

City of Keene
New Hampshire

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Monday, August 5, 2024

5:00 PM

**Room 22,
Recreation Center**

Members Present:

Sofia Cunha-Vasconcelos, Chair
Councilor Catherine Workman
Dr. Mohammad Saleh
Dr. Dottie Morris (arrived at 5:08 PM)
Rabbi Daniel Aronson (arrived at 5:03 PM)
Gina Burke (arrived at 5:04 PM)
Debra Bowie, Alternate
David Morrill, Alternate
Emma Charles, Alternate

Staff Present:

Alyssa Bender-Jesse, Youth Services Manager

Members Not Present:

Marti Fiske
Jennifer Nescimento, Alternate
Ritu Budakoti
Aja Davis
Tedd Benson, 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. For the purposes of quorum, she asked alternate members Mr. Morrill and Ms. Charles to stand in as voting members.

2) Approval of June 3, 2024 Meeting Minutes

Rabbi Dan Aronson arrived at 5:03 PM.

Mr. Morrill made a motion to approve the meeting minutes of June 3, 2024. Rabbi Aronson seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

3) **Finance Report**

Gina Burke arrived at 5:04 PM. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that now that there is a quorum of regular members present, Mr. Morrill and Ms. Charles resume their alternate member status for the rest of the meeting.

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that they are in the new fiscal year. She continued that regarding the Juneteenth fundraising, the HRC was not the fiscal agent, the YMCA was. The HRC gave the \$500 to the YMCA. She is trying to figure out, just for the HRC's knowledge, what the (arrangement) is between the YMCA and the City for this, if there was extra from fundraising, for example. If the HRC wants, she can include the actual amount that was remit, in the finance report. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that that would be helpful. She continued that it is valuable to understand what the events are costing the HRC and how much fundraising there is. She believes the number was around \$7,000.

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that she pulled the reports today, and the "City of Keene" line shows as 0, but in the budget that has already been approved, the HRC was approved for \$2,000. It is just not yet in the account. When it is officially in the HRC's account, she will move it into the budget. Next month, they should see it in the finance report.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that she sees there is an amount in the "expenses" column for the Pride Event, and they will "put a pin in that."

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if there were any questions about the finance report. Hearing none, she moved on in the agenda.

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

Councilor Workman stated that the MDEIB desperately needs new members, now that two members of the steering committee have moved out of state. She continued that they are trying to reengage and stay with their focused mission. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked about the strategic plan. Councilor Workman replied that they are still working on it.

Dr. Dottie Morris arrived at 5:08 PM.

Rabbi Aronson asked for a reminder of when the meetings are. Councilor Workman replied that the steering committee meets the third Monday of the month at the YMCA at 4:00 PM, with the option to attend via Zoom. She continued that subcommittees include the Public Safety Committee, Education Committee, Regional Engagement Committee, and the Workforce Advisory group. Those are accepting new members as well.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if the steering committee is looking for people with certain qualifications and skill sets. Councilor Workman replied an interest in DEI work and availability to

commit to the times. Mr. Morrill asked if they are advertising for new members anywhere. Councilor Workman replied no, just through word of mouth.

Councilor Workman stated that the MDEIB is coordinating a Community Conversation, which will be at the end of September so that college students will have the opportunity to participate as well.

5) Racial Justice and Community Safety Report

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that the HRC has done their part; they have provided feedback (to the City Council, on the report created by the Racial Justice and Community Safety Committee) and they are interested in understanding how the City is engaging with that feedback. She continued that the City has started an internal DEI group with each department having a representative. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied yes, and some departments, if they have multiple divisions, have more than one representative so the divisions are represented, too. She continued that she stands in for Parks and Recreation and Youth Services.

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that the HRC's feedback on the RJCS Report included recommendation 1.A., which was to have the statement (that the HRC wrote and states at the beginning of each meeting) read before City Council meetings. She continued that the City Attorney, Tom Mullins, informed her that the City Council cannot do that, due to the fact that it would open the door to any or every City of Keene committee or commission having the ability to ask the City Council to read a different statement before their meetings. The City will not move forward with the HRC's recommendation.

