

City of Keene
New Hampshire

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Monday, June 3, 2024

5:00 PM

**Room 22,
Recreation Center**

Members Present:

Sofia Cunha-Vasconcelos, Chair
Dr. Mohammad Saleh
Marti Fiske
Rabbi Daniel Aronson
Gina Burke
Dr. Dottie Morris
Ritu Budakoti
Debra Bowie, Alternate
David Morrill, Alternate
Emma Charles, Alternate

Staff Present:

Alyssa Bender, Youth Services Manager

Members Not Present:

Councilor Catherine Workman
Aja Davis
Tedd Benson, 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."*

She called the meeting to order at 5:00 PM. Roll call was conducted.

2) Approval of April 1, 2024 Meeting Minutes

Ms. Fiske made a motion to approve the meeting minutes of April 1, 2024. Ms. Budakoti seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

3) Finance Report

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos explained the format and basics of the Finance Report for the benefit of the new members, and the HRC's budget. She stated that the HRC has a surplus balance on hand of over \$2,000. That can be used at the request of HRC members for events, which the HRC votes on. Tonight's agenda includes such a request.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if there were any questions about the finance report. Hearing none, she added that the finance report does not reflect the fundraising the Juneteenth (working group) has been doing, because they are running it through the YMCA, their community partner for the event. They are up to about \$7,000 so far. Alyssa Bender-Jesse, Youth Services Manager, replied that the finance report will have that reflected next time.

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

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that several HRC members are also Coalition members, including Councilor Workman, who is the Chair; Dr. Morris; Ms. Burke; and Dr. Saleh. She asked one of them to give an update. She asked if the mission statement document is still being tweaked.

Dr. Morris replied yes, but it is almost done. She continued that she is part of the Education Subcommittee, which has quarterly meetings with local educators. There might be a meeting on Wednesday; the subcommittee is varying the meeting times to see what works best for people. They are planning an event, co-sponsored by the NH Educators of Color group, on September 27. Educator/author Dr. Bettina Love is coming to Keene.

Dr. Morris continued that as for the Coalition as a whole, fundraising continues, and she thinks Councilor Workman talked last time about the award the MDEIB received as a result of its work.

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that an update from Councilor Workman is that the MDEIB has had some resignations and are looking for new people to join. She continued that Sheriff Rivera, chair of the Law Enforcement and Public Safety subcommittee, had to step down.

Dr. Saleh stated that the Steering Committee still has openings as well. He continued that he has taken on chairing the Regional Engagement subcommittee. Its goal is to increase participation from surrounding towns. Specifically, they want at least one Select Board member from every town, which would allow the opportunity for social change conversations or actual legislative changes. For example, the Selectman in Rindge, before even joining the Regional Engagement subcommittee, introduced Juneteenth as an official holiday in Rindge, and even a strongly right-wing Selectman voted for it. That is an example of the kind of small changes they can achieve. He asks the HRC members to reach out to their friends in surrounding towns, who can help the Regional Engagement subcommittee identify Select Board members to reach out to.

Dr. Saleh continued that through the initiative of the MDEIB he participated in a daylong conference, the Business Alliance of People of Color. It was a first-time event and had about 100 participants. The keynote speaker was Anthony Poore, leader of the NH Center for Justice and Equity. He gave an extraordinary presentation full of information and insight about how the social justice movement and the business initiative work together and what work needs to happen. He wonders if Mr. Poore could give a smaller version of his presentation to the MDEIB.

Dr. Morris stated that a related victory in the courts is that the (federal) judge ruled (against) the “Divisive Concepts” law the NH legislators put in place. She continued that there was a big fight against the law, which did not allow K-12 educators to teach certain concepts, such as “critical race theory,” which is only taught in law school anyway, not K-12 schools; or implicit bias, which has been around since the 1940s. The law was unclear and misused terms. It was chilling, because teachers could be fired for talking about certain concepts. A teacher’s union from NH, along with another organization and the ACLU, filed a lawsuit. Dr. Morris explained the legal process they went through for this. She continued that the federal judge eventually ruled last Tuesday that the Divisive Concepts law was unclear and unconstitutional. Severe damage had already been done, in that some educators experienced a lot of nasty, harmful treatment they did not deserve, but they are still standing. This (ruling) is a major victory to a lot of work many people in NH are doing, including the HRC.

Rabbi Aronson asked if Dr. Morris thinks the ruling will be appealed or sent back to committee to be made constitutional. Dr. Morris replied that the State is figuring out whether to appeal the ruling. She suspects it will come back through the legislative process and that they will attempt to correct some things. She thinks they are following the lead of what Florida and Texas have done. Discussion continued. Dr. Morris stated that this (ruling against Divisive Concepts legislation) is related to work that this body, the MDEIB, Anthony Poore, and others are doing.

