

## Crisis at the EEOC?

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Budget cuts and staff shortages are preventing the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) from properly investigating and litigating workplace-discrimination cases, according to labor unions and some advocacy-group leaders.

"The EEOC is in a state of crisis and is being systematically weakened from within, to justify its elimination," said Andrea Brooks, national vice president, American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), who spearheaded Tuesday's press conference in Washington, D.C.

An EEOC spokesperson acknowledged a growing backlog of cases but said the EEOC remains committed to the vigorous enforcement of the laws prohibiting employment discrimination.

In fiscal 2003, the EEOC had a backlog of 29,368 cases. In fiscal 2007, the backlog is expected to be more than 47,000 cases, a 37 percent increase.

"The EEOC's pending inventory of cases remains at a manageable level, below projections," said Charles Robbins, EEOC spokesperson, adding that the EEOC closed the second quarter of fiscal year 2006 with an inventory of some 39,000 cases.

The EEOC has lost 20 percent of its work force and a hiring freeze has been in effect since 2001. The agency's budget projections indicate its backlog of cases will grow, even as it faces another round of cuts totaling \$4 million.

"Cutting funds from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission is like taking a homeless persons coat in the middle of winter. It makes an already bad situation much worse," said Kim Gandy, president, National Organization for Women.

Brooks said the problems at the EEOC don't just affect people of color and women.

"When you think of EEOC, you think about women complaining about discrimination and you think about minorities. But the EEOC is much more than that" said Brooks, adding that the largest group of discrimination claims is for ageism and disability. Twenty percent of the 75,428 discrimination charges filed in fiscal year 2005 with the EEOC were age-discrimination cases.

Some question the EEOC's commitment. "It is completely illogical and an absolute outrage that the Bush administration would respond to this [crisis] with a reform plan that

further eviscerates the very agency which millions of Americans rely upon to ensure fairness and equality on the job," said Edward F. Coyle, executive director, Alliance for Retired Americans.