Dr. Morris stated that she would like more information about that, in order to feel okay with it. She asked if they could invite the City Attorney to come talk with the HRC. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that the City Attorney was supposed to come to the last HRC meeting, but that meeting was canceled, and around the same time, Tom Mullins retired. This conversation might re-start with the new City Attorney. She can invite the new City Attorney to come to the next HRC meeting if they want to talk about it further. Dr. Morris, Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos, and others agreed.

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that the internal DEI Committee is going over the rest of the HRC's recommendations step by step, looking at what the City can specifically look at. It is unclear what the DEI Committee's powers are. It is similar to how it is with the HRC, in that the DEI Committee can only draft a recommendation to the City Council and then the Council takes it from there. The DEI Committee has been looking at the HRC's recommendations in 4.B. and 4.C., regarding CivicHR and application tracking, and how the City hires individuals. The City is switching to a new online application system, and they hope the new system allows HR to redact certain information on applications, such as an applicant's name, address, current salary, and anything that could indicate who a person is outside of their actual qualifications. It would be a great way to approach hiring from an unbiased perspective.

Ms. Bender-Jesse continued that the DEI Committee is creating an internal survey to get an understanding of how each City employee feels that the City responds to harassment and discrimination,

and how they feel people are treated or get promotions. This will help them figure out better steps to take internally.

Ms. Bender-Jesse continued that in 4.D. and 4.E., the HRC brought up that (City) internships should be paid. The City already has a rule that all interns from Keene State College (KSC) must be paid, and (the DEI Committee) does not know of any intern, even from outside of KSC, who has not been paid. That is great news. Currently, most departments and divisions are able to set their own parameters for interns, including the pay. It does not technically have to be on a salary scale. Thus, their next step is to look into how to make internships fair across the board, for every department or division and for every intern, regardless of where they go to school.

Ms. Bender-Jesse continued that in 4.G., the HRC had asked about looking at whether companies who are offering bids have a DEI focus. The DEI Committee is interested in this, because they are not aware of whether there is a specific policy saying the City should be focusing only on taking bids from outside contract companies that have a strong focus in DEI. The group will look into this at their next few meetings.

Ms. Bender-Jesse continued that the HRC's recommendation for 4.I. was that when the City hosts community forums about planning/design/projects, they should offer it in a variety of different ways. To be inclusive of all, they should keep in mind people who are hard of hearing, people who cannot come during the workday, people who do not have access to the internet, and so on and so forth. What came up in the conversation is that the City is trying hard to create these various options, such as forums at different times of day, and (information on) paper. She would love to hear more ideas from the HRC, even if it is after today, of ways for the City to increase the ways in which they are (reaching people). She can bring their ideas back to the DEI Committee.

She continued that 4.J. is the HRC's recommendation for the Keene Public Library (KPL) and school libraries to expand their collections' diversity. The KPL already does a very good job in ensuring a diverse collection. They hope the schools also take that step.

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that the big plan for the DEI Committee is 4.D. and 4.E., regarding expanding the reach to candidates and continuing to looking for the best ways to have a more inclusive and diverse application process and to expand to different populations.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that it sounds like the DEI Committee is making progress, which is exciting. She asked if anyone had questions.

Councilor Workman stated that this might be "new business" but ties into the topic of the RJCS Report. She continued that the City Council is reviewing its Rules of Order, and the (changes) were sent to the Planning, Licenses, and Development (PLD) Committee for further wordsmithing. She would like to see if the HRC would join her in advocating for a certain part. One rule is that an individual "shall stand" to address the Council. The Council went back and forth on the word "shall," whether there is a logistical reason for standing, and consideration of those who cannot stand. Current procedure is for a

person who cannot stand to inform the Mayor ahead of time. Most Councilors feel that is acceptable. A few said that is not inclusive or accessible. The Council's compromise was to change the word "shall" to "should." Most recently, the PLD Committee recommended, "shall if able." She does not like that terminology and believes there is no reason people have to stand. The argument for standing is "decorum" and "it is the way we have always done it." While seated, speakers can be seen and heard by the audience and by TV screens and microphones. She welcomes HRC members' support at the PLD Committee meeting.

Discussion ensued. HRC members asked clarifying questions about the PLD Committee meeting. Mr. Morrill asked if they could make a recommendation to the PLD Committee on behalf of the HRC, in support of what Councilor Workman is saying. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that they should start by determining whether everyone in the room agrees with Councilor Workman's position. She continued that if so, she does not see why they could not write a letter.

