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AFFIRMING AND ADVANCING RIGHTS FOR ALL

**Testimony on House Bill 706 – Human Rights for All
Submitted to the Massachusetts Joint Judiciary Committee
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June 7 2005**

Thank you Representative O’Flaherty and Senator Creedon for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of HB 706 to the Joint Judiciary Committee. Along with the bill’s sponsors, you are to be commended for enabling this landmark bill to move forward through the legislative process.

I am delighted to comment on behalf of this important legislation, which will put the Commonwealth at the forefront of a visionary national movement to strengthen the organs of governance using the principles and tools of the universal human rights system.

I write to you today in two capacities: first, I am a former resident of Massachusetts who came of age in this state and spent a majority of my adult life here engaged in various struggles for social justice as an educator, writer and activist. Second, I am a current Coordinator of the New York City Human Rights Initiative, a flourishing citywide coalition that has developed legislation that translates human rights standards into practical tools designed to promote dignity and equality in all municipal government operations.

I would like to highlight three reasons why HB 706 is not only good for the residents of Massachusetts, but is necessary if the Commonwealth and this nation are to retain their status not just as historical symbols of democracy, but as the embodiments of vibrant democratic practice.

First, human rights and good governance are inextricable and interdependent—neither can exist without the other. Human rights brings a human-centered approach to evaluating government performance and ensuring that policies and programs are responsive, efficient and fair. When government does not perform as it should, the result is ill-conceived programs, inadequate services, unjust employment policies, a culture of adversarial relations between public agencies and their constituents and/or employees and, ultimately, human rights violations that can result in costly and time-consuming litigation—wasting critical tax dollars and human energy on all sides. Anchoring our assessments of government performance in a model that centers human dignity and equality ensures that government fulfills its first and most significant obligation: *to represent and serve people*. But it also dresses this lofty goal in sensible clothing that should appeal to all who support more efficient and streamlined governance: e.g., a pro-active approach that seeks to identify problems and gaps before they

squander resources and/or cause egregious harms. Finally, human rights methodologies encourage participation of those directly effected by issues, thus facilitating a more robust participatory democracy.

Second, human rights are more than abstract “aspirational” principles. While the human rights system does lay out a virtually comprehensive vision of the basic conditions necessary for each of us to live a dignified life, it also codifies standards and provides nuts-and-bolts tools that governments can use to translate these rights into reality. Worldwide, specific human rights treaty provisions have been put to work in numerous locales and at all levels of government. Implementation has taken a plethora of forms, including review and elimination of laws that violate rights, design of new legislation that supports rights, enhanced documentation of the harmful (or helpful) impact of particular policies, development of programs that promote equality or support improved living standards (especially for marginalized populations), and shifting of fiscal or human resources, including in response to budget shortfalls, among other improvements. Here in the U.S, the cities of San Francisco and Los Angeles have already begun using CEDAW (the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women) to guide city policy, and New York City may soon follow their example using CEDAW *and* CERD (the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination). There is nothing mysterious or unattainable about translating human rights principles into concrete mechanisms and programs that will enhance the public good—it merely takes compassion, curiosity, an openness to dialogue, and the political will to change the status quo.

Third, at no time in recent history has the task of promoting human rights culture been more urgently needed at all levels of U.S. society. In dangerous times, regressive forces often resort to mobilizing fear in the service of reversing civil rights gains, scapegoating vulnerable populations and diverting essential resources away from their communities, rationalizing institutional violence and shutting down dissent. Every one of us, whether through the actions we take in our individual lives or in our roles as public servants, must contribute our share toward countering these trends. Human rights inspires us to pose different kinds of questions about who we are and what kind of world we seek to inhabit. It offers a platform for establishing our common humanity and for demanding a heightened threshold of humane behavior—from both ourselves and others. The Commonwealth, too, has a unique and invaluable role to play in this urgent project. By adopting HB 706, Massachusetts lawmakers will demonstrate the critical role of states and localities in institutionalizing human rights as a norm of governance and a fundamental requirement of humane and engaged citizenship.

Thank you for allowing me to enter my comments on this matter into the public record.