



Work Plan and
Recommendations to the
Mayor and
Common Council

2021/2022

Equal Opportunities
Commission & Equal
Opportunities Division

02/01/2022

The City of Madison Equal Opportunities Commission (“the Commission”) is committed to addressing issues of discrimination in Madison, Wisconsin.

The year 2021 has already presented numerous challenges including the ongoing global pandemic that has continued to result in economic, health and housing crises disproportionately affecting the Black community. These disparities demonstrate the even greater need for the commission to support positive change to overcome these challenges and help Madison become a more equitable city.

The Commission is committed to continuing to address the ongoing housing crisis in the City of Madison and its disparate impact on low-income members of the community and community members of color, and to continuing to understand and challenge the systems and policies that perpetuate the public health crises of racism and housing.

The Commission sees opportunity amidst these challenges, and a call to action in this unprecedented time. In 2021 at their annual retreat, the Commission committed to focus on continuing to find solutions to the complex discrimination issues in Madison, and to addressing the policies and practices in place within Madison perpetuating systemic racism.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

While the Commission continues to task itself in the upcoming year with addressing the public health crises of racism and housing, they also took a moment to reflect on the following accomplishments of 2020/2021:

- Recommendations to various committees, commissions and Common Council on use of tear gas and other non-lethal uses of force by Madison Police, policy recommendations around use of body-worn cameras, the temporary permissible encampment at Reindahl Park and other considerations around members of our community experiencing homelessness, including the impact of COVID-19.
- Eliminating a backlog and timely processing cases on appeal to the Commission.
- During the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic continuing to meet consistently and continuing to engage speakers and subject matter experts to address issues before the EOC.
- Improvements in voting, recognizing and honoring the nominees and recipient of the Reverend James C. Wright Human Rights Award.
- Completing the go-live of the Department of Civil Rights Equal Opportunities Division online complaint portal; allowing access to file a complaint of discrimination or report a problem from anywhere a person has internet access.
- Continued connections with landlords and the community to continue to educate and issue spot disparities, primarily in the area of housing.
- Continued partnership and information sharing with Building Inspection.

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HISTORY

The charge of the Equal Opportunities Commission as set forth in MGO 39.03 – Equal Opportunities Ordinance is, in part, as follows:

In order that the peace, freedom, safety, and general welfare of all inhabitants of the City may be protected and ensured, it is hereby declared to be the public policy of the City of Madison to foster and enforce to the fullest extent the protection by law of the rights of all of its inhabitants to equal opportunity to gainful employment, housing, and the use of City facilities and public accommodations.

To fully effectuate this policy of promoting nondiscrimination, the City shall endeavor to eliminate all discrimination that may occur in its own employment, housing, and public accommodation practices and in the use of City facilities. By adopting Sec. 39.05 of these ordinances, the Common Council has attempted to make sure that City facilities and programs that received City financial assistance are accessible to all persons [...].

The Commission is committed to fulfilling their charge through an educated, thoughtful, and action-oriented approach to the issues facing the community they serve.

OUTCOMES

In an effort to learn more about the issues facing the community during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in the area of housing, the Commission, over the last year, met with individuals from the City of Madison, Commonwealth Development, Madison College Free Legal Clinic, and Public Health Madison Dane County. The Commission learned that some of the most immediate issues experienced by community members in the area of housing, even as the COVID-19 pandemic wears on, are discriminatory or retaliatory treatment by landlords or property managers, and the threat of non-renewal or eviction for speaking out against discriminatory or retaliatory behavior. Given the severe shortage of low-income housing in the City of Madison, residents are often faced with the choice of accepting unacceptable landlord behavior or facing eviction or non-renewal of their lease. This untenable situation has only been exacerbated by the economic impacts and lifting of eviction moratoria by federal, state, and local governments.

While there have been a number of extensions to the original eviction moratorium, at the time of the writing of this work plan, all moratoria covering the residents of the City of Madison have expired. This Commission will continue closely monitoring the effects of the moratoria being lifted and the impact on eviction filings and non-renewals. This Commission also continues to follow the actions of Common Council as it pertains to options for temporary housing for those experiencing homelessness throughout Madison and is committed to elevating the voices of the marginalized populations.

This Commission was able to provide feedback on several other initiatives during the past year, including the Body Worn Camera Feasibility Review Committee, initiatives on use of non-lethal force options in policing, including use of mace, tear gas, and impact projectiles, obtaining property from the Defense Logistics Agency, as well as providing feedback and recommendations on the Police Civilian Oversight Committee and Independent Police Monitor.

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This Commission also heard from City Clerk Maribeth Witzel-Behl on pandemic voting access and what the City of Madison was doing to support voting access for all of its residents during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is vital that access to the ballot is preserved and expanded so that all community members have the opportunity to make their voice heard.

Having engaged in ongoing learning and input in these many areas, the Commission is prepared to offer the following recommendations:

GOALS AND APPROACHES

The Commission has identified a number of goals that they feel will help advance some of the outcomes identified above, and is committed to pursuing the following approaches to address these issues.

The Commission will prioritize the utilization of its authority to push for tenant-focused change in ordinances at the local level. The Commission is pursuing various means of connecting with other local governments with similar goals to expand the voice of housing advocacy beyond the City of Madison to other municipalities. This Commission will work toward engaging groups where there is natural synergy on civil rights issues affecting our community such as the City/County Homeless Issues Committee, and by working with other City commissions dealing with civil rights issues to identify any opportunities for collaboration.

The Commission will continue to support the development and expansion of innovative, alternative means for reducing homelessness in Madison. Many residents have found themselves displaced due to the pandemic, and the city has taken steps to provide resources to these populations in the form that they need them. However, there is more to be done, and the Commission is committed to elevating the voices of the affected communities to refine and scale the right solutions.

Public Health Madison Dane County has declared racism a public health crisis. The Commission would like to encourage Public Health Madison Dane County, the City of Madison Building Inspection Division, and the Department of Civil Rights to continue to work together and leverage partnerships that effectively deter discrimination and retaliation in housing, healthcare, public safety, and employment, and that combat the issue of racism at a systems and policy level. The issues of housing insecurity and unsafe housing disparately impact people of color. Public Health Madison Dane County has named housing security as one of the indicators directly impacting education and health outcomes.

The Commission also seeks to have ongoing and robust engagement with the residents of the City of Madison, and those joining the City on completion of the attachment of the Town of Madison, in offering education and outreach on the City's Equal Opportunities Ordinance, how its protections work, and what protections are available to the community. The Commission is committed to engaging new, alternative and improved ways of communicating messaging and opportunities for engagement to the public that it serves. This Commission is interested in connecting with further voices from the community including faith-based organizations and the disability community.

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Policy Recommendations:

1. Develop a proposal for the Common Council to create a Truth and Reconciliation process designed to bring voices of experts, leaders, and marginalized communities together to identify the sources of inequality within Madison and to build solutions that will create equal opportunities for all.
2. Work with the city to identify specific laws and practices that cause inequality and develop proposals to remove or modify.

Strategic Initiatives:

3. Organize a statewide coalition on housing to push for housing reform.