

## Statement of the Phoenixville Human Relations Commission

March 3, 2025

Honorable Members of the West Vincent Twp. Board of Supervisors:

We are here on behalf of the Phoenixville Human Relations Commission to provide a statement ~~in support of retaining~~ the West Vincent Township Human Relations Commission and the township's anti-discrimination ordinance.

In Phoenixville, we believe all individuals deserve dignity and respect, and the opportunity to live in an inclusive, fair, and supportive community. Our anti-discrimination ordinance and the Human Relations Commission it created form the basis of a community value statement that reflects this belief. By supporting a locally run HRC and dedicated local ordinance, Phoenixville not only articulates but actively embodies these principles, empowering residents to engage in meaningful dialogue, foster relationships, and address community challenges together.

Through the HRC, we work to help people from diverse groups with differing interests or identities understand that their shared values and experiences unite them as members of the Phoenixville community. A *locally run* human relations commission, led by engaged folks with deep community interests, creates the necessary space to instill this collective identity. Here are a few ways the Phoenixville HRC works to support this collective identity among our residents:

- Mediating and providing resources to address situations of perceived bias or conflict in our community, even when formal discrimination complaints were not filed.
- Bringing together leaders from marginalized communities with Borough officials for proactive conversations, to prevent misunderstandings and ensure all voices are heard.
- Assessing our community along external benchmarks, including the Human Rights Campaign's national Municipal Equality Index, an assessment tool that will help showcase Phoenixville's character as a welcoming community throughout the region.

We believe only a *locally run* HRC — built on neighbor-to-neighbor interactions and accountability — is equipped to empower a community to work together to solve its problems using bottom-up solutions. Removing or undermining this local structure will invite more top-down mandates that may fail to understand or address the unique needs and challenges of West Vincent Township.

A *locally run* HRC acts as connective tissue between elected officials and the community they serve, engaging community stakeholders to identify local concerns and providing space to workshop a means to address them. And a *locally run* HRC can only do the work of strengthening its community if it has the legitimacy and authority to make its community aware, recruit the right people, and empower them to serve the mission. In Phoenixville, our HRC is empowered to engage with community stakeholders proactively and to raise awareness of the HRC as a resource for our community.

In Phoenixville, formal community outreach takes place through efforts like printing and distributing flyers, tabling at public events, and attending meetings of other community groups. This helps us build relationships that create a pipeline for recruiting new HRC members, and opens channels of communication, which can be used as issues arise. We've seen several instances where the relationships built through community outreach have helped us learn about and address concerns constructively, without requiring formal complaints.

For example, when a community member raised concerns about wheelchair accessibility at a local business, the individual felt comfortable approaching the HRC to voice their concerns. We supported the community member in addressing the issue directly with the business owner, and the two parties came to an amicable resolution that addressed the initial concern to both of their satisfaction. Similarly, when members of our community reached out to us about improving the police response to mental health crises, we were able to invite members of our local force to the table to discuss their training and response procedures. Even though policing is outside of the HRC's direct scope, we were able to serve as a conduit for community concerns, and demonstrate that there is a municipal body with the mission and capacity to take such important issues on, as a primary concern. The fact that community members know they can come to the HRC with their concerns is a huge asset and opportunity – both for our residents, and for the Borough government.

These examples show how the HRC serves as a valuable community resource, fostering understanding and positive change through dialogue rather than solely responding to formal complaints. This proactive approach allows greater access for community members than the legal system alone, while building stronger relationships between businesses, residents, and local government.

We understand that the political landscape can sometimes seem unpredictable but it is precisely in times of uncertainty that local governance and community-driven initiatives like the HRC become more vital. We cannot afford to allow decisions about our community to be dictated by external political pressures. Only by maintaining local authority can we ensure our voices, needs, and values are represented in the most meaningful ways.

We urge you to consider the long-term well-being and unity of the community when making this decision. The work of the HRC is not just about addressing problems as they arise, but about building a future where all people, regardless of background, can thrive together in a fair and just society.

We appreciate the opportunity to share our perspective and hope you will continue to support the West Vincent Township HRC.