

# Targeted by Anger

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Those same voices have emerged in the public opinion pages of state and local newspapers with charges such as those by Dorothy Bolduc of St. Albans: "All accused of discrimination are declared guilty until proven innocent." The consistent message from these letters has been that respondents have had to assume costs for legal counsel.

At the last of the four legislative committee meetings held on December 22 at the State House, angry respondents, all of whom had been found in violation of others' civil rights, cried foul that they were not given "a level playing field."

Essentially, they want a different set of rules for responding to charges than the rules applied in all other judicial cases. They want not to have to pay for their attorneys' fees or any other costs resulting from charges brought against them. They also object to subpoena power, charging that the HRC should not have those powers.

The Legislative Committee on Civil Rights Enforcement consists of six members: Senators Matt Krauss and Jeb Spaulding from Washington County, Senator Susan Sweetser from Chittenden County, Representatives William Lippert (Hinesburg), Sandra Baird (Burlington), and Ed Paquin (Fairfax). Paquin serves as chair. Based upon their findings, this committee will be preparing a report to their legislative colleagues.

Representative Paquin opened the fourth and last meeting with a statement that he regrets that the committee has not been able to gain enough information, including information about how other states deal with human rights issues. Senator Sweetser stated that "four meetings are not enough to do justice to this issue" and that "our report is not going to be that informative to the legislature but is only a snapshot."

Senator Krauss did not attempt to conceal his biases. "I have a lot of reservations about the Human Rights Commission, especially internally." He mentioned the recent computer virus as evidence of problems. Yet he did not ask for an explanation from Ms. Sussman, who was present at the hearing.

When asked about the virus, Ms. Sussman explained that all the information lost is in manual records and that the information will be reloaded. The virus is

the same virus which struck at St. Michael's College and the University of Vermont. The Human Rights Commission will be securing a virus detection program in an effort to prevent further disaster.

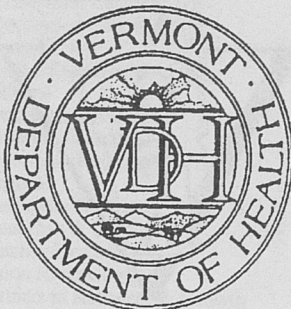
Most disturbing to many who have followed these hearings are statements such as those made by Jim Breer, one of the violators who has been very outspoken at these meetings. He stated to the committee that "I will be in the toilets if necessary" to "eliminate Susan Sussman and the Human Rights Commission membership."

Susan L. Aranoff, representing the Vermont Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights, testified that "Vermont is not yet a discrimination-free state. And until it is, we need the Human Rights Commission to continue its vital mission unfettered by mean-spirited political attacks."

Similar thoughts were expressed by Peter Youngbaer, the Executive Director of the Vermont Coalition for Disability Rights as well as by Henrietta Jordan, the Director for the Vermont Center for Independent Living. Both noted the accessibility of the Human Rights Commission and maintained that were civil rights issues to be handled by the Attorney General's office that cases would take as long as two or more years to be heard. ▼

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