Discussion ensued about the rule about standing. Rabbi Aronson expressed his thoughts, opinions, and questions, as did Dr. Morris, Dr. Saleh, Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos, and Mr. Morrill. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that it sounds as though the HRC members do not have a consensus on this topic, so writing a letter might be tough. She continued that the answer could be for HRC members to attend the PLD Committee meeting and be part of the conversation.

Dr. Saleh stated that he thinks they do have a majority opinion here. He asked how many people think the rule should be phrased in a way that makes standing a choice, not a requirement. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that it is not just about whether standing is an obligation, but about the expectation around it. Discussion continued about the meanings of expectations, the definition of "decorum," who the deciders are, and more. Dr. Saleh stated that the HRC cannot micromanage the phrasing of the rule, but he thinks they can express a sentiment that they collectively agree that standing should be an option.

Councilor Workman stated that Wednesday, September 11 is the next PLD Committee meeting.

6) Acceptance of Committee Event Reports

A) Pride Event

Mr. Morrill stated that the small but mighty working group has met a couple of times so far. They booked a table for the Keene Pride event in September and will be giving out stickers, temporary tattoos, and that sort of thing. They will have a survey to see what kinds of Pride events the public wants. The subcommittee has lots of potential and lots of ideas, including a queer artist show. He will reach out to some organizations that would be interested in collaborating. The Pride Event working group will host another Pride event next June.

Ms. Charles stated that they would love some volunteers to help with the table on Sunday, September 15. She continued that it is a six-hour event and they plan to do two shifts of three hours each. The volunteers' role would be to "spread joy;" give out stickers, bracelets, and temporary tattoos; talk with

people about the festival and about the HRC, and about how people want the HRC to support the LGBTQ+ community.

Dr. Morris stated that she can probably get some flyers about the Black Heritage Trail. She continued that the focus of this year's conference is "Living Out Proud: The Intersectionality of Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation."

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos expressed gratitude to Mr. Morrill for stepping up to lead the Pride Event working group. She continued that he is new to the HRC but has "taken off running."

B) Keene International Festival

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that the KIF will be September 28, 11:00 AM to 3:00 PM at the Rec Center, with a mix of indoor and outdoor events. She continued that Ritu Budakoti's last report included a request for help and volunteers at the event. Even if HRC members are not volunteering, she highly recommends attending the amazing event.

C) Indigenous Peoples' Day

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that Marti Fiske's report is in the agenda packet. She continued that the last time the HRC met, they talked about giving extra funds to the Indigenous People's Day event so Ms. Fiske could try for a grant. Unfortunately, the performers could not settle on a date. However, Ms. Fiske already arranged for Hawk Henries to come give a lecture and a flute performance, Sunday, October 13 at 1:00 PM at Heberton Hall. It sounds amazing and she looks forward to it. The Library and the HRC will each pay \$500, so it looks like the event will not need the extra \$100 that the HRC had approved.

D) Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

Rabbi Aronson stated that all he has to report is that he intends to reach out to the Coalition and the school district to gather a steering committee.

E) Black History Month

Dr. Morris stated that she has no update but welcomes volunteers to join her.

F) Juneteenth

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that the working group has not met since the Juneteenth events happened. She continued that the events were a great success. At the concert on the Common, attendance was 150 at its peak, the largest turnout they have had to date. There was a great turnout at the reading at the Toadstool, and smaller turnouts for the film events. Crys Mathews' event was fantastic, with good turnout, despite being in competition with a music festival. The working group

learned to not schedule against the music festival or Father's Day. Fundraising was successful, with a little bit leftover to seed for next year. The working group will meet in October to begin planning for next year.

Rabbi Aronson stated that he will add that the Keene Swampbats did acknowledge Juneteenth. He continued that someone sang Lift Every Voice and Sing at the 7th inning stretch, and the Swampbats' announcer, at the beginning, talked about Juneteenth and gave some historical context, which was great.

