



## *The Canadian Human Rights Act: a Guide*

*"Every individual should have an equal opportunity with other individuals to make for himself or herself the life that he or she is able and wishes to have, consistent with his or her duties and obligations as a member of society."*

*(Section 2)*

- family status,
- mental or physical disability (including previous or present drug or alcohol dependence),
- pardoned conviction, or
- sexual orientation.

### **What is discrimination?**

Discrimination means treating people differently, negatively or adversely without a good reason.

As used in human rights laws, discrimination means making a distinction between certain individuals or groups based on a prohibited ground.

### **Grounds for action**

Under the Canadian Human Rights Act, it is against the law for any employer or provider of service that falls within federal jurisdiction to make unlawful distinctions based on the following prohibited grounds:

- race,
- national or ethnic origin,
- colour,
- religion,
- age,
- sex (including pregnancy and childbirth),
- marital status,

### **You are protected**

Everyone is protected by the Canadian Human Rights Act in dealings with the following employers and service providers:

- federal departments, agencies and Crown corporations
- Canada Post
- chartered banks
- national airlines
- interprovincial communications and telephone companies
- interprovincial transportation companies
- other federally regulated industries, such as certain mining operations

All provinces and territories have similar laws forbidding discrimination in their areas of jurisdiction.



---

## **Discriminatory acts**

The Canadian Human Rights Act deals with discriminatory behaviour in its various forms:

- differential treatment of an individual or a group of individuals based on a prohibited ground;
- all forms of harassment;
- systemic discrimination — a seemingly neutral policy or practice which in fact is discriminatory.

The following are examples:

### *Employment*

- A person cannot be denied a job because of a disability that does not affect job performance or that can be accommodated.

### *Employment applications and advertisements*

- Federally regulated employers cannot include requirements that are not clearly related to the job, such as previous Canadian experience.

### *Equal pay*

- A job performed mostly by women cannot be paid less than a job of equal value done mostly by men. Examples of jobs that might be of equal value are nursing assistants and electricians, or secretaries and maintenance staff.

## *Employee organizations*

- Due to provisions in certain collective agreements, some unions enjoy a monopoly on referring job applicants to employers. It is a discriminatory act for such unions to exclude designated group candidates as referrals.

## *Provision of goods and services*

- A bank cannot ask a married woman for her spouse's signature when applying for a loan.

## *Accommodation*

- An individual unable to work certain days for religious reasons may not be denied employment unless the employer can demonstrate that it would cause undue hardship.

## *Discriminatory notices*

- A poster that encourages discrimination is illegal.

## *Hate messages*

- Pre-recorded telephone hate messages are forbidden.

## *Harassment*

- Making demeaning comments because of the person's colour, ethnic origin, age, disability, sex, or any of the grounds in an employment or service situation, is prohibited under the Act.



---

## Exceptions

The Act provides for exceptions such as:

### *Bona fide occupational requirement*

- A job may be refused to a person who cannot perform it safely, efficiently and reliably.

### *Bona fide justification*

- A service may be refused to a person when it cannot be offered without undue costs.

### *Equal pay guidelines*

- A difference in wages between men and women performing work of equal value in an establishment may be justified by different performance ratings, seniority, red-circling, training and rehabilitation assignments, internal labour shortages and surpluses and regional wage rates.

### *Maternity and child care*

- An employer can grant workers special leave or benefits in connection with pregnancy or childbirth, or for the care of their children.

### *Mandatory retirement*

- A worker can be retired at the age that is “normal” for the kind of work involved.

### *Age guidelines*

- Lower transportation fares are permitted for children and senior citizens.

## Access for all

### *Special programs*

- The Canadian Human Rights Act, like the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, makes provisions for special programs designed to end long-standing disadvantages and prevent them from happening again. A special program can be something as simple as a training program for workers from a disadvantaged group, or a comprehensive employment equity plan.

### *Accessibility*

- The Canadian Human Rights Act recognizes that persons with disabilities must have access to premises, services and facilities.

### *Accommodation plans*

- Employers and those who offer goods, services, facilities and accommodations are encouraged to draw up plans for adapting to the needs of persons with disabilities. Such a plan could include wheelchair accessibility. If a plan has been approved by the Canadian Human Rights Commission, and if it is being followed, the plan provides employers with a defence against complaints.

## The Canadian Human Rights Commission

The Canadian Human Rights Commission administers the Canadian Human Rights Act, and ensures that the principles of equal opportunity and non-discrimination are followed in all areas of federal jurisdiction.



