

Judiciary Committee

Public Testimony of the Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF)

H.B. 7222: *An Act Concerning the Duties of the Office of the Attorney General*

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The Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF) is a statewide, nonprofit organization that advocates for and empowers women and girls in Connecticut, especially those who are underserved or marginalized. For forty-five years, CWEALF has been a leading advocate of policy solutions that enhance women's economic security and combat discrimination at work.

Through CWEALF's Legal Education Program, we also provide information, education, referrals, and bilingual advocacy to the Connecticut community to ensure that all individuals in our state have access to legal justice. The majority of CWEALF's clients are low-income women with at least one dependent.

CWEALF urges the Committee to support H.B. 7222: *An Act Concerning the Duties of the Office of the Attorney General* to empower the Attorney General's authority to investigate allegations of civil rights violations, including hate crimes and discrimination, and to initiate legal proceedings in response to such allegations.

Women in Connecticut and around the country experience an alarming rate of harassment and violence each day, often motivated by bias, resulting in devastating consequences to victim. Over the past forty-five years, CWEALF has experienced a steady stream of requests from people who seek our services to know their rights and options regarding workplace discrimination and harassment.

Reports of hate crimes and discrimination have been on the rise across the country. In 2017 alone, Connecticut law enforcement officials reported more than 120 reported hate crime incidents.¹ Last year, the FBI reported a disturbing 17 percent increase in reported hate crimes from 6,121 in 2016² to 7,175 in 2017³. This was the third consecutive year that

¹ <https://www.ctpost.com/local/article/FBI-Conn-law-enforcement-reported-122-hate-13389043.php>

² <https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2016/tables/table-1>

³ <https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2017/tables/table-1.xls>

reported hate crimes increased, and 2017 represented the single biggest spike since the surge of incidents targeting Muslims in 2001 after the attacks on Sept. 11.⁴

House Bill No. 7222 will clarify the Attorney General's authority to investigate allegations of civil rights violations and initiate legal proceedings in response to such allegations. House Bill No. 7222 encourages the Attorney General to combat instances of discrimination and hate crimes, offenses motivated by an offender's animus against a race, religion, disability, gender, sexual orientation, or national origin, making women, people of color, and the LGBTQ+ community disproportionately vulnerable to violence and inequity.

Approximately 42 percent of working women in the United States say they have faced discrimination on the job because of their gender⁵, and about 22 percent say they have been sexually harassed at work.⁶ In fact, the number of Connecticut Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities sexual harassment complaints rose 8 percent between 2016 and 2017.⁷ In 2018, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission filed 66 lawsuits challenging workplace harassment, 41 of which alleged sexual harassment.⁸

It is high time that Connecticut joins its surrounding states of New York, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island to recognize the authority of the Attorney General to combat discrimination and stand up for vulnerable residents. These states have prioritized civil rights by way of empowering their Attorneys General to protect their citizens' most fundamental rights.

CWEALF supports H.B. 7222's authorization of the Attorney General to file civil rights lawsuits to stop systematic violations of existing constitutional and statutory rights, which largely affect women, people of color, individuals with disabilities, and the LGBTQ+ community.

⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/paloma/daily-202/2018/11/14/daily-202-hate-crimes-are-a-much-bigger-problem-than-even-the-new-fbi-statistics-show/5beba5bd1b326b39290547e2/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.4c4946154edd

⁵ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/12/14/gender-discrimination-comes-in-many-forms-for-todays-working-women/>

⁶ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/12/28/10-things-we-learned-about-gender-issues-in-the-u-s-in-2017/>

⁷ <https://www.gpsp.com/2017/11/09/chro-2016-2017-stats/>

⁸ <https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/newsroom/wysk/preventing-workplace-harassment.cfm>