Advancing Opportunity and Equality Through Human Rights

Risa E. Kaufman
Human Rights Institute, Columbia Law School
“Human Rights are Universal, but their experience is local.”

-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton
What is meant by “international human rights?”

- Standards
- Strategies
Human Rights Standards

- Ensure fairness, dignity and equality for every person

- Enable all individuals to meet their basic survival needs

- Recognize interdependence of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights

- Place affirmative obligation on government to respect, protect and fulfill these rights
Human Rights Strategies

- a set of tools and approaches that hold government and other powerful actors accountable for protecting the rights of all people

- provide opportunity for community engagement

Include:
- documenting human rights abuses
- engaging in public education
- using international mechanisms
How are international human rights relevant to the work of state and local agencies?
“Human Rights” is a Local Issue

- Human rights must start at home, and must involve and reflect the needs and expertise of local communities.

- Realization of human rights requires local decision-making, and strong cooperation between local, state and federal government, and between government and civil society.
Human Rights in a Federalist System

- US Constitution’s Supremacy Clause: ratified treaties are the Supreme Law of the land

- US Ratification: human rights treaty obligations will be implemented by state and local government to the extent that they exercise jurisdiction over such matters
Human Rights Treaties
Ratified by the US

- Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
- Race Convention (CERD)
- Convention Against Torture (CAT)
Human Rights Treaties
Signed but not Ratified

- Women’s Convention (CEDAW)
- Children’s Rights Convention (CRC)
- Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)
- Economic and Social Rights Covenant (ICESCR)
Human Rights Treaties Provide Opportunities to:

- Report on conditions within communities
- Train officials and community members to promote equality and non-discrimination
- Conduct hearings to examine the relevance of findings by international treaty bodies
- Issue recommendations for future action
Key Recommendations

- Monitor and document human rights issues
- Assess local policy in light of international standards
- Promote human rights education
- Incorporate human rights principles into advocacy efforts
- Investigate human rights complaints
- Coordinate and implement local policy to integrate human rights principles
US Civil and Human Rights Commission

- dedicated staff to coordinate with state and local government
- education and training for state and local officials
- Funding for state and local agencies
“Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home . . .”

- Eleanor Roosevelt