The Commission, composed of two full-time and up to six part-time commissioners, meets regularly to decide on individual complaints and approve Commission policies.

The mandate of the Commission includes:

- investigating complaints of discrimination in employment and in provision of services based on the grounds enumerated in the Act;
- investigating complaints alleging inequities in pay between men and women who are performing work of equal value;
- auditing and, when necessary, taking action to ensure employers' compliance with the Employment Equity Act, which applies to the federal public service, as well as federal Crown corporations and federally regulated companies employing 100 or more people;
- monitoring programs, policies and legislation affecting designated groups (women, Aboriginal peoples, visible minorities and persons with disabilities) to ensure that their human rights are protected;
- developing and conducting information programs to promote public understanding of the act and of the role and activities of the Commission.

## Complaints

When a complaint is filed with the Canadian Human Rights Commission, it follows the process described below. At each stage, an attempt is made to settle the complaint. If it is not resolved, it moves to the next stage in the process. The complaint may also be dismissed at any stage, and

either party can appeal to a Review Tribunal or higher court.

- Is the Commission the right agency to handle your complaint? If no, it is referred to another agency that might help. If yes, the complaint is accepted for investigation.
- An investigation begins. The Commission acts in the public interest by impartially investigating the allegation of discrimination. Sometimes it results in an early settlement to which both parties agree.
- If the complaint cannot be settled, a report is prepared for Commission review.
- The Commission can appoint a conciliator to attempt to resolve the complaint, send the complaint to a Human Rights Tribunal, or dismiss the complaint, usually because there is not enough evidence to support the allegation.
- The conciliator tries to settle the complaint. If unsuccessful, the case may be sent to a Human Rights Tribunal.
- The Tribunal reviews the complaint and makes a decision. It will either dismiss the complaint or order compensation. That decision can be appealed to a Review Tribunal or the Federal Court.
- The Review Tribunal or Federal court hears the appeal and makes a decision. The decision can be appealed by either party.
- The Supreme Court makes the final decision.



---


## **Remedies**

Remedies for complainants may be realized at any stage of the process (early settlement, conciliation agreement or tribunal decision).

Remedies include:

- reinstatement and/or compensation for lost wages
- letters of apology
- issuance of an anti-harassment policy by an employer

## **Right to protection**

The Canadian Human Rights Act provides for fines of up to \$50,000 for threatening, intimidating or discriminating against an individual who has filed a complaint, or for hampering an investigation. The Commission can also investigate and deal with complaints of retaliation against persons who file a complaint. 



---

***For more information or assistance, call the office  
of the Canadian Human Rights Commission  
nearest you.***

***Atlantic***

*Halifax:* (902) 426-8380  
Toll Free: 1-800-999-6899  
TTY: 1-888-643-3304  
Fax: (902) 426-2685

***Quebec***

*Montreal:* (514) 283-5218  
Toll Free: 1-800-999-6899  
TTY: 1-888-643-3304  
Fax: (514) 283-5084

***Ontario***

*Toronto:* (416) 973-5527  
Toll Free: 1-800-999-6899  
TTY: 1-888-643-3304  
Fax: (416) 973-6184

***Prairies***

(Manitoba, Saskatchewan and  
Northwestern Ontario)  
*Winnipeg:* (204) 983-2189  
Toll Free: 1-800-999-6899  
TTY: 1-888-643-3304  
Fax: (204) 983-6132

***Alberta and Northwest Territories***

*Edmonton:* (403) 495-4040  
Toll Free: 1-800-999-6899  
TTY: 1-888-643-3304  
Fax: (403) 495-4044

***British Columbia and Yukon***

*Vancouver:* (604) 666-2251  
Toll Free: 1-800-999-6899  
TTY: 1-888-643-3304  
Fax: (604) 666-2386

***National Capital***

344 Slater Street, 8<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 1E1  
Phone: (613) 995-1151  
Toll Free: 1-888-214-1090  
TTY: 1-888-643-3304  
Fax: (613) 996-9661

Internet: [www.chrc-ccdp.ca](http://www.chrc-ccdp.ca)  
E-mail: [info.com@chrc-ccdp.ca](mailto:info.com@chrc-ccdp.ca)

*This publication is available as a sound recording, in  
large print, in braille and on computer diskette to ensure it  
is accessible to people who are blind or vision-impaired.*

November 1998