7) New Business

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that the HRC now has a logo, which she has here today to show everyone. She continued that when the HRC is creating flyers or other materials, they can let her know, and she can give them access to the logo. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos thanked her. She continued that this is the result of the conversation at the HRC's last meeting, and their hope and intent is to raise the HRC's visibility.

Rabbi Aronson asked if they can have a banner made, which would be great for when they are tabling. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that they do have some surplus funds, which can be spent if the Committee votes to do so. She asked if Ms. Bender-Jesse could facilitate the creation of the banner if the HRC wants that. Ms. Bender-Jesse asked if it could be a tablecloth with the logo. Discussion ensued about options. Ms. Bender-Jesse offered to have a local business create a few mock-ups of tablecloths, banners, or things to put on a table. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos and others agreed. Councilor Workman spoke about making sure the item will work in all kinds of weather. Rabbi Aronson asked if there is a threshold by which the City would have to put it out to bid. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that she believes the HRC has control over its own money, but she will double check.

A) **Review Best Practices for Publicizing Events**

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that she created a brief outline/start of a best practices document for the HRC. She continued that one of the challenges the HRC has is publicizing its events. The Juneteenth working group has learned a bit and had the benefit of working with the YMCA's marketing team. This (document) is an outline, and the idea is to flesh it out further then have it available for HRC members to reference when they are putting on an event, so they can be consistent with their marketing. She will seek input from members of the Juneteenth working group and others.

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

Katie Carbonara and Ella Bogdonoff introduced themselves, stating that they are from the group Keene for Palestine. Ms. Carbonara stated that Keene for Palestine is a group of local people who stand in solidarity with the Palestinian people. She continued that they are before the Human Rights Committee after making multiple attempts to communicate with the City Council, requesting the Council send their petition for a resolution to a Committee. Keene for Palestine believes the HRC's mandate of promoting social justice, not violence; equity; diversity; and multiculturalism requires the HRC to make a statement

denouncing the ongoing war crimes and human rights violations occurring in Palestine, which are being funded by our tax dollars. She continued that the International Court of Justice recently ordered Israel to end the occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem as rapidly as possible.

Ms. Bogdonoff stated that what Keene chooses to do or not do impacts Palestinians in Gaza as well as Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim members of the local community. In 2023, two Palestinian people were shot in Vermont, and one was left paralyzed. This hate crime took place in our neighboring state. The community needs to actively denounce the dehumanization of Palestinians, not remain silent. Keene for Palestine asks the HRC to draft a statement that includes concrete steps the HRC will take to ensure the safety and inclusion of Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim community members. It is urgent, as Israel's massacres continue against Gaza. City institutions have been silent for over 300 days and Keene for Palestine believes it is imperative for the HRC to immediately speak up, for the community and for posterity, so future generations know the people of Keene stood on the right side of history.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked for discussion. Dr. Morris stated that this is something the HRC has not done before. She continued that there has not been any discussion (about Palestine) because everyone is afraid to have a discussion. The more it is not talked about, the more harm is being caused. She is open to at least discussing it.

Councilor Workman stated that as a Councilor, she is conflicted. She continued that she believes there should at least be a discussion. The Mayor has autonomy to place an item on more time or accept it as informational. She does not want to give false hope that the outcome of a committee-level discussion would be any different (from the Council outcome). She does not see the harm in at least having a conversation and bringing it to a community-level conversation. She does not know if a resolution or proclamation could or would result. If the HRC's communication was referred to a Council committee, either the Municipal Services, Facilities, and Infrastructure Committee; Finance, Organization, and Personnel Committee; or Planning, Licenses, and Development Committee, that would at least open the door. Those Council Committees are where community dialogue can happen.

Dr. Morris stated that this is an instance in which sometimes decorum gets in the way, because this is not an intellectual discussion. She continued that it is a trauma-informed discussion, needing someone who can facilitate a trauma-informed discussion. Some people might come to the discussion with motivations not in line with either side, so the question is how to have an honest discussion if there are people there with an intent just to hurt and engage in unhelpful ways. A discussion like this is not just about maintaining decorum. It is about a long history of trauma. Our community has individuals from all walks of life who have been subjected to trauma over years and centuries. It is important for people to be able to treat others as loving community members. She does not think the City Council's structure and decorum can help them rise to the occasion for this heart-to-heart community conversation. She does not know if the structure is in place.

