



## Equality for All

December 10, 2007

Today, the first session of the Saskatchewan Legislature to be led by Premier Brad Wall officially opens and Justice Minister Don Morgan has declared December 10th as Human Rights Day in Saskatchewan. But the significance of December 10th extends beyond our provincial borders to communities across Canada and around the world. It commemorates that moment back in 1948 when the founding states in the United Nations General Assembly adopted the 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights' outlining the human rights guaranteed to all people. Equality for all

At the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission, it is our privilege to carry forward the legacies of Tommy Douglas, whose vision and leadership resulted in the very first general human rights protections in North America in 1947, even before the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the first global enunciation of human rights.

The most basic of human rights include the right to a decent standard of living, to food and essential health care, to opportunities for education and decent work, and to freedom from discrimination. These are principles which most Canadians embrace. They are ideals which our peacekeeping troops strive to uphold overseas in countries like Afghanistan.

In a province as seemingly wealthy as ours, it is hard to believe that not everyone experiences the same benefits of genuine equal opportunity. Yet, at the human rights commission it is a reality we are challenged by every day.

For example, a school system designed for the needs of the dominant culture cannot provide equality of educational benefit to Aboriginal children and children of racialized groups. Work schedules and dress codes can discriminate against certain religious minorities such as Muslims, Sikhs or Jews. Health care providers cannot provide equality of service if they cannot respond to the diverse cultural, religious and language needs of their clients.

We see the impact of racism on persons because of their nationality or their heritage, and how this disadvantage multiplies when they are a person with a disability or of a certain age. Sexual orientation continues to rob qualified employees of their right to equality in employment. Violence against women cuts across income, class and culture.

Discrimination, whether intentional or not, humiliates and belittles those it is directed toward.

Last year, more than 70 percent of the complaints we received were allegations of discrimination in the workplace. Past violators of the *Code* include a construction company which failed to protect an employee from sexual harassment, an employer that terminated four staff members because of their ancestry, and a human resources department which disqualified a man because he was over 50 years of age.

For several years, the largest single group of complaints to the Commission has involved discrimination because of disability.

Discrimination isn't funny. And it isn't cheap. It hurts our communities and adds costs to our society. Settlements can range from \$1,500 paid to a man who was refused taxi service because he was accompanied by his service animal, to more than \$90,000 paid to a woman who was allegedly told she was being "punished" for being away on maternity leave. In 2007, this aggregate figure has exceeded \$300,000 in compensation for general damages, financial losses, and injury to feelings or loss of dignity.

It is our job at the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission to discourage and eliminate discrimination. We do that through our complaint system and through public and special programs, including our growing network of Equity Partners. Complaints which can't be settled but have merit are sent to the independent Saskatchewan Human Rights Tribunal, for a decision as to whether the *Code* was violated.

The right to a life free from discrimination is so important in Saskatchewan that our human rights code takes precedence over all other laws. It is also one of the reasons why we annually ask the Minister of Justice to declare December 10<sup>th</sup> as Human Rights Day in Saskatchewan. It is the one day of the year that citizens of this great province are reminded that *The Saskatchewan Human Rights Code* was enacted in 1979 to protect the individual dignity, fundamental freedoms and equal rights of all members of its human family. Saskatchewan law prohibits discrimination.

Today, as we take the time to celebrate Human Rights Day here in Saskatchewan, let us not forget that it is Human Rights Day around the world. It is one day each year when we, as global citizens, can unite together to proclaim our belief in the right to equality for all.



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