; using peer mediation to address normal conflict resolution; promoting racial tolerance; raising funds for environmental causes; raising funds for American soldiers; addressing and helping to solve any global, national, state or local injustices that may occur; and to hold a clothing/food drive five times during the school year.

We applaud the efforts and accomplishments of Commissioner Joseph Bonaccorso in his brief time serving on the Commission, as well as the administrators, student advisors, students and parents of the Arthur L. Johnson High School community.
Bullying and CyberBullying Awareness and Prevention

The Union County Human Relations Commission is extremely proud of our long-standing, proactive and aggressive stance on promoting awareness and prevention of bullying, cyberbullying, intimidation and harassment -- particularly with regard to bias-based bullying.

Within the past year, several workshops have been held for school administrators, educators, school bullying coordinators, and law enforcement officers on these areas, as well as the requirements of the recent legislation.

With New Jersey’s passage of New Jersey’s Anti-Bullying Student’s Bill of Rights -- the nation’s strongest anti-bullying legislation signed into law on January 5, 2011, the national attention relating to the death of Rutgers University freshman Tyler Clementi, and the recent verdict handed down in the case against his roommate, Dharun Ravi, who was convicted of bias intimidation, there continues to be a quest for information and understanding by schools, students, parents, and the law enforcement community. As reported in a New York Times article on March 16, 2012, the Ravi verdict, in particular, is poised to broaden the definition of hate crimes in an era when laws have not kept up with evolving technology.

Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the school to create a school environment and culture that will serve as the best intervention and prevention mechanism for bullying, harassment, intimidation and other forms of school violence and disrespectful activities. For this reason, and as part of our ongoing commitment to continue our leadership role in bullying and cyber-bullying awareness and prevention, we will continue our partnership with the Union County Superintendents of Schools and Union County Prosecutor’s Office to provide turnkey education and training on bullying, cyberbullying, generational texting/sexting, and bias-based bullying.

InterFaith Community Network

In the aftermath of the Columbine High School tragedy, the Union County Human Relations Commission actively set about to create a structure and system to be used to quickly put together crisis-response public forums when necessary.

The result was Union County’s Interfaith Community Network, comprising multi-denominational houses of worship geographically spread throughout Union County that have volunteered to act as “safe haven” host-sites.

The purpose of establishing this network of facilities is to ensure that we can quickly arrange meetings as necessary wherein the community can dialogue and express concerns about issues and events affecting their communities.

It also provides the opportunity to present programs that ultimately focus on Prejudice Reduction and Multi-Cultural Diversity, as well as simple “human relations” concepts.

In the past two years, with its partners, the InterFaith Community Network have hosted several offerings of two meaningful and well-received Public Forums:

The first, for worried and distressed homeowners, on Foreclosure.

the second, an ongoing Public Dialogue on Gang Awareness.
Public Forums: Foreclosure

In partnership with the New Jersey Office of Dispute Settlement, the Union County Superior Court, and the Union County Foreclosure Task Force, a free public forum entitled, “FORECLOSURE: Moving From Fear To Positive Action,” has been and continues to be presented in a variety of venues in Union County.

The program is comprised of a variety of expert panelists who present options that are available to someone who is worried about, facing, or who has recently lost their residence to foreclosure, positive actions that can be taken, and, most importantly, FREE resources that are offered on a state and county level.

Panelists included representatives from the following organizations: ◆ the Office of Dispute Settlement, New Jersey Office of the Public Defender, who provides an overview of the free statewide Mortgage Foreclosure Mediation initiative, with details of how to sign up; ◆ The New Jersey Housing and Mortgage Finance Agency, who speaks about the role of the NJHMFA in program development and providing resource and referral information for persons facing foreclosure, including funding; ◆ Local Housing Counselors -- the most important and extremely vital resource for the homeowner, who works with the homeowner every step of the way on budgeting, financing, identifying viable loan modifications, and pursuing potential mortgage/rental assistance programs; Superior Court who provides a general overview of the court’s perspective, and the role of the court beginning with a bank filing a foreclosure complaint, through to a potential Sheriff’s sale; and ◆ the New Jersey Division of Consumer Affairs, who warns never to pay anyone for assistance, including the plethora of scam artists who try to convince distressed homeowners they can help them avoid foreclosure “for a fee,” and speaks to the free and professional assistance available on the state and county level.