Dr. Morris continued that she is not sure exactly what Ms. Carbonara and Ms. Bogdonoff are asking of the HRC. Personally, she does not think just making a statement would be very meaningful. It would be meaningful if they came together as a community and said, 'This is not us against them, it is us trying

to figure out how to manage the very complicated feelings we all have, the very complicated things that go into governments making decisions to do certain things that maybe the people don't agree with,' and all of that. All governments make decisions people disagree with, but it is up to the people to say how they come together and treat each other. She is not sure what the best place would be, or if the HRC could even sponsor it, because the HRC members would first need to work through some feelings and discussion before they could sit in community with each other.

Dr. Saleh stated that he echoes Dr. Morris's sentiment, and believes that progress cannot be made unless they start listening to each other. Yes, there is trauma as well as other issues, and they are trying to break the mold of not listening to each other. Decorum is important, as they were discussing earlier (regarding the City Council rules). Rules are made to serve (the people's) needs. If there is a will, this can be done. What comes to his mind is the "commission made after the death of George Floyd" (the Racial Justice and Community Safety Committee), which Dr. Morris led. The conversation that happened was very healing for the community. Thus, the City has the precedence and the resources to facilitate something like this. It would not be easy, but he believes they (the HRC) can make that recommendation.

Rabbi Aronson stated that apart from the question of the discussion that the HRC should have, there are initiatives in the works to create dialogue, reading groups, and other programming, such as at the Monadnock Interfaith Project (MIP). Another initiative is happening between some folks in his Jewish community and folks from Keene for Palestine. He hopes those will bear fruit, and Dr. Morris and Dr. Saleh are right that there is a lot of trauma and emotion and a need for listening.

Rabbi Aronson continued that the HRC's mission is quite narrow. It is strictly educational and focused on local issues. He thinks that in light of what the Council decided, there are still ways to present the cause that are local. They (the HRC and the City) have days for Martin Luther King, Juneteenth, the Keene International Festival, and Indigenous People's Day. There are many other people they could be speaking out for. Palestinians, Muslims, and people seeking asylum or refugee status are our neighbors, and they want to make sure everyone is represented and everyone's human rights are accounted for. He suggests they be strategic in finding a way they can make a statement work within the purview of the HRC's mission.

Ms. Carbonara thanked the HRC members. She continued that the City's mission statement says the City is "highly collaborative," and their (Keene for Palestine's) experience has been the opposite. It is important and meaningful that the HRC has started this discussion. She agrees that making a statement is not the best move and they need something more active, like a reading group or community conversation. She invites everyone to an event at the Antioch building on Avon St., on August 28 at 6:00 PM, to celebrate Palestinian culture, heritage, food, and dance.

Ms. Burke stated that Trauma Response Monadnock is a good group to reach out to, funded through MFS. She continued that they might be able to help get a community discussion going.

Mr. Morrill stated that he thanks Ms. Carbonara and Ms. Bogdonoff for coming. He continued that this is an important conversation to be having.

Ms. Bowie asked if anyone has examples of what other municipalities have done regarding this topic. Ms. Carbonara replied that the NH municipalities that have passed a ceasefire resolution are Durham, Dover, Lebanon, and Hanover. She continued that she is not aware of any municipalities other than Keene that have a Human Rights Committee.

Dr. Saleh stated that even though Keene is a small city, they have the HRC because this is the City of Jonathan Daniels. He continued that Keene's small size should not limit them in reaching for their aspirations.

Discussion continued. Dr. Morris spoke of how wrong it is when sometimes supporting the Palestinian people is conflated with being anti-Jewish. She spoke of the importance of ensuring that any statement the HRC makes is clearly about what the HRC is standing for. It is heartbreaking that so many children, including Jewish children, are experiencing the stress, pain, and trauma from the situation their governments are making.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that this meeting has gone over time, but she suggests they each take some time over the next month to think about how it might be appropriate for the HRC to move forward (on this topic). She continued that they can discuss it under "New Business" at next month's meeting. Others agreed.

8) **Adjourn – Next Meeting September 9, 2024 at 5:00 PM (Second Monday Due to Labor Day)**

There being no further business, Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos adjourned the meeting at 6:12 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Britta Reida, Minute Taker

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