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Rights advocates want department named 'Labor and Human Rights

By Janell Cole

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BISMARCK North Dakotans who think their human rights have been violated would benefit from the Labor Department being renamed the state Department of Labor and Human Rights to accurately reflect the office's duties, several advocates told a House committee Thursday.

"It is our understanding from the labor commissioner that over half the work of the department is now involved in human rights complaints," said Cheryl Bergian of Fargo, executive director of the nongovernmental organization North Dakota Human Rights Coalition.

She and others said people with human rights complaints do not know that the agency to call is the Labor Department.

The 2003 Legislature assigned the Labor Department to be the state human rights agency, two years after assigning it the job of investigating and enforcing housing rights. The department has a human rights division which has a separate listing in phone directories, but the department name has never been changed.

Skeptics on the House Government and Veterans Affairs Committee wondered if Senate Bill 2121 is necessary.

Rep. Jim Kasper, R-Fargo, thumbing through a Bismarck-Mandan phone book, noted that the Labor Department's human rights division has a separate listing.

"This is relatively easy to find," he said.

Amy Nelson, executive director of the nonprofit Fair Housing of the Dakotas said, "People are confused about why the Labor Department handles housing," she said.

Bergian and others noted that the state Workers Compensation Bureau successfully asked the Legislature for a law four years ago to change its name to Workforce Safety and Insurance because it wanted "a name that more closely reflects our commitment to providing safety and insurance services to the workforce."

Others testifying for the bill included the Mental Health Association, the Arc of North Dakota, the AFL-CIO and a lawyer for United Tribes Technical College.

Labor Commissioner Lisa Fair McEvers did not testify for or against but some legislators asked her about the department's amount of work in wage-and-hour enforcement vs. human rights investigations. She said of the 15,000 calls to the office in a year, 12,000 are labor related and 3,000 for human rights complaints.

No one testified against the bill but the committee decided not to act on it until today.

Cole works for Forum Communications Co., which owns the Herald.