

Griffin of Rights Commission

North of the Alaskan Range, the State of Alaska Human Rights Commission Fairbanks Office is charged with the vast responsibility of investigating complaints of discrimination in jobs, housing and public accom-

modations.

The Fairbanks field representative is one of a tiny staff of three professional personnel responsible for the entire state. Human Rights Commission executive director Robert Willard and one investigator staff the Anchorage office.

In Fairbanks, Ernest Griffin, appointed November 9, 1971 by the Governor, staffs his office without even the benefit of

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ERNEST GRIFFIN

Rights Commission...

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a secretary—the budget isn't there.

Griffin, a resident of Fairbanks since 1950 has been a member of the State Human Rights Commission for almost the complete eight years of its existence.

Born in Belzonia, Mississippi 45 years ago, Griffin served as Chairman of the Human Rights Commission for one year, two years as a member of the Fairbanks Human Relations Council, and as an organizer for the Fairbanks branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored people.

"I would like to have an opportunity to talk to any native or native group to discuss their problems and their possible solutions as they relate to the Human Rights Commission," said Griffin.

Persons can file official complaints if they feel they have been discriminated against on the basis of race, religion, color, sex, national origin or physical handicap.

Many natives are hesitant about going to the Human Rights Commission with a complaint Griffin says.

"Often, they do not know the law or that redress is possible—or that reporting cases of discrimination is important."

Often, natives are afraid to get involved in the judicial system.

Generally, when someone comes into a Human Rights Commission office with a complaint he will talk to the staff investigator. If the story sounds like something the Commission can look into, the person will be asked to file an official complaint. This will be forwarded to the Executive Director for review. Then, the commission will make a thorough investigation.

What do they look for?

"Generally, we try to put together a pattern of some type," Griffin explained.

If an employer is charged with discrimination, the investigator will look through the company's employment records. He will try to ascertain who did apply, what were their qualifications, and why were they excluded.

Also, he will find out how long a policy has been in effect. If minorities have been employed within a reasonable amount of time, the report will show "no cause"—no provable discrimination.

Sometimes, the Commission will make recommendations even if they cannot prove a complaint—because some evidence is there. In these cases the report is not binding. If a Commission report shows cause their recommendations are binding—enforced by possible fines and/or jail sentences.

In the housing market, there is not much discrimination against blacks and natives in the Fairbanks area, Griffin reports, but there is some. In low income housing, a commodity in drastically short supply in the city, there is no discrimina-

tion. Blacks and natives are competing for a few available units.

Griffin plans to travel into northern Alaska frequently both to investigate reports of discrimination and to speak to any group which wishes to learn more about the Human Rights Commission.

"I can travel to just about any village to address a group which has invited me," Griffin said.

Much of his business is just that—speaking to groups of natives, of blacks or other minorities to inform them of how the Commission can serve them—and how they must help the Commission by reporting cases of discrimination.

On still another front, the Human Rights Commission has been working towards expanding job opportunities for minority group members. One problem, which they cannot attack directly, is state jobs—which are outside the sphere of the Commission.

"Look at how many job descriptions for state jobs require Masters degrees," Griffin pointed out.

State hiring requirements, he found are much more restrictive than federal ones, often requiring amounts of education which automatically disqualify members of low income groups. In order to change this, he suggested, a thorough study is needed to see what each employee actually does—and what training he needs.

Meanwhile, a tiny human rights staff must attempt to tackle all of these problems. Right now, the Fairbanks office has no salary for a secretary—letters don't get sent out and travel is almost impossible (nobody to mind the store). A budget of \$125,000 funds the entire Commission—wholly inadequate to their task.

"If I'm away, as it now stands," Griffin commented, "I have to close up."