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Global/Local Communities Neighborhoods Work & Economy Politics & Policy Arts & Lifestyle Opinion Special Sections

Communities mobilize to preserve human rights funding



Kevin Lindsey, Commissioner for the Minnesota Department of Human Rights

BY HARRY COLBERT, JR., [INSIGHT NEWS](#)
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If the republican-controlled state legislature has its way, the Minn. Dept. of Human Rights (MDHR) could have its budget slashed by as much as 65 percent.

This is despite the fact that the current state deficit is at about 13 percent and most other cuts proposed by the house and senate are coming in at between four and six percent. In dollars, the MDHR could lose between \$1.55 million and \$2.1 million of its annual operating capital if the cuts take effect.

A group of nearly 30 concerned citizens and civic leaders representing various organizations gathered at the offices of the Lao Family Community of Minnesota to hear directly from the MDHR commissioner, Kevin Lindsey, who said human rights departments throughout the nation have been under constant attack.

"What's going on is a coordinated effort to limit the effectiveness of human rights departments across this nation," said Lindsey, who said his department is already stretched to the gills.

According to Lindsey, by statute under the state's Human Rights Act, the MDHR is supposed to investigate any claim brought to the department within 365 days. "Currently, it's taking more than 400 days to complete an investigation into probable cause findings. Any further cuts to (the department's) budget would make it impossible to comply with the statute," said Lindsey, who was appointed this past February by Gov. Mark Dayton to head the MDHR.

Though the legislature is proposing the steep cuts, Lindsey said any such cuts will be vetoed by the governor. The governor's proposed budget calls for the MDHR budget to remain at current funding levels. "The governor is steadfast in his commitment to our office and realizes the importance of having an adequately funded department of human rights," said Lindsey.

Over the years, the MDHR has seen its funding steadily decrease. "When you visit the MDHR, it's striking to see the number of empty offices," said Lindsey.

Some proponents of the cuts believe the MDHR is redundant as it serves essentially the function as the Equal Opportunity Employment Commission (EEOC). According to Lindsey, these claims are not accurate. He said the EEOC is only charged with issues of employment, whereas the department of human rights, in addition to employment, also deals with issues of fair housing, education, public accommodations and more. "And also know; currently there's a backlog of more than 86,000 cases over at the EEOC," said Lindsey.

Louis King, founder of HIRE Minnesota and president of Summit Academy OIC said the community will not stand for any cuts to the MDHR budget. "I think we have the right governor in place to move our agenda forward. We're going to the mat on this one," said King. "You can't deny my people work and then wonder why they're on the 6 o'clock news starving."

Mel Reeves, who spoke at the meeting, said a fully-funded MDHR is a must. "The situation is dire. It's not time for a check-up, it's time to go to the emergency room for blacks in Minnesota," said Reeves.

The legislature is expected to present its final budget to the governor by May 23.

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