5) Racial Justice and Community Safety Report

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if Ms. Bender-Jesse had an update. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that she was not at the last meeting of the City’s DEI Committee. She asked if Ms. Fiske had an update, if she was there.

Ms. Fiske stated that she recalls that the DEI Committee was bringing a question to the City Clerk about whether they could have the statement (that the HRC wrote and proposed) made before the City Council and committee meetings. She continued that her understanding is that the City Clerk has made queries to the City Attorney but she has not heard any decisions. They need to follow up with Megan (Fortson) about that.

6) Acceptance of Committee Event Reports

A) Juneteenth

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos reported that the Juneteenth events begin June 13.

Mr. Morrill gave information about the schedule of events as follows:

- June 14 – YA author Lesa Cline-Ransome is doing a book reading and signing at Toadstool.
- June 14 – Crys Mathews is playing at Brewbakers at 7:00 PM.
- June 16 – Two movie screenings, Kid Flicks at 2:00 PM at The Showroom, and Imitation of Life at 6:30 PM at the Drenan Auditorium
- June 19 - Community dinner at the Community Kitchen, and musical acts and more in the Central Square gazebo.

Rabbi Aronson added that there is a Swamp Bats game on June 19 as well.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos gave more information about the events that will be at Central Square, including participation from local youth, and performances by the Gaslight Tinkers and Senie Hunt.

Dr. Saleh asked if there is a Juneteenth flyer to share and distribute on social media. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied yes, there are events to RSVP to and share, from the YMCA's Facebook account. Discussion ensued about publicity. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos spoke positively about how much participation from community members has organically been happening. It will be a wonderful half-week of events. The Juneteenth working group is grateful for the community partners, including the Toadstool and the Monadnock International Film Festival (MONIFF), who is facilitating the films for Juneteenth.

Ms. Budakoti stated that there should be a way for people to easily get the information, and to see the whole lineup at a glance, instead of just getting the information in chunks. Dr. Morris stated that she drove by the banner, which she thinks was just put up. Discussion continued. Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that she will send the flyer to the HRC members. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that there will be a banner at the Rec Center, and they are working with Rotary to have banners along Central Square. Rabbi Aronson stated that all the information is at KeeneYMCA.org/Juneteenth. Dr. Saleh replied that the YMCA's homepage does not have a link to that.

Ms. Budakoti stated that she knows the HRC is under the umbrella of the City of Keene, but it is important for the HRC to be specifically named on flyers and other communications. She continued that she did not see "Human Rights Committee" mentioned anywhere in the YMCA's information (about Juneteenth). It is important for the community to be aware of the HRC as an entity, because many people do not know the HRC exists. Discussion ensued. Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that as long as it is okay with Rebecca (Landry), who is in charge of the City's social media and branding, she (Ms. Bender-Jesse) could create a mockup of a Human Rights Committee (logo) to add to things. Then when the HRC is sponsoring events, people would be aware. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos and HRC members agreed. Discussion continued. Ms. Fiske noted that the Keene YMCA's webpage about Juneteenth says the event is sponsored in part by

the City of Keene, but does not say the Keene Library or the Human Rights Committee. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that this should be a quick fix with an email to Colleen, and she believes the correct logos and information will be up soon. Ms. Bowie stated that it is important for the groups who sponsored this to be recognized.

B) Keene International Festival

Ms. Budakoti reported that September 28 is the day of the KIF, to celebrate the cultural diversity in the region. She continued that they are looking for sponsors and volunteers. The KIF organizers want to be able to provide a token of appreciation to the local artists who come, to honor all of their hard work, time, and skills.

Ms. Budakoti asked if there is an official City photographer who could take photos at the event. Discussion ensued and Ms. Fiske stated that the City does not have an official photographer. Rabbi Aronson suggested using Hannah Schroeder (from the Keene Sentinel). Ms. Budakoti replied that she does not know if Ms. Schroeder is available or if the KIF would have the funds to pay her. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that the Juneteenth working group discussed photography as well, and she thinks Dee Fitzgerald of MONIFF has some contacts and is looking to have a volunteer photographer there for Juneteenth. She continued that this is something for the HRC to pay attention to, because they certainly want to be reporting these events and have the images for the City's purposes going forward.

C) Indigenous Peoples' Day

Ms. Fiske stated that she is in discussions with the Wampanoag Nations' Singers and Dancers, who are based out of the Mashpee, MA area. She continued that they have a group of 6-12 dancers who teach people the eastern social dances. Interspersed are discussions and short lectures using music, dance, and their traditional clothing and instruments as a gateway to a conversation about the history, culture, and cosmology of the Native peoples, particularly Wampanoag people. The event is currently scheduled for the afternoon of Sunday, October 13. The Wampanoag Singers and Dancers are already scheduled to go to Concord that same day and would come to Keene on the way back to MA, which would slightly reduce the mileage fee they would charge to Keene.

