

City of Keene
New Hampshire

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Monday, October 7, 2024

5:00 PM

**Room 22,
Recreation Center**

Members Present:

Sofia Cunha-Vasconcelos, Chair
Dr. Mohammad Saleh, Vice Chair
Rabbi Daniel Aronson
Ritu Budakoti
Debra Bowie, Alternate
David Morill, Alternate

Staff Present:

Alyssa Bender-Jesse, Youth Services Manager

Members Not Present:

Dr. Dottie Morris
Tedd Benson, Alternate
Gina Burke
Councilor Catherine Workman
Marti Fiske
Aja Davis
Emma Charles
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 5:07 PM. Roll call was conducted. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked alternate member David Morrill to be a voting member today.

2) Approval of September 8, 2024 Meeting Minutes

Rabbi Aronson made a motion to approve the meeting minutes of September 3, 2024. Ms. Bowie seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

3) **Finance Report**

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that the HRC's total income for the year is \$2,000, and that does not include fundraising that is event specific. She continued that the HRC has a balance on hand of \$4,804. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied yes, it is because they finally got the \$2,000 in. The only expense so far that has been brought to her attention is the \$150 for the tablecloth.

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that Carrah Fisk-Hennessey is the staff liaison for the Keene International Festival (KIF). She asked if it would be beneficial to the HRC if she takes the KIF expenses out of (the HRC's budget) and puts the KIF information on a second page. She could have Ms. Fisk-Hennessey give her the KIF's budget report each time before the HRC meeting, as she has her own spreadsheet and document for it. Ms. Budakoti replied yes, it would be very helpful to have them separated like that, and clearer.

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

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that they will forego an update, since the Coalition member is not present.

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

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if the City's internal DEI Committee has met since the last HRC meeting. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied yes, but she does not have much new information today. She continued that they are still working on the same things she told the HRC about last time. They started creating an internal survey to try to get an understanding of City employees' views of the community. The City Manager and Deputy City Manager wanted to create an even bigger survey, instead of having multiple small surveys sent out, so the DEI Committee is waiting for them to complete their part of the survey to combine the five DEI-focused questions with that. They are hoping to have a better next step for working on more aspects of the Racial Justice and Community Safety report.

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that the great news, which she found out from Ms. Fiske at the last meeting, is that the Keene Library has a very high percentage of DEI-focused materials in its collection. She believes that is a recommendation from the RJCS report that has perfectly been hit, because of Ms. Fiske and all of the great work the Library does.

Sam Sintros of Alstead stated that she is a teacher in Keene, working with English Language Learners. She asked if the survey is available in languages other than English. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that the survey is only for City of Keene employees. Ms. Bender-Jesse explained the RJCS report, the City's DEI Committee, and its work.

Rabbi Aronson stated that he wants to lift the question up, because it is not something the HRC thinks about frequently. He continued that even if the survey is for City employees, there might be employees for whom English is their second language. He is also aware that everything the HRC puts out is in English. There might be people for whom English is not a native language or who lack facility with it. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that is a great point. She spoke about the possibilities for translating surveys into other languages, such as through Microsoft 365's tools, which she will look into.

Rabbi Aronson stated that he has another question about the RJCS report. He continued that at the last meeting, the Assistant City Attorney talked to the HRC about the HRC wanting to request that the City Council and other City committees begin their meetings by reading a statement of inclusion. The HRC did not follow up on what the Assistant City Attorney said. He wonders if the HRC is interested in pursuing a different path, or if her comments meant this is "dead in the water." Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that she does not think the Assistant City Attorney was saying it was dead in the water. She continued that she was asking the HRC to consider the implications (their request would have).

Discussion ensued. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos spoke about what the Assistant City Attorney said to the HRC. Ms. Budakoti asked which organizations they are talking about bringing the (statement of inclusion) to. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that the City Council is the only body the HRC could make the request of, and the Council could allow or deny it. She suggested the HRC might need time to digest the Assistant City Attorney's comments. If there is interest, the HRC should have this discussion. Rabbi Aronson spoke in favor of the HRC moving forward with the request to the City Council, and not being afraid of the potential pushback or slippery slope, because it would feel like the HRC is doing its job. This committee was created for a reason. He thinks they should discuss how to word their request/recommendation.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that they could put this on next month's agenda for the whole HRC to discuss, or create a subcommittee to work on a draft. Rabbi Aronson replied that they could do both. Dr. Saleh noted that the next meeting is scheduled for Nov. 4, which is Kristallnacht. Discussion ensued about how several HRC members are participating in Kristallnacht, and about the possibility of changing the date of the HRC meeting.

Putting the topic of the November meeting date on hold, Ms. Bender-Jesse asked if the HRC wants her to add to next month's agenda a discussion of the wording of their communication to the City Council and a possible subcommittee. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos, Rabbi Aronson, and others replied yes. Ms. Budakoti spoke about helping the City Council understand why the HRC is making the recommendation and why it is important, even if the Council ends up voting against it.

6) **Acceptance of Committee Event Reports**

A) **Indigenous Peoples' Day**

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that everyone has the flyer for Indigenous Peoples' Day. She continued that she has an update from Ms. Fiske. Ms. Fiske is no longer available to be at the event, due to a personal matter. She herself is out of town that whole weekend. She asked if anyone from the HRC is available to be at the event in Ms. Fiske's place. The Library has everything set up, so the HRC member would need to greet the speaker and deliver a short introduction that Ms. Fiske will write ahead of time. The Library staff will be responsible for building access, all A/V, paying the speaker, and all of those details. Brief discussion ensued. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that she will do it. She and Ms. Bender-Jesse can talk about it after the meeting.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that it will be a great event and she strongly encourages HRC members to attend. Ms. Bender-Jesse asked the HRC members to share the flyer on social media, share the Facebook event the Library created, and spread the word about the event.

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

Rabbi Aronson stated that the working group is coming together. He continued that he has heard from a few people, and hopes to schedule a meeting within the next two weeks. He asked Mr. Morrill if he had said he wanted to be part of it. Mr. Morrill replied no, he had said he would try and connect Rabbi Aronson with his friend at the Historical Society, Roland Russell. He will give his contact information to Rabbi Aronson again.

Rabbi Aronson stated that if anyone else from the HRC wants to join the MLK Day working group, they can let him know. Ms. Budakoti replied that she will join.

C) **Black History Month**

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that this is Dr. Morris's event, and she has not seen or heard from Dr. Morris in a few months. She continued that she hopes Dr. Morris is doing okay. She asked if anyone has had contact with her. Ms. Bowie replied that Dr. Morris is well, but very busy, with classes that conflict with the HRC meeting times.

D) **Juneteenth**

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that the Juneteenth working group has their first meeting next week or later this week, to start planning for June 2025.

E) **Pride**

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that the HRC had a presence at Pride, which went very well, and she commends Mr. Morrill and the working group. She asked if they have had a chance to look at the results of the survey they did.

Mr. Morrill replied that the HRC's table at the Pride Festival went very well, and they received over 50 completed surveys. It was great to have so many people interested in the HRC. The working group met to debrief, and they have some good ideas for next year's Pride Festival if they choose to table again, and ideas for their own Pride event in June. Based on survey feedback, they are leaning towards doing an art show with queer artists, hopefully incorporating live music and possibly a mural. The working group meets again in a couple weeks. He is connecting with Arts Alive to talk about the possibility of partnering. They will reach out to other local groups as well. Brief discussion ensued. Sam Sintros shared ideas and thoughts about local arts people to connect with.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked how many people are in the Pride working group. Mr. Morrill replied four. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if they could use more. Mr. Morrill replied yes. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that Sam Sintros is welcome to join if she wants.

F) Keene International Festival

Ms. Budakoti stated that the Keene International Festival (KIF) was great, and she thanks the community for their support and love and participation. She continued that the festival was busy, well attended, with great weather, and she heard overwhelmingly positive feedback from the community.

Ms. Bowie stated that she (led the) "Kindness Wheel" activity at KIF, which is from the Compassionate Community group. She explained how the activity had acts of kindness for each different age group to do, as a way of encouraging people to connect with each other. Ms. Sintros spoke of how her middle school students enjoyed participating.

Dr. Saleh stated that he unfortunately had to miss the KIF this year for the first time. He continued that when he comes across people from different nationalities, he always brings up the KIF, asking them if they are aware of it and encouraging them to go. Many of them have not heard of the KIF, which surprises him. He encourages further publicity. Maybe the City could send notices to other towns. Ms. Budakoti replied that that is a great idea, and to go back to Ms. Sintros's point, everything so far has been in English. She continued that another factor could be determining which languages to translate the KIF information to. Ms. Sintros replied that she could give the KIF organizers information about the first languages of Keene students K-12 – there are almost 20 languages. Discussion continued about translation options.

