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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

International Human Rights Day – Cause for Celebration in Yukon

Every year on December 10th the global community commemorates the adoption by the United Nations General Assembly of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

The Yukon Human Rights Commission is applauding the changes to the Yukon *Human Rights Act* that take effect on December 10th – International Human Rights Day.

Melissa Atkinson, chair of the Yukon Human Rights Commission welcomes the changes and said: “They will do much to streamline our process resulting in quicker resolution and settlement of complaints and also will update some of the language in the *Act*.”

One of the areas noted by Heather MacFadgen, Director of Human Rights is that, “The Commission will have the ability to refer a complaint directly to a Board of Adjudication without an investigation in certain cases where a speedy resolution is needed because of urgent circumstances, or in cases where there is agreement on what happened but not on how the law applies. Direct referral to hearing may also be used where there are no witnesses to the alleged discrimination and the parties do not agree on what happened.”

MacFadgen also highlighted another major change to the time limit for making a human rights complaint. “Previous to the changes, people had 6 months from the time of the alleged discrimination to make a complaint. This time limit has now been increased to 18 months, with the Commission having discretion to extend the time limits.”

Other changes include the Commission’s power to not investigate a complaint when a person declines a settlement that the Commission considers fair and reasonable, or in situations where a person making a complaint has not first used other processes such as internal grievance or review procedures, which are available within an organization.

Definitions in the *Act* have been updated so the offensive use of the term “mental retardation” has been eliminated and “seeing eye dog” has been replaced with “service animal”. The definition of “sexual orientation” has also been eliminated, due to age

discrimination. The *Act* will now protect people of all ages from discrimination based on their sexual orientation.

The focus for this year's International Human Rights Day is non-discrimination. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay explains why: "We have picked non-discrimination as the theme this year because discrimination spreads mistrust and humiliation for victims and leads to violence, conflict and discord generally. We are all aware of the effects of discrimination and yet we continue to practise it."

Pillay goes further and describes non-discrimination as the first priority of the Human Rights Office. "Our main objective is to help promote discrimination-free societies and a world of equal treatment for all."

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