Ms. Fiske continued that it would be probably six dancers and their gear in two vehicles, and the total with the mileage rate could be up to \$2,350 if it is both directions from Mashpee and Boston. She is applying for a NH Humanities mini grant, which is a one to one match. The HRC would need \$1,200 in cash to match the mini grant. They do allow counting in the salaries of the organizer (herself), the janitor who will be cleaning up, and the advertising person, but she is not sure how that figures into the match, such as whether that would be considered a cash grant or an in-kind grant. She just sent the draft to the program director for review. The official deadline to submit the grant application is June 21. Thus, she is requesting the HRC approve spending up to \$600, so they can have a cash one to one match if they receive the grant. The Library would put in the other \$600. If they do not get the grant, she would be looking for

community donors. It is important to apply as soon as possible, because the NH Humanities mini grant already has many applicants.

Rabbi Aronson stated that \$500 is already allocated (for the Indigenous Peoples Day event, from the HRC's budget), so this would be an additional \$100. Ms. Fiske replied that is correct.

Rabbi Aronson made a motion for the Human Rights Committee to approve the additional \$100 to match the grant. Ms. Budakoti seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

Ms. Fiske stated that she will keep everyone updated. Brief discussion ensued about the event date of October 13. Rabbi Aronson stated that the Fridays before and after Friday, October 13 are both Rosh Hashanah. Ms. Fiske stated that October 14 is officially Indigenous Peoples' Day, but Heberton Hall is booked by the Friends of the Library Book Sale. She continued that if October 13 does not work she will look for another date, keeping in mind that information from Rabbi Aronson.

D) Pride Event

Mr. Morrill stated that he spoke with the Keene Pride organization, and they are open to collaborating with the HRC on a Pride event. He continued that before he gets into depth with that, he needs HRC volunteers. Gina Burke offered to volunteer and one or two more people would be great. They can let him know or email Ms. Bender-Jesse. He has some ideas for events, which will not be in June, but wants to discuss it.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that since Mr. Morrill has just taken on chairing the Pride event, it would be completely legitimate to create a working group to plan an event for next June, if he wants. Ms. Fiske stated that Keene Pride has a big lineup of events for September, so another idea is for the HRC to sponsor a program within that. Mr. Morrill replied yes, that was one of his ideas.

Ms. Charles stated that she would love to help with the Pride event. Ms. Budakoti replied that she will help, too, if the Pride working group really needs it, because she is still looking for help with the KIF. She continued that if the Pride event has defined volunteer roles at some point, maybe she could sign up on the day of the event. Mr. Morrill thanked her and replied that the working group should be fine with just him, Ms. Burke, and Ms. Charles, but of course they welcome anyone's help.

E) Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

Rabbi Aronson stated that January 20, 2025 is the date. He continued that he plans to start working on this in July. He would like a broader coalition. He wants to include school administrators from the beginning, so that the HRC's Martin Luther King, Jr. Day event can be better integrated with the schools. Schools have that day off, so participation from students and/or school personnel would be optional and thus require more coordination ahead of time. He

does not know what direction the event will take, and he welcomes ideas. He challenged Tom Julious, chair of the Monadnock Interfaith Project (MIP), to bring in Eboo Patel of Interfaith America, who is “sort of the Greg Boyle of the interfaith community.” He would be amazing for MLK Day, if the HRC wants to partner with MIP. Or the event could have another (speaker), or none, and just be something homegrown.

Mr. Morrill stated that someone from the Historical Society is interested in this, too.

Ms. Bowie asked about involving local youth groups. Rabbi Aronson replied that it was great to have youth from St. Joseph School and Our Lady of Mercy Academy at the event last year, but only two or three students from Keene High School showed up, despite the working group’s best efforts to encourage students to come. Discussion continued about local youth groups, and HRC members suggested contacting people at the YMCA and/or the Keene Rec Center.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that she is still getting feedback from people about how amazing last year’s MLK Day event was.

F) Black History Month

Dr. Morris stated that she has not started working on this yet, but she has been thinking about how to activate the Black Student Union to help out. She continued that she will talk with that group’s advisor. (At Keene State College), events for Black History Month and MLK Jr. Day are often combined. Students who went on a Civil Rights spring break trip last year will be presenting on their experiences, and more students will be going on that trip in 2025.

Rabbi Aronson asked if they should expand Black History Month to include MLK Jr. Day. Dr. Morris replied that combining them just works for KSC because of the (academic/class) schedule.

