

**City of Keene**  
**New Hampshire**

**HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE**  
**MEETING MINUTES**

**Monday, November 6, 2023**

**5:00 PM**

**Room 22,  
Recreation Center**

**Members Present:**

Sofia Cunha-Vasconcelos, Chair  
Hunter Kirschner, Vice Chair  
Councilor Catherine Workman  
Dr. Dottie Morris  
Dr. Mohammad Saleh  
Marti Fiske  
Gina Burke  
Rabbi Daniel Aronson (Arrived Late)  
Tedd Benson, Alternate  
Ritu Budakoti, Alternate

**Staff Present:**

Alyssa Bender, Youth Services Manager  
Andy Bohannon, Parks, Recreation, and  
Facilities Director

**Members Not Present:**

Heidi Schwieger, Alternate  
Jennifer Nescimento, Alternate

**1) Welcome and Call to Order**

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos read the HRC's statement: *"In our efforts to create a more equal and just society, we move forward with the firm intention to value the voices, opinions, and experiences of all people. We choose to proceed with the awareness and humility that the statements and decisions we make will have a different impact for those with different life experiences."*

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos called the meeting to order at 5:00 PM. Roll call was conducted.

**2) Approval of October 2, 2023 Meeting Minutes**

Ms. Fiske made a motion to approve the meeting minutes of October 2, 2023. Mr. Kirschner seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

**3) Finance Report**

Mr. Bohannon stated that the Finance Report in the agenda packet is wrong, and he apologizes. He continued that somehow it is a finance report from three years ago, not the current one. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that they will forego the finance report this month.

Ms. Fiske asked if the check was sent to the panelists from the Indigenous Peoples' Day event. Mr. Bohannon replied no, not yet, and explained how he and others are still working to correct the discrepancies that have happened as a result of the City switching to a new financial software. Payments cannot go out until that is resolved. It will be soon.

4) **Monadnock Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging Coalition Updates**

Councilor Workman (chair of the Coalition) stated that she does not have the Coalition's strategic plan to share tonight, as it is incomplete. Portions of it have been approved by the Steering Committee. They meet again on November 20, and she is asking the Coalition's subcommittees to have their portions of the strategic plan completed by then. If that happens, the Steering Committee can finalize and approve the strategic plan at that meeting. Otherwise, it would be ready in December.

Councilor Workman continued that the Coalition is seeking/has room for many new members. It is a regional coalition, not just Keene, so people from local towns are welcome.

Dr. Morris stated that the (Coalition) has made a lot of progress. She continued that she is on the Education subcommittee, and if anyone is interested in joining, it meets at 7:30 AM every other Thursday at Keene High School.

Dr. Saleh stated that Steering Committee member Pierre Morton hosted a meeting at the Franklin Pierce campus, which had student participation, which was energizing. He asks for HRC members to extend the Coalition's invitation to any young people they know who might want to be involved.

Councilor Workman stated that the Coalition meetings use a hybrid model; they are in-person and online. The "home base" for meetings is the Savings Bank of Walpole on Marlboro St., but their goal is to have more meetings outside of Keene as well to be more inclusive. The Coalition welcomes ideas for meeting locations.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked who people should contact if they are interested in finding out more about the Coalition and about which positions are available. Councilor Workman replied that she is the chair, but any Coalition member would have access to the information about open positions.

5) **Racial Justice and Community Safety Committee Report**

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if this is in the hands of the City Council. Mr. Bohannon replied yes, but that there was no response yet. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that they would leave this section on the agenda for follow-up at the next meeting.

**6) Acceptance of Committee Event Reports**

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that she does not think it is working out to have written reports from the subcommittees, since they do not have any, so they will go back to doing it the old-fashioned way.

**A) Martin Luther King, Jr. Day**

Rabbi Aronson reported that the subcommittee has a title (for the event) from speaker Father Greg Boyle, “Cherished Belonging: Love in Divided Times.” He gave more information about the conversations he has been having with Father Greg’s scheduler, and the plans for the event. It will be Monday, January 15, 2024, in the evening. Discussion ensued about where to hold the event, Heberton Hall at the KPL, or a space at KSC - Dr. Morris will look into both options. Discussion ensued about the preferred time for the event. The group agreed on 6:00 PM.

