

# Monroe County human relations advisory panel to hold its first meeting

By [Andrew Scott](#)

Pocono Record Writer

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STROUDSBURG — Since 2003, 31 incidents involving discrimination, harassment or hate crimes have been reported in Monroe County, according to the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission in Harrisburg.

In fiscal year 2004-05, of the state's 67 counties, Monroe reported the ninth highest number of such incidents, according to the PHRC.

Some in the local community fear these incidents will increase along with the population's size and racial diversity.

That's why the Monroe County Advisory Council to the PHRC has formed and will have its first meeting Aug. 25 at 7 p.m. in the Hughes Eastern Monroe Public Library in Stroud Township.

The PHRC has advisory councils in other counties. Prior to the one in Monroe, the most recent formed was in Northampton County about 20 years ago.

"Advisory councils are our eyes and ears in the counties they serve and are made up of residents of those communities," said PHRC education and community services supervisor Martin Kearney. "Given Monroe County's unique position, we felt it would be good to have an advisory council there to give us insight on any concerns and ideas to address those concerns."

The strategy for addressing a problem depends on the problem itself, be it a discrimination complaint, hate crime or anything else that might cause racial tension in the community, such as Mount Pocono considering its own version of Hazleton's immigration control ordinance, Kearney said. For example, if the Ku Klux Klan or a similar organization decided to hold a march or rally here, the advisory council can work with the PHRC on planning a unity or anti-hate rally to counter that event.

Monroe's advisory council is chaired by community activist Robert Hillman of East Stroudsburg, who is well known to the PHRC and has been involved with the Unity Coalition.

The advisory council differs from the Unity Coalition in that the council is part of a broader network that goes beyond this area and is limited in the number of members it can have.

The council is made up of 18 black, white and Latino residents with experience in education, law enforcement, criminal justice, civil rights activism and other areas.

"One major issue we'll be focusing on is education," said Hillman. "The number of students of color in our public schools keeps going up, but we have almost no teachers or guidance counselors of color. We'd also like to see more school programs dealing with cultural diversity."

Council member Joseph Smoke, who lives in East Stroudsburg and teaches in the Bangor School District, said, "I got involved in this to see what the issues are. I'm sure a lot of good can come out of this."

Another issue is racial tension.

"There's a dichotomy in this society between what should be and what is," said council member and former New Jersey civil rights attorney Silvia A. Brandon-Perez of Mount Pocono, who wrote a recent letter to the editor criticizing the stereotyping and unfair treatment of Latinos in light of recent immigration concerns.

"People, gays, lesbians and transgenders as well as those of color, feel under-represented," Brandon-Perez said. "There are a lot of young people who are angry over the way they're being treated. This community needs help. The advisory council is an idea whose time has come."

A third goal, in light of recent news coverage on whether or not gangs exist in the Poconos, is finding ways to keep children from falling prey to negative influences.

"Parents bring their children here to keep them out of the trouble they might have gotten into in the more urban neighborhoods they came from," Hillman said. "But, parents spend most of their time away from home at their city jobs, leaving the children alone on their own. With no one around and not much in the Poconos to do when not in school, is it any wonder some of these kids get into the very trouble their parents were trying to keep them out of?"

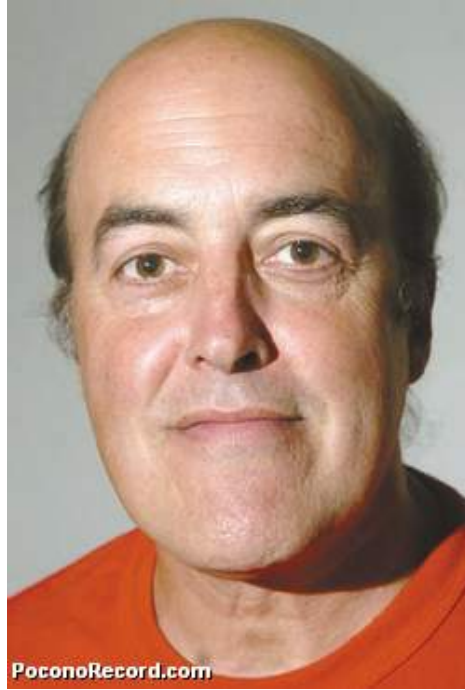
Hillman noted there are many children spending their free time in positive, productive ways and adults working to keep youngsters on the right path. But, more needs to be done for youths considered at risk and not getting the help they need, he said.

"Despite our problems, the Poconos is still a healthy place to live," Hillman said. "Too often, we see the negative images. The whole purpose of this is to show the more positive side and show that we're working to promote better relations between people."

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"I'm sure a lot of good can come out of this," Joseph Smoke, Advisory council member.  
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Robert Hillman of East Stroudsburg is the Chairman of the Monroe County Advisory Council to the Human Relations Commission.

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