

City of Keene
New Hampshire

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Monday, March 4, 2024

5:00 PM

**Room 22,
Recreation Center**

Members Present:

Sofia Cunha-Vasconcelos, Chair
Gina Burke
Tedd Benson, Alternate
Debra Bowie
Rabbi Daniel Aronson (arrived at 5:11 PM)
Ritu Budakoti (arrived at 5:19 PM)

Staff Present:

Alyssa Bender-Jesse, Youth Services Manager

Members Not Present:

Councilor Catherine Workman
Dr. Dottie Morris
Dr. Mohammad Saleh
Marti Fiske
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 5:03 PM.

Roll call was conducted. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that today Mr. Benson will step in for Dr. Morris as a voting member, and new member Debbie Bowie will fill in for Marti Fiske as a voting member.

2) Approval of January 8, 2024 Minutes

Mr. Benson made a motion to approve the meeting minutes of January 8, 2024. Ms. Burke seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

3) Finance Report

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos explained the layout of the finance report for the benefit of the new members.

Ms. Bender stated that at the January meeting, the balance on hand was printed incorrectly. She continued that staff looked into it and updated/corrected it. On the form, she added the correct balance to where the year ended. They also updated the Martin Luther King, Jr. Day section. To answer a question from a previous meeting, yes, the Pride event did use the whole \$500 allotted for the event last year.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos explained the HRC's budget for the benefit of the new members. She stated that the HRC annually receives \$2,000 from the City, which is divided equally by the annual events the HRC puts on. It is up to the chair of each event's working group to figure out where to get whatever additional funds (if any) the event needs. Typically, but not always, the HRC does not spend its entire budget and has carry-over funds. The use of excess funds is voted upon by the entire HRC.

Ms. Bender-Jesse asked if the HRC wants Black History Month to stay on the events list in the finance report, but without the \$500 funding listed, since last year it was a brand new event and not specifically in the HRC's budget. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos agreed. She stated that they should probably figure out how to allocate the budget for next year.

Discussion ensued about the budget. In response to a question about Black History Month, Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos explained how Dr. Morris organized a rather ad-hoc, impromptu event last year that worked out well, but it was unclear whether the HRC hosting a Black