

City of Keene
New Hampshire

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Monday, December 2, 2024

5:00 PM

**Room 22,
Recreation Center**

Members Present:

Sofia Cunha-Vasconcelos, Chair
Dr. Mohammad Saleh
Rabbi Daniel Aronson
Gina Burke
Debra Bowie, Alternate (remote)
David Morill, Alternate

Staff Present:

Alyssa Bender, Youth Services Manager

Members Not Present:

Dr. Dottie Morris
Aja Davis
Councilor Catherine Workman
Marti Fiske
Ritu Budakoti
Emma Charles, Alternate
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."*

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos called the meeting to order at 5:06 PM. Roll call was conducted. Ms. Bowie stated that she was participating remotely, from home, due to COVID-19. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked Mr. Morrill to be a voting member today, standing in for Dr. Morris.

2) Approval of October 7, 2024 Meeting Minutes

Ms. Burke made a motion to approve the meeting minutes of October 7, 2024. Mr. Morrill seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

3) **Finance Report**

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that she will soon be adding the Keene International Festival (KIF) to the HRC's budget (it is currently separate), but other than that, nothing has changed.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if anyone had questions about the Finance Report. Hearing none, she moved on in the agenda.

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

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked Dr. Saleh or Ms. Burke for an update. Dr. Saleh stated that he missed the last Steering Committee meeting. He continued that the Steering Committee had organized a listening session at the library, which went well and was attended by 40 people. There will be a follow-up in a month or two. The topic was school bullying, and its impacts in society. The mother of the student who lost her life due to suicide was present. This listening session was a significant accomplishment for the Coalition. He encourages anyone who can to attend the future event.

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

A) **1.A Follow up**

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that she put this on the agenda so the HRC could talk about whether they want to move forward with the 1.A recommendation or somehow continue the conversation. She continued that at the September meeting, the Assistant City Attorney, Amanda Palmeira, had spoken with the HRC about the issue. It is up to the HRC whether to continue the conversation.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos summarized that the HRC had been interested in having the statement that they make at the beginning of their meetings one that all City boards and committees say at the beginning of their meetings, and Attorney Palmeira talked to the HRC about how the HRC does not have the authority to do that but could make the recommendation to the City Council. The City Council could decide to move the recommendation forward or ignore it. Attorney Palmeira shared concerns about the possibility of a "slippery slope," in the sense that other people or groups might make requests, too. The question becomes, in light of that, whether the HRC still wants to recommend to the City Council that this kind of (inclusive) language/statement be said before each City committee or commission meeting.

Dr. Saleh stated that that was one aspect of the conversation, but there was a larger context. He continued that the HRC had summarized the goals and recommendations of the Racial Justice and Community Safety Report, recommending a couple phases of (action steps), which the City Council was reviewing. He asked if that – how the recommendations would be implemented – is still part of the conversation.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that “1.A. Follow Up,” in particular, was put on the agenda because at the October HRC meeting, the HRC talked about wanting more discussion about recommendation 1.A. in particular. Regarding the whole executive summary that the HRC put forward, the City formed a DEI group with representation from each department, and Ms. Bender-Jesse has been updating the HRC on that group’s work and progress. Currently, that is the best access the HRC has, as it does not sound like any one person has been tasked with addressing everything in the executive summary.

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that she is now the chair of the City’s internal DEI committee. She continued that she could give the HRC updates on the different bullets. Regarding recommendation 1.A, even when the City’s DEI Committee tried to push it forward, it bounced back, and (the feedback was) that only the HRC could bring it forward as a recommendation. That is why Attorney Palmeira came to speak with the HRC.

Ms. Bender-Jesse continued that she can give an example of implementation. One recommendation from the RJCS Report was about hiring, and the City switched to a new platform that gets rid of several categories that could lead to (applicants) being overlooked quickly. She was recently part of an interview committee and got to see what the new platform looks like, which is amazing, as it just puts forward applicants’ experience and limits the other information. It was great that the HRC put that bullet forward and it resulted in such a big shift. Another example is the Library. Ms. Fiske has spoken about the huge increase in diversity in the collections, which is fantastic. They have reached out to a Deputy City Manager for an update on Fact TV, as one of the recommendations was to have Fact TV show more diverse shows and movies. The DEI Committee can only act on the bullets that are directly related to the (City of) Keene, as they do not have authority with the colleges or outside organizations, but they have been making good progress on, for example, the recommendation about paid internships.

Dr. Saleh thanked Ms. Bender-Jesse for the update and for taking on that role. He continued that he would like to request that she update the HRC about any progress made on each bullet point, even if the update is very brief, going forward. It would be helpful if she could refresh the HRC’s memory on what each bullet/ask was, followed by how the DEI Committee or other group is addressing it. It would help satisfy the HRC to know it is not disappearing in a black hole. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that to clarify, the HRC does not have authority. She continued that they are lucky to have Ms. Bender-Jesse as the HRC liaison as well as the DEI Committee chair. They appreciate what Ms. Bender-Jesse can provide.

