
**Testimony of JoAnn Kamuf Ward
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New York City Commission on Human Rights
Before the Committee on Civil and Human Rights
April 28, 2026**

Introduction

Good morning, Chair Nurse and members of the Committee on Civil and Human Rights. My name is JoAnn Kamuf Ward and I am Deputy Commissioner of Policy and External Affairs at the New York City Commission on Human Rights (“CCHR” or “the Commission”). Joining me today for questions is Hillary Scrivani, Director of Policy and Adjudications. Thank you for convening today’s hearing. CCHR is excited to speak about our ongoing commitment to advancing Fair Chance protections in employment and housing – amendments the Commission has staunchly supported for decades.

The NYC Human Right Law’s protections against discrimination on the basis of criminal history are groundbreaking. Today, we will speak about how the Commission educates New Yorkers about their expanded rights and works with housing providers and employers so they know and comply with evolving obligations. Since the passage of the Fair Chance employment protections in 2015, and its subsequent amendments, the Commission has continued to develop new initiatives to address this pervasive type of discrimination. I will begin with our dual mandate and then turn more specifically to the provisions of the Law and the agency’s efforts.

The New York City Human Rights Law

The Commission is charged with enforcing the New York City Human Rights Law (the “Law” or “City Human Rights Law”). The Law is one of the strongest local civil rights laws in the nation and reflects a clear principle: all New Yorkers deserve to live, work, and thrive in our city, free from discrimination. The City Human Rights Law prohibits discrimination in housing, employment, and places of public accommodations across more than 25 protected categories. Individuals who believe their rights have been violated can come to the Commission or file claims in court.

Since its inception, the Commission has been responsible for preventing discrimination through education, outreach, and partnerships.

The Commission’s enforcement authority was strengthened in direct response to patterns of discrimination that excluded Black and Latino New Yorkers from accessing housing. That legacy continues to guide our work today. The agency investigates allegations of discrimination, initiates Commission-initiated actions where appropriate, seeks resolution through mediation, and prosecutes violations to ensure accountability and meaningful relief.

Fair Chance Protections

The Fair Chance frameworks in the New York City Human Rights Law are a vital part of our mission to expand access to opportunity. They reflect the principle that past interaction with the criminal legal system should not be a permanent barrier to housing or employment. They also recognize that background checks are not always reliable and provide New Yorkers the ability to respond when errors show up as part of their applications.

Employment Protections

Addressing discrimination on the basis of criminal history has been a longstanding priority for the Commission. Since the 1970s, the agency has had joint enforcement authority with the State Division on Human Rights over Correction Law Article 23-A, which limits how criminal history can be used in employment decisions.

In 2015, the Fair Chance Employment Act passed, prohibiting most NYC employers, labor organizations, and employment agencies from considering a job applicant's criminal history until after a conditional offer of employment has been made, or referencing criminal histories in job advertisements and applications. While criminal history can be taken into account in limited circumstances, the Fair Chance employment protections guarantee that job applicants receive an individualized assessment and require employers to demonstrate a specific connection between a particular conviction and the position.

In 2019, these vital protections were expanded to cover current employees and additional types of case dispositions.

The Fair Chance Employment protections ensure that qualified applicants are evaluated based on their skills and ability to perform a job, rather than being automatically excluded. By enhancing access to employment, these protections can support economic mobility, family stability, and successful reentry.

The Commission enforces these protections through investigations, outreach, trainings, and engagement with employers across sectors.

Housing Protections

Stable housing is foundational to dignity, health, and economic security. Fair Chance Housing protections ensure that individuals do not face categorical or permanent exclusion from housing based on past legal system involvement or a criminal record.

The Fair Chance Housing Act requires that New Yorkers be considered for housing based on their current circumstances and eligibility. Housing providers cannot discuss criminal history in housing ads or applications. While the Law does not strictly prohibit background checks, the Fair Chance Housing Act requires two important things: (1) that if a housing provider does a criminal background check it must be the last part of the application process and (2) that before a candidate can be turned away, the housing provider must conduct an individualized analysis and provide a legitimate business reason to deny an applicant housing.



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By promoting individualized review and transparent decision-making, these protections help create the conditions necessary for employment, family reunification, treatment continuity, and long-term community safety.

The Commission worked closely with City Council and advocates on the passage of Fair Chance Housing protections; and we continue to collaborate with partners with experience in reentry, including the Fair Chance Housing Coalition, the Fortune Society, and Osborne Association. This ensures that our outreach and education efforts reflect lived experience.

Education and Outreach

The Commission seeks to prevent discrimination before it occurs through education, outreach, and technical assistance. The Commission provides guidance, trainings, and direct engagement to workers, tenants, employers, housing providers, community-based organizations, and advocates across the five boroughs so that New Yorkers understand their rights and responsibilities under the City Human Rights Law.

This proactive work is especially important in the Fair Chance context, where compliance depends on awareness of procedural requirements, lawful screening practices, and individualized review standards. By expanding understanding, and promoting compliance on the front end, education and outreach make the protections of the Law meaningful in everyday practice.

The Commission's outreach and engagement on the Fair Chance Housing Act reflects this approach. Ahead of the Law's effective date, the agency engaged with advocates, sibling agencies, and housing providers to develop comprehensive information and launch the "*Break Down Barriers to Housing*" campaign, ushering in awareness of the Fair Chance Housing Law. CCHR distributed resources at outreach events, ran digital social media and link kiosk ads, and placed posters in convenience stores across the five boroughs in multiple languages.

In FY25, the Commission created an in-house training and trained staff internally to prepare for enforcement of the Fair Chance Housing Law. CCHR also created a free Fair Chance Housing training, available by request to all New Yorkers, ensuring that renters, buyers, and providers alike understand and comply with these historic protections. Fair Chance protections are also included in our most frequently offered training, "*Human Rights Law 101*," as well as in our continuing education training for real estate brokers.

Strong education and outreach support awareness and compliance with the aim of reducing violations of the Law, which complements the Commission's enforcement work.

Enforcement

When the Commission receives information suggesting potential violations of Fair Chance protections, it may launch investigations to determine whether employers or housing providers have engaged in unlawful screening practices, or done premature background checks, failed to provide required notices, or other discriminatory conduct.

The Commission also utilizes testing as an important civil rights enforcement tool, particularly in employment to identify discrimination that may otherwise go unreported.



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During the first year of Fair Chance Housing implementation, the Commission has prioritized outreach and education. As we look forward, we anticipate that like in employment, fair chance housing enforcement will result in settlements, including agreements and policy changes to prevent future discrimination

Conclusion

Fair Chance protections embody a fundamental promise of the City Human Rights Law: that every New Yorker deserves to be treated fairly. Access to employment and housing creates the stability that strengthens families, supports reentry, and advances public safety. The Commission remains committed to pairing vigorous enforcement with proactive education, so these rights are meaningful in practice. We thank the Committee for its partnership and look forward to continuing this important work together. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. We look forward to answering your questions.