Rabbi Aronson stated that the subcommittee needs to talk about how to fund this event. He continued that they have \$500 in the HRC’s budget and need to come up with approximately \$3,000 more. Mr. Bohannon replied that he recommends Rabbi Aronson come into the December meeting with those financial commitments. Discussion ensued about donations and sponsors and the process.

Rabbi Aronson asked Councilor Workman about the meeting schedule for the MDEIB, and Councilor Workman replied that the Steering Committee generally meets the third Monday of the month at 4:00 PM. Rabbi Aronson asked her to put him on the agenda for the November 20 meeting, and he will come do a pitch. Councilor Workman agreed.

Dr. Saleh requested that an online donation link be added to the HRC webpage.

**B) Black History Month**

Dr. Morris stated that she has been in touch with Crys Matthews, for an event Monday, February 5, 2024. She continued that there are details to work out, but she hopes that they can do a workshop of some sort and a musical event. The planning is coming along. Discussion ensued. Dr. Morris gave further information about possible workshop topics, such as developing singer/songwriter skills and political music. Mr. Bohannon spoke about how it would be great if Crys Matthews could sing some of their songs and also talk about the meaning behind the songs or about how they developed the songs, like a combination of a workshop and a musical performance. Discussion continued.

**C) Juneteenth**

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos reported that the Juneteenth working group had its first meeting (for planning next year's event), which went well. She continued that the event will be the evening of Juneteenth, which is a Wednesday in 2024, in Central Square. There will be music and speakers and they are looking to incorporate youth. There will be other events as well.

Dr. Morris stated that she connected with singer-songwriter Adrienne Mack-Davis, who is popular in the Manchester and Nashua area. She gave more information about her work, which is centered on Black empowerment. She has reached out to see if she is available for Juneteenth. She will send the HRC a link to her music.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that the next meeting is January 9. The working group is applying what they have learned, from organizing this event in the past, about the programming and financing processes. Dr. Morris gave more information about other possible speakers and musicians she has been thinking about and talking with. Discussion continued.

**D) Keene International Festival**

Ms. Budakoti stated that the organizers prefer to hold the event right before the DeMar Marathon, when people are in town, so they have chosen September 28, 2024 for the Keene International Festival. She continued that they will start working on the lineup soon.

**E) Indigenous Peoples' Day**

Ms. Fiske reported that there was a nice turnout for the Indigenous Peoples' Day event. She continued that the documentary, Voices From the Barrens, was beautifully done and they received a lot of positive feedback about it. Two copies are now available for loan at the Library. The documentarian and a member of the board of directors of the blueberry company spoke at the event, and addressed audience questions. Discussion ensued.

Dr. Morris recommended the film Killers of the Flower Moon, currently playing in Keene. She continued that it is about some of the Oklahoma murders (of indigenous people in the 1920s) and is very well done. Ms. Fiske spoke about indigenous people involved with the movie's creation. Discussion ensued.

**F) Pride Event**

Mr. Kirschner reported that the Pride event was a couple of weeks ago, a film screening of Cured. He continued that the audience was smaller than he would have liked, but he felt the film was well-received, and the filmmaker was there to talk about the process of making the film. There is a copy now at the Mason Library at Keene State College.

7) **New Business**

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if anyone had new business. She continued that the HRC welcomes public input.

Ed Tomey and Maich Gardner introduced themselves. Mr. Tomey stated that they are from Covenant Living/Hillside Village, which is an all-white community of all older people. Many of the residents are very interested in the kinds of things the HRC is doing. January 2024 will be Covenant Living's fifth celebration of Juneteenth and their third year celebrating MLK Day. Most years, he and Ms. Gardner have chaired the activities, but this year they have formed a committee. It is great to hear about how the HRC spreads out the work and responsibilities amongst its members, for each of its events. Covenant Living needs something similar.

Ms. Gardner stated that she and Mr. Tomey are here listening to how the HRC does its work, now that she and Mr. Tomey have a committee to help them put on events at Covenant Living, and they hope there are opportunities for the HRC and Covenant Living to collaborate and do some things together. Covenant Living has a great facility/performance space that holds about 100 people. Mr. Tomey added that if they do not collaborate on events, they can at least provide additional audiences for each other. Ms. Gardner stated that Covenant Living residents have been eager to participate in the events they have done in the past, so if they do collaborate, she thinks there would be a good response.