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that going forward, the HRC can add “DEI Committee Report” to the agenda and she can give a report each time, such as a bulleted list giving the overview of each (recommendation) and what the DEI Committee has started talking about or doing. She asked if that would be helpful for the HRC. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos and Dr. Saleh replied yes and thanked her.

Dr. Saleh stated that they still have not decided what to do about recommendation 1.A. He continued that he does not personally feel strongly one way or the other. Rabbi Aronson stated that he was the one who had previously spoken about following up on this, but it does not seem like the rest of the HRC has strong interest in or energy for pushing the issue, and he is okay with that. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that there are only five members present today. She continued that they could talk about it again in January if Rabbi Aronson wants. Rabbi Aronson replied that he does not think that is necessary. Discussion continued. Rabbi Aronson asked if the other committees and boards know that this (beginning meetings with a statement of inclusivity) is an option. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that each group can create and control their own meeting processes, and probably they are just focused on the topics and issues of their specific groups, not thinking about or prioritizing the (human rights) lens that the HRC sees everything from. She continued that they might be aware that they can start (meetings) with whatever they want, but might not understand the value of (a statement) the way the HRC would. She thinks this issue will continue to percolate and the HRC could talk about it another time.

6) Acceptance of Committee Event Reports

A) Indigenous Peoples' Day

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that this was Ms. Fiske's event. She continued that Ms. Fiske sent the HRC an update, but it is not in today's agenda packet because it was from November. It was a well-attended, engaging event.

Ms. Bender-Jesse read Ms. Fiske's update, for the record:

"Indigenous Peoples' Day event, Hawk Henries, Eastern Woodland Flutes and Music, was held on Sunday, October 13. Unfortunately, I was not able to be present myself. Sofia graciously acted as a representative of the Committee and introduced the speaker. The Library staff said about 30 people attended this event and were engaged in discussion. From the discussion and questions, it was believed that several attendees were also musicians."

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that she attended and it was wonderful, with much conversation, and a tone that was collaborative and warm.

B) Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

Rabbi Aronson stated that he realized that he could have given the HRC the minutes of the last Martin Luther King, Jr. Day working group. He asked if they want that. Others replied that Rabbi Aronson can just tell them about it. Rabbi Aronson stated that the working group met on November 20, and it includes people from the YMCA, the high school and middle school, the Library, the Monadnock Interfaith Project, and the Monadnock Youth Coalition. He continued that the event will be January 20 at 5:30 PM at Heberton Hall. The Community Kitchen will have a breakfast for community leaders or whomever the committee wants to invite, at the Community Kitchen's expense. Rob Malay, Superintendent of SAU 29, has representatives

from the different schools and will spearhead that, for the breakfast part. The vision for the MLK Jr. Day program this year was to highlight student voices and try to maximize participation from the schools, but that is not working out, due to the music programs not being on board. They have very busy schedules in January. However, MoCo Arts will have a theater performance. The working group has decided to put out calls for submissions from local students K to 12. They can be performances, written pieces, or physical art. There will also be activities in the schools themselves, using “advisory sessions,” regular times in the schools for important discussions to happen. All of the schools will dedicate a session to MLK Day. The high school is creating a lesson with assistance from Tom White of the Cohen Institute.

Rabbi Aronson continued that in addition to all of that, the working group decided to identify a particular MLK speech with a portion of text that can be used as a prompt for the creative pieces (students will be submitting) and the discussions in schools. They chose a piece from his 1956 speech “Facing the Challenge of the New Age.” It mentions NH. Dr. King once spoke in NH, so the working group is searching for historical footage of that. The working group will work with the Keene Sentinel to publicize the call for student submissions. The breakfast details are still up in the air, but the working group meets Wednesday, December 4, on Zoom, and will figure that out.

Dr. Saleh stated that it is great that all of the schools will use advisory sessions to discuss MLK. He asked if that has historically been done, or if it was an outcome of Rabbi Aronson’s conversation with the Superintendent as a result of the committee’s initiative. Rabbi Aronson replied that he does not know for sure, but imagines that it has been done in the past. He continued that there is a concerted effort this year to have everyone use the advisory time for this purpose. He credits Ritu Budatoki for presenting the idea and appreciates having her on the committee and helping connect them with the schools.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that Dr. Morris knows a gifted young vocalist who might be interested in participating in the MLK Day event, if it fits with the program. She continued that Dr. Morris intended to reach out to Rabbi Aronson, but if she has not yet, maybe Rabbi Aronson could contact her. Rabbi Aronson replied absolutely, and he welcomes connections with other youth that HRC members know, who would be interested in participating. He spoke of two young women of color who are part of the Restorative Learning Center, whom he hopes get involved with the MLK Day program, because they have been recommended for having great energy and could really make a difference. Ms. Burke stated that Gathering Waters might be interested in this, too. Rabbi Aronson replied that he reached out to Gathering Waters but did not hear back. Discussion continued. Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that she could try to connect Rabbi Aronson with their guidance counselor.

