



State of Connecticut COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

450 Columbus Boulevard, Suite 2, Hartford, CT 06103

Promoting Equality and Justice for all People

Commerce Public Hearing – February 11, 2021

CHRO Testimony Regarding

SB 627 – AA Opportunity Zones

HB 5150 – AA Establishing a State Hiring Program for Recent College Graduates

HB 5614 – AA Establishing a Commission to Study the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Senator Hartley, Representative Simmons, Senator Martin, Representative Buckbee, and members of the Commerce Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present testimony regarding the following three bills.

Proposed SB 627 – AA Opportunity Zones

The Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities (CHRO) supports Proposed SB 627, which requires companies receiving Opportunity Zone Benefits or large state contracts funded by the State of Connecticut to provide internship opportunities for disadvantaged youth, local students, and other residents of the State. The CHRO also encourages the support of small banks and the Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD) support to new and small businesses opening in federally designated opportunity zones.

Internships are of significant interest to CHRO – we maintain a robust internship program with student participants ranging in age from High School through Law School. Several of our current employees were former interns. Internships provide opportunities for students to learn about a range of future employment opportunities as well as the “soft skills” involved in the work environment. Internships also help students develop networking connections that are not always available in the community. Employers benefit as well from internships; they can evaluate the skills of future employees, receive new perspectives, and get real work done. Over the past few years, more and more job opportunities begin with internships.

One important concern, however, is that too many internships are unpaid, leaving students from disadvantaged backgrounds unable to accept them because they need to earn money to support themselves, save for school, and sometimes support families. If students obtain internships in an area where they do not live, there can be additional costs of rent, food, and transportation. Internships and mentorships provided through these State-sponsored programs should provide stipends similar to working so that people who need the experiences that internships provide are not excluded from the opportunity because of financial concerns. A 2019 report of the National Association of Colleges and Employers shows significant racial and ethnic disparities in who received internships as well as who is paid versus unpaid.¹ This study, as well as studies conducted by other groups, shows that White students are more likely to be paid interns and Black students are more likely to be unpaid, whereas Hispanic students are likely to never have had internships. This bill should make sure that these inequities do not

¹ [Racial Disproportionalities Exist in Terms of Intern Representation \(naceweb.org\)](https://www.naceweb.org/racial-disproportionalities-exist-in-terms-of-intern-representation)

persist in the internships available through DECD, state contractors, and recipients of Opportunity Zone Benefits. Equal and equitable opportunities need to be available.

Finally, mentorships by DECD, CWCSEO, as proposed by this bill, can also assist in developing strong businesses in these Opportunity Zones and the employees who work for those businesses. CHRO supports this bill, with the inclusion of paid stipends for the internships.

HB 5150 – AA Establishing a State Hiring Program for Recent College Graduates

The CHRO has concerns about the language in Proposed HB 5150 establishing a program for recent college graduates in state employment. One of the protected classes enforced by the CHRO is age. Age under Connecticut statute is not defined as being at one end of the spectrum or the other. All age is protected. Any discriminatory hiring decision based on age would be a violation of the discrimination statutes. By using the term “recent college graduates” the enactment of the statute would limit by age who would be eligible to apply for this program as most recent college graduates are young in age. The CHRO is currently litigating several cases where an employer used these terms in its job advertisements. Using the term recent college graduate has a disparate impact on older workers who would be excluded by this program as they are likely not recent college graduates.

The CHRO cannot support this bill as proposed as it has a disparate impact on the protected class of age.

HB 5614 – AA Establishing a Commission to Study the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The CHRO strongly supports Proposed HB 5614 and the establishment of a commission to study the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The impacts of the pandemic have been felt across society, but nowhere more devastatingly than by women and communities of color. Women are far more likely than men to have needed to drop out of the workforce due to the economic impact of the pandemic. Due to longstanding disparities and inequities in the healthcare system, people in Black and brown communities have been more likely to get the virus, die from the virus, and are now less likely to have access to the vaccine to be protected from the virus. These are just a few of the many examples of the gender and racial disparities that the COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare.

As the state entity that enforces the state’s antidiscrimination laws and aims to eliminate discrimination while promoting equity, the Commission has worked throughout the pandemic to illuminate the disparate impacts the pandemic has had on women and on Black and brown communities. If this bill is drafted, the CHRO respectfully requests that it be given a seat on the commission established by the legislation to ensure that the needs of every stakeholder and resident of Connecticut are considered.