

Human Relations Department: Building bridges

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Measuring the status of human relations in Winston-Salem is a tough job, said Herman L. Aldridge, the director of the city's Department of Human Relations.

Aldridge is more concerned with, and talkative about, the specific areas his office is working on to improve them.

"The state of human relations in the city is difficult to gauge, because it's hard to determine attitudes," Aldridge said during an interview in his office last Friday. "But I can tell you the areas we are moving forward in."

His department seeks to improve human relations by solving human problems, Aldridge said.

"We base our programs on a foundation of research to find problems and then find some way to solve them," he said. "I think we've made a difference in that respect."

Aldridge outlined four major areas the department, which was created in 1978 by a vote of the Board of Aldermen, seeks to address.

The department, and the 21-member Human Relations

Commission, which determines its direction, were charged with fighting discrimination through communication, employment, youth training and conflict resolution.

Aldridge, who has directed the department since 1979 after serving 10 years as a human relations consultant for the state, said the department's focus has remained consistent.

Today, he said, it educates, researches problems, investigates complaints and forms support groups to pursue those objectives.

"We talk with groups on self-awareness, community awareness, civil rights, human rights, problem-solving and communications," Aldridge said. "We put on about 30 workshops a year."

Special events include February's Human Relations Month and the current Fair Housing Month, he said. The department also sponsors an annual awards banquet, with a focus on youth, in February.

"We get the schools and parents involved because one of our great concerns is for youth to understand human relations and to apply what they learn,"

Aldridge said.

At the banquet, students from schools throughout the county are honored for exemplifying an understanding of good human relations. Aldridge said he hopes to develop a leadership workshop for youth from the program.

The department conducts research primarily through studies and public hearings, Aldridge said. The commission, through each of its 10 subcommittees, studies problems and, where necessary, holds hearings to explore all angles of a problem. The commission then makes recommendations to the Board of Aldermen.

It recently held public hearings on housing code enforcement. One of the commission's subcommittees studied problems with getting landlords to comply with code violations and recommended changes in the code to speed up the process. The commission held a public hearing at the Martin Luther King Recreation Center to seek community input.

The commission also has a seven-member Fair Housing Hearing Board which hears housing complaints not resolved at the staff level.

The department receives complaints in employment, housing, public accommodations and credit. Last year, the largest number of complaints were in the first two categories.

Aldridge said the department responded to 195 complaints in housing, 181 in employment and 24 in other areas. An additional 468 requested telephone assistance.

The complaints are broken down into two categories: discrimination, which involves a violation of the law, and grievances, where a person is treated unfairly but no actual law is broken. All complaints are handled at the staff level, if possible. If not, further action is taken.

The Board of Aldermen, on the recommendation of the Hearing Board, decided to file suit in February against a local real estate company in one housing discrimination suit. Another housing discrimination case will go before the Hearing Board soon, Aldridge said.

Employment discrimination cases are referred to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in Washington.

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Human Relations Department Director Herman Aldridge says the key to improving human relations is through solving problems and education (photo by James Parker).

Housing

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plagues us still in the '80s. It often goes undetected and many victims are, unfortunately, unaware of their recourses. Discriminatory practices have become more sophisticated and more subtle. Still, as bleak as our past has been, we have made great progress."

Fulton said current statistics indicate that the national HUD office receives approximately 4,000 fair housing complaints each year. But he said that the actual number of abuses is probably higher and includes many cases that go unreported. Fulton said many cases are reported because "perhaps people have lost confidence in the system that is designed to support fair housing."

Ensuring total compliance with fair housing laws, Fulton said, is not the sole responsibility of the government. Instead, he said the general public must bear some of the responsibility for encouraging fair housing practices.

"The government alone cannot wipe out discrimination," he said. "In fact, it should not be their responsibility alone. An individual commitment is an absolute necessity. HUD has committed to provide training, counseling and support for litigation. We're working to enforce voluntary and forced compliance. It requires greater support and Winston-Salem is a very, very significant part of that process."

Herman L. Aldridge, director of the city's Human Relations Department, said the setting aside of a month to focus on fair housing brings attention to federal and local housing concerns.

"We're all serious about making fair housing a reality for all of us," Aldridge said.

Other activities scheduled for Fair Housing Month include a 7 p.m. panel discussion April 10 on the city's role in fair housing. The program will be held at the Glade Street YWCA with the city's aldermen as the principal panelists.

A seminar on the implications of fair housing laws will be held April 16 from 1 to 3 p.m. at the Main Public Library and there will be a closing awards ceremony April 24 at 7 p.m. at the Sawtooth Building. The ceremony will recognize student winners of a fair housing poster contest.

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