The program was offered first at in October 2010 at St. Helen’s Roman Catholic Church in Westfield; followed by a program in the Spanish language at the Blessed Sacrament Church in Elizabeth in January 2011, and Shiboh Baptist Church in Plainfield in September 2011. The next program is planned for the Rahway area in Fall 2012. The turnkey program was introduced to the New Jersey Human Relations Council in March 2011, and has been spun off by the Ocean County Human Relations Commission at the Toms River Library in June 2011. The Union County Human Relations Commission perceives that by reaching this initial public, ultimately the information will reach those individuals and families who need it most, and will assist in guiding them to the resources that are available to assist them through the arduous and difficult journey.

Public Forums: Gang Awareness

The UCHRC’s Inter-Faith Community Network has called upon all sectors of the community -- the clergy, parents, students, citizens, educators, social agency staff members, community organization staff members, law enforcement professionals, and all youth advocates -- to come together for a community education and dialogue on gang awareness.

Acknowledging the presence and impact the gang culture has in our communities, this ongoing series of Gang Awareness Public Forums has been developed so that all sectors of the community can come together to discuss and share ways that we, individually and collectively, can address these issues and work with youth to encourage healthy choices, relationships and affiliations.

Conflict Mediation

The Union County Human Relations Commission is primarily focused on local concerns and is committed to the improvement of life in the county.

To this end, a great number of the Commissioners were trained in conflict intervention and mediation by Ms. Petrilla, Esq., a former staff member of the New Jersey Secretary of State’s Office of Dispute Settlement (which now resides in the Office of the Public Advocate).

In addition to the initial 18-hour state-mandated training, the Commissioners have continued to work with Ms. Petrilla and on their own to conduct ongoing training sessions, including role play sessions, to hone their skills and gain a broader exposure to potential solutions devised by those in conflict.

Some Commissioners have also chosen to work as conflict mediators with the federal court system.

As Commissioners, we are becoming increasingly aware of the need for conflict mediation as an opportunity to provide mediation to citizens to resolve disputes and keep matters out of the court system.

An integral part of a “tool box,” the Commissioners are reaching out to make various community groups aware of our capability in this regard, and encouraging them to call upon the Union County Human Relations Commission to be of service.

“The truth is that there is nothing noble in being superior to somebody else. The only real nobility is in being superior to your former self.”

Whitney Young (1921-1971)
Understanding Other Cultures and Ourselves

The Union County Human Relations Commission continues to seek opportunities at meetings and in public forums to become acquainted with other cultures, with an eye to better understand the visible and invisible behaviors, motivators and values that comprise our diverse global community. A recent presentation featured local Marathi-speaking people from India, who are seeking to preserve their cultural heritage, language, and music. The organization is a pioneer in the movements to eradicate untouchability and women’s illiteracy. We have also been inspired by recent visits exploring the Chinese American and Muslim/Arabic communities and cultures, as well as other guest presenters. The Commissioners continue to explore ways to become acquainted with and better understand other cultures, themselves and each other, always with an eye toward helping to spread that awareness to the general public.

The Union County Human Relations Commission also continues to strive for self-education and discovery. At the end of every meeting, Commissioners share “Popcorn and Soda” -- that is, recommendations about books, movies, television programs, theatrical productions, school plays, music, websites, and educational and cultural events. Through this exchange, we are encouraged to explore various aspects of cultural diversity and human rights that help us to look at ourselves, and at the complexities of cultural exchange and discourse in our society, both today and yesterday. The ensuing discussions reflect a wide spectrum of opinions, viewpoints, perspectives, biases and prejudices, which reinforced both the need to continue these dialogues, and the need for our Commission to actively engage in providing ourselves and the general public with these types of educational experiences and opportunities.