Dr. Morris stated that community members have asked if they could join the Civil Rights Spring Break trip. It is structured to be for KSC students, but she would like to be able to extend something similar for (community members), such as a trip to Washington, D.C. to go to the Holocaust Museum, African American Museum, and the Indigenous Peoples’ Museum. She spoke about her idea of the HRC and MDEIB together sponsoring a bus to D.C.

Ms. Bowie stated that the (Civil Rights Spring Break) sounded like a wonderful experience, and what was even more wonderful was the interactions that everybody had together when they came back. Discussion continued, and Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that in the interest of time, they need to move onto other agenda items, but they should take note of this conversation so they can continue it at a future meeting.

7) New Business

A) Holiday Recognition Document Discussion

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that she will resend the Holiday Recognition Document to the HRC members, and they probably have one more week for this, if HRC members want to add or change anything on the document. She thanks those who have already sent ideas for additions and those who helped correct mistakes on it. As a reminder, this is the Mayor's document, and his intention is to update the City of Keene calendar with all of the important and meaningful holidays and days of remembrance. The Mayor's webpage linked from the City of Keene's website would have all of the dates, too.

Ms. Budakoti stated that she has two questions about this. She continued that when the Mayor was here, they were talking about how there are different cultures within the (local) community, and those cultures celebrating the significant holidays or events within the community should be highlighted on the City calendar, because this is an inclusive community. She volunteered that they can run a survey through KIF participants and attendees, about what they want to see on the City of Keene's website to recognize their culture. That would be a different document they would not have. If the Mayor is still interested in having that information, they will have it sometime around September. This one here is a City document. She does not think the KIF is part of it. She will send Ms. Bender-Jesse a separate note on that.

Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that as Mayor Kahn entered his position, this was one of the first things he (started). She continued that he has been doing a big push on DEIB in the city, internally and externally. She thinks updating the City calendar was the first big step he was taking, to get it out there. However, throughout the year, if the HRC members see or think about things that should be added or discussed, they should always bring that up here. She could send the Mayor additional emails with the HRC's thoughts and additions. She thinks the survey will be very beneficial.

Dr. Saleh asked if this document will only reside on the City's website, or if any of these days will have a proclamation or recognition. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that she thinks it will be up to what the Mayor wants to do with it. She continued that when he talked with the HRC, his plan was to put it on his Mayor webpage that is on the City's website, and update the City of Keene calendar so that all of these holidays and remembrances would be listed just as the ones the City already recognizes, like "Monday, Memorial Day." June 1 would say "Pride Month," for example. Brief discussion continued.

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that two meetings ago, the HRC brought up the idea of having the option of attending HRC meetings virtually. She continued that she looked into it, and while this option would not be available to the public, HRC members could attend virtually via the same Microsoft Teams meeting link that the minute taker uses. Virtual attendance would be allowed if a member was, for example, out of town on a work trip. She thanked Ms. Fiske for sending her information about virtual meeting requirements, and continued that per NH law, a quorum needs to be physically present for a meeting to be held. A member attending virtually cannot count toward quorum. A virtual member can vote. Another NH rule is that anyone attending virtually needs to be able to see and hear the people in the meeting, and vice versa, but to answer an HRC

member's question, using the "mute" button is fine as long as the audio is working when needed. Dr. Saleh added that during roll call, the virtual attendee also needs to state their location and whether anyone is present in the room with them. Ms. Bender-Jesse added, and why they are not able to join in person. Ms. Fiske added that all votes need to be held via roll call if someone is attending virtually.

Ms. Bender-Jesse continued that the HRC can begin having virtual attendance as an option, if all HRC members agree they want this as an option. However, to be clear, this does not mean a return to hybrid meetings. She strongly recommends the virtual option be used sparingly, if someone truly cannot make it to a meeting, due to something like a work trip, or an emergency that comes up and prevents someone from physically coming to the meeting but they could attend online.

Discussion ensued. Per HRC members' questions about quorum, Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that it is correct that if a quorum of members is not physically present for a meeting, the meeting will be canceled. A quorum is five people, which is "50% +1" of the membership.

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

Ms. Budakoti stated that she wants to recognize Ms. Bender-Jesse, who is doing a fantastic job, keeping the HRC organized and on target. She continued that she appreciates Ms. Bender-Jesse's work. Others agreed.

Rabbi Aronson reported that Saturday, June 8 at the Redfern Arts Center, is an event to celebrate Maps Counseling Services' 50th anniversary. It will be a performance by Eric Dittelman, comedian and mind reader.

8) Adjournment – Next Meeting July [1], 2024 at 5:00 PM

Ms. Bender-Jesse noted that the agenda has a typo; the July meeting is July 1. Dr. Morris stated that she will be out of town that day.

There being no further business, Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos adjourned the meeting at 6:07 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Britta Reid, Minute Taker

Reviewed and edited by,
Alyssa Bender-Jesse, Youth Services Manager