Ms. Gardner and Mr. Tomey shared more information about past events they have hosted. They thanked the HRC, and thanked Dr. Saleh for inviting them to attend tonight. They welcome the HRC members to contact them via phone or email. Mr. Tomey spoke of how he and Ms. Gardner and their newly formed committee are struggling to add events in addition to ones that focus on Black citizens, to go beyond that to other people of color, issues of gender, issues of social justice, and so on. They are looking at a variety of issues and struggling with what to name their committee, which had been the "Juneteenth Committee" until now. When they held an event to honor George Floyd, 60 people attended, and Covenant Living only had 80 residents at the time, so it was quite a showing. All of the events he and Ms. Gardner have hosted have had 80 people or more. They expect it to increase, now that there are more residents than ever. There is a lot of interest in social justice issues. Ms. Gardner stated that they want to maintain an open dialogue with the HRC, given that they have shared values and interests.

Ms. Fiske asked if there is a bus/transportation available for Covenant Living residents to attend events downtown. Mr. Tomey replied that their current bus will soon expire but a new one is on order. He continued that they have two vans. Residents are in their 60s-90s, so anywhere they go needs to have quick access to restrooms. Ms. Fiske stated that if transportation is available for Covenant Living folks to attend the HRC's events, the HRC can include Covenant Living in their advertising/outreach. Discussion continued. Councilor Workman stated that she is Chair of the MDEIB and they could definitely be in contact with/collaborate with the Covenant Living group. She continued that she was at the candidate forum that was hosted at Covenant Living a

couple weeks ago, and the energy was palpable – Covenant Living residents had a lot of impassioned discussion. Mr. Tomey agreed and spoke of how people who live there do not want to be thought of just as “Covenant Living residents,” but as citizens of Keene as well. They want to be involved in things that are happening in Keene. Mr. Bohannon stated that he will put Mr. Tomey and Ms. Gardner on the HRC’s distribution list, so they will receive the committee’s agenda packets and meeting minutes and can stay involved.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if there was any other new business.

Rabbi Aronson stated that Thursday, November 9, is *Kristallnacht*. He continued that the ceremony that had at one time been at the Colonial was scheduled for Central Square and has now been moved to the Library. The Library had been the Plan B in case of inclement weather. It was moved there partly at his suggestion because many folks in his community are feeling very vulnerable and traumatized. He personally does not feel that the Jewish community here is at risk of any physical harm. Other people have different feelings. However, he thinks that anything that is outside and Jewish-related is inviting protests from pro-Palestinian groups, which most likely would be imported from outside of Keene. That is one consequence of the war that is happening in Israel and Gaza. In addition, the public menorah lighting, which they started last year, is also moving indoors. It will be Thursday, December 14, at the YMCA at 5:30. He hopes the HRC members attend. He wants to talk with Dr. Saleh about including someone from the Muslim community for that.

Rabbi Aronson continued that he wants the HRC to know that many folks in the Jewish community are feeling incredibly isolated. People who have deep commitments to social justice have found that they are not welcome in certain circles of groups where social justice is done, because they are Jewish and care for the state of Israel. Even within the Jewish community, incredible tensions are coming up. He himself has done a lot of soul-searching in recent days. They are getting support from a lot of corners and are grateful for all of it.

Mr. Tomey asked if there will be security for *Kristallnacht*. Ms. Fiske spoke about the Cohen Hall space and stated that to her knowledge, the organizer has not requested any additional security. Discussion ensued. Rabbi Aronson spoke about the coordination with KPD.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if there was any other new business. Mr. Bohannon stated that he will be stepping down as the staff liaison for the HRC, and Alyssa Bender will be the new staff liaison. He continued that she is a growing leader within the City, doing great work, and has now been participating in HRC meetings for quite a while and absorbing everything like a sponge. It is time for him to transition, and in fact, Ms. Bender should have taken over a year ago, but he has stayed because he loves this group’s work and its members and mission, and how they change the community and open so many doors. He feels passionate about the work and will still be present in certain ways. The HRC will be in great hands with Ms. Bender.

The HRC members thanked Mr. Bohannon for all of his work, and welcomed Ms. Bender in her new role.

8) **Adjourn – Next Meeting Monday, December 4, 2023 at 5:00 PM**

There being no further business, Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos adjourned the meeting at 6:06 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,  
Britta Reida, Minute Taker

Reviewed and edited by,  
Alyssa Bender, Youth Services Manager