Global Issues including Immigration, Genocide, Human Trafficking, and other Suffering

While the UCHRC is primarily focused on local concerns and the improvement of life in our county, we have also engaged in a myriad of discussions on many sensitive social and legal issues and sought responsible ways to address these subjects. Our inquiries have reminded us that, despite our commitment to the Union County community, we are inextricably tied to the global community, which has led us into discussion of a broader field of issues. We recognize that some of these issues, such as the Darfur genocide, human trafficking, immigration, and the NARCO drug wars are incredibly broad and complex in scope. We continue to search for new insights and learn so that we can share ourselves, our education and our wisdom in a manner that will improve our life skills and help our county reap the full benefits of our diversity.

Support for Bias Crime Victims

We continue our close relationship with the municipal, county and state bias crime offices, including the New Jersey Division of Criminal Justice’s Office of Bias Crime and Community Relations, the New Jersey State Bias Officers Association, and the Union County Prosecutor’s Office Bias Unit, which serves on our Commission. They regularly update us on the types of bias incidents and hate crimes that have been investigated in Union County.

We are committed to uphold the law and sponsor efforts encouraging the abandonment of negative words or actions motivated by prejudice, bias, or hate, or protected characteristics including race, color, religion, national origin, ethnicity, sex, gender, gender identity, expression, disability or sexual orientation. We are also committed to find and/or develop support mechanisms for those who are victimized.

UCHRC Commissioners

Our Commissioners continue to seek active and interested members to ensure the Union County Human Relations Commission reflects the diverse population of Union County. A Background Information Nomination form that has been developed aids in this process. The following is our Membership Roster effective April 2012, reflecting 35 members:

Co-Chairs
- Peter McTiernan (2010-2012)
- James F. Keefe (1997 to present)

Recording Secretary...★ Karen E. Positan

Members At Large
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- Barbara Babcock
- Joseph Bonaccorso
- Barbara Boyer
- Reverend Alfred E. Brown (2008-2010)
- Dr. Carmen Centuolo
- Dr. Martin Dickerson
- Faheemah El-Amin (2000-2002)
- Maria Egoavil
- Flor Gonzales
- Sgt. Lenney Guarino
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- Alice A. Holzapfel
- Nora Mislav
- Charles Newman
- Virginia San Pedro
- Esmeralda Vargas
- Emma Villegas
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- Chief Brian Mahoney, Scotch Plains Police Department

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- Aristo Carranza ★ Janice Jackson
- Ana Martinez ★ Deborah Smith

Commissioners Emeritus
- Raul Pinto

Continuously Improve The Commission

The Union County Human Relations Commission, which consists of a group of Union County residents from diverse personal and professional backgrounds, was created by the Union County Prosecutor’s Office in 1991. Following the death of then-Prosecutor Andrew K. Ruotolo, the UCHRC ceased activities for a couple of years. It was reorganized and reenergized in 1997.

Since that time, the Union County Human Relations Commission has continued to earn our statewide reputation of being a Commission that is progressive, interested and involved.

The UCHRC meets every other month on Monday nights at the John H. Stamler Police Academy in Scotch Plains. UCHRC Sub-Committees meet as needed to address and implement specific projects. Being a group of like-minded volunteers, we are constrained by the resources and time available among us. Despite our sparse resources, we continue to use our leverage to gain the broadest exposure and impact.

We will continue to work to identify opportunities for current and future Commissioners, and continue to work to meet and exceed the standards asked of all New Jersey Human Relations Commissions.

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We will continue to work to identify opportunities for current and future Commissioners, and continue to work to meet and exceed the standards asked of all New Jersey Human Relations Commissions.