C) Black History Month

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that this is Dr. Morris’s event. She continued that Dr. Morris let her know that this semester, she teaches on Monday evenings and that is why she has been

unable to come to HRC meetings, but next semester, she hopefully will be available. Black History Month is in February and there is not a lot of time. She will reach out to Dr. Morris about it.

D) Juneteenth

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that the Juneteenth working group has met twice and they have a first pass at a program. She continued that using what they have learned from the previous years strengthens the event. They wanted the event to be at Central Square again because it worked so well last year, but this year, Central Square will be torn up at the time, due to the Downtown Infrastructure Improvements Project. Thus, the Juneteenth event will be back at Railroad Square. They would like two of last year's musical acts to be this year's headliners. They are planning the different elements of the event and its marketing based on what they learned from last year, and they are in great shape. They will meet again on Thursday.

Rabbi Aronson asked who is on that working group. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos named the members, representing the YMCA, the City, and others. Discussion continued.

E) Pride Event

Mr. Morrill stated that the Pride working group has met once since the last HRC meeting, and decided to move forward with planning an art show, featuring a queer artist. He continued that he met with a representative from Arts Alive, who recommends the Pride working group enlist the help of someone who knows how to organize art shows. He is working on that, and also has connections with Friends of Public Arts. He will meet with a couple people from that group who are interested in helping and then schedule another working group meeting. They are also looking at collaborating with other organizations like Keene Pride and a Keene State student group. What the event will look like is still wide open. They would love to include live music, maybe some speakers, and a mural. They want the event to be in June, but the exact date and the location have yet to be decided. It would be great to have the Pride event complement but not compete with other June events.

Rabbi Aronson stated that they should keep in mind that Keene State will not be in session in June. Mr. Morrill replied that that is why Keene Pride does their festival in September, but the Pride working group likes the idea of having a Pride event during the actual Pride Month. Rabbi Aronson stated that there is a group at the high school they might want to reach out to. Mr. Morrill replied yes, they are on the working group's radar for sure.

Rabbi Aronson stated that young people are really into digital art. He continued that it would be interesting to find a way to incorporate that. The MLK Day working group was talking about making good use of the HRC's website, by maybe creating a Google folder with art pieces for people to see; that is an idea for the Pride working group to consider as well.

F) Keene International Festival

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that Ms. Budakoti is not here to give an update. She continued that since the event was held less than three months ago, she assumes there is not much to update the HRC on anyway. She asked if anyone else had something to add. (No).

7) New Business

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if any members of the public wanted to introduce themselves and if there was anything they wanted to discuss with the HRC.

Ed Haas stated that he is here as an interested member of the public, and to help make connections. He continued that he is mostly just observing. The work the HRC has been doing for the past couple meetings is coming up to the City Council, for acting on the (City Council's) Rules of Order, and he looks forward to continued discussions with the HRC on those matters.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos thanked Mr. Haas for coming. She asked if anyone else had new business.

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that HRC membership terms need to be looked at. She continued that currently, terms are up for Aja Davis, Gina Burke, Mohammad Saleh, and Tedd Benson. Ms. Burke said she will stay on. Ms. Davis has not attended any meetings and has not communicated with her (Ms. Bender-Jesse), so she will probably be removed, which is up to the Mayor and the City Council. Mr. Benson wants to be kept in the loop but is unable to renew his membership. Dr. Saleh has served two terms and is technically not able to renew, but the HRC and the City want him here and will not ask him to step off. Similarly, Dr. Morris's term expired in 2020 (but she is still here). This is the first time the HRC has ever had a full board, and they have not had anyone else submitting interest forms to join. Losing Mr. Benson and Ms. Davis means no longer having a full board.

Ms. Bender-Jesse continued that she is not certain about how the City will handle the expiration of Dr. Saleh's and Dr. Morris's terms, but she has heard that one option is for Dr. Morris and Dr. Saleh to become alternate members and for the alternate members to become full members. After a year, they could flip back (to full member) or stay as alternates, because alternate member positions do not have term limits. She asked Dr. Saleh to let her know, whenever he can, whether he would like to stay on the HRC. Dr. Saleh replied that he will get back to her on that.

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that Ms. Bowie, Mr. Morrill, or Ms. Nescimento could become a full member now that the spot is available. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that would make sense, if Ms. Bowie, Mr. Morrill, or Ms. Nescimento would be interested, since they are here consistently. Discussion continued about membership numbers and terms and how alternate members work.

Dr. Saleh asked if Dr. Morris will be able to continue. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that she thinks that Dr. Morris can stay if there is not someone new who is wanting to join.

Rabbi Aronson stated that he recommends Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos or Ms. Bender-Jesse reach out specifically to the high school and the Superintendent so the HRC can have another representative from the schools. He continued that the high school, in particular, is an important community to include in the discussions. Also, now that Councilor Workman is no longer the member, the HRC needs another Councilor. Discussion continued. Rabbi Aronson stated that he can reach out to Rob Malay.

8) Adjourn – Next Meeting January 6, 2025 at 5:00 PM

There being no further business, Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos adjourned the meeting at 6:02 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Britta Reida, Minute Taker

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