Rabbi Aronson asked if the KIF is always the last weekend (in September). Ms. Budakoti replied that it is purposefully always the same weekend as the Clarence DeMar Marathon.

Ms. Sintros spoke of publicity ideas, such as having people who live in surrounding towns hang KIF flyers there. Ms. Budakoti spoke of making use of the Library, since that seems to be a place most people visit. Dr. Saleh stated that as the Regional Outreach person from the MDEIB, he is working to make connections with people in surrounding towns, and could share the flyer. Discussion continued about translating the flyer into multiple languages and KIF publicity on the radio. Ms. Budakoti spoke of how it is not just a Keene festival, as people come from the Monadnock region, MA, VT, NY, and more.

7) **New Business**

Dr. Saleh stated that he was tasked with brainstorming, with other HRC members who had volunteered, to find a way to have a conversation about the crisis in the Middle East. He continued that there are five people who volunteered, six including Dr. Morris, whose idea this was. He apologizes for not having had time yet to connect everyone. He knows they are all eager to have the conversation. Representative Joe Schapiro is also willing to participate. He (Dr. Saleh) will work on putting a meeting together for everyone. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos suggested including Patrick Heneghan, Director of Cheshire County Restorative Justice, as “challenging conversations are kind of his specialty.” Ms. Bender-Jesse offered to connect Dr. Saleh with Mr. Heneghan.

Ms. Bender-Jesse asked for more information about how many HRC members will be meeting to do this brainstorming. Discussion ensued about whether a quorum of HRC members would be present and whether that is allowed, as a working group. Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that she encourages Dr. Saleh and the others to move forward with their meeting, as she looks into the logistics of it. She would like to be part of it, too, and she does not count toward quorum. Ms. Bowie stated that Dr. Morris has restorative justice training, and she herself has some training as well. Dr. Saleh spoke more about what Rep. Schapiro is offering – to connect Dr. Saleh with the person who facilitated this kind of conversation at the Statehouse. He continued that Rep. Schapiro recommends that if the HRC ends up hosting a community conversation, they have an independent person facilitate it. Discussion continued. Rabbi Aronson stated that he can be a resource and help find resources in the Jewish community.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that finishing the conversation about whether/how to make the recommendation to City Council will be an item on the next agenda. Discussion resumed about whether/when to meet in November, given the conflict with Kristallnacht. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos suggested they have Ms. Bender-Jesse email the HRC to see who would be attending the November 4 meeting and who would not, to see if there would be a quorum. If there would be a quorum, they would meet. Others agreed and discussion continued.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if there was any other new business. She asked if Ms. Sintros wanted to say anything.

Ms. Sintros stated that she mostly came just to see what the HRC was all about. She continued that working with English language learners, she has realized how many resources are lacking for those students and their families, (such as) information about services that is communicated in their native languages. She did not know if that would be within the HRC's purview. She wanted to see what work the HRC was already doing, and it sounds like they are doing many great things. She wonders how non-native English speakers can be better accommodated and supported. She knows there is something in the works for a refugee center or multi-cultural center in Brattleboro, VT, because there is a bigger refugee population there. She would love that for Keene, as there are many families in Keene who are isolated and living in situations that are not great. She would love for all her students to feel good, to feel welcomed, and to know that they can go to places and have resources for them. The Keene Library is great, and the public school libraries have made it a point to have diverse collections. Some school librarians make sure every student who is a non-native English speaker has at least one or two books available in their native language. Keene may be small but it has many people from all over (the world), and she wants more for Keene. She does not want people to be hidden. She wants the community to be aware of the diversity Keene has, and to be welcome and accommodating. The HRC, for example, is here to be welcoming and accommodating.

HRC members thanked Ms. Sintros for coming. Dr. Saleh spoke about the good work of the Keene Immigrant and Refugee Partnership and its sister organization Project Home, which he is part of. He continued that Project Home will have an event at the Keene Unitarian Universalist church on October 20. Discussion continued.

Ms. Budakoti stated that she thinks this is a conversation the city needs to have. She continued that they need to see how many languages they are catering to, because if everyone is doing their own efforts in their own way, it takes money, time, and resources. She wonders if there is a pathway forward where they can all join forces, as they all have the same intent of catering to the diverse community of people to feel welcome and understand each other. Maybe they can join forces at least with translation, at least for disseminating information. She proposes the HRC look into this. Discussion ensued.

8) Adjourn – Next Meeting November 4, 2024 at 5:00 PM

There being no further business, Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos adjourned the meeting at 6:01 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Britta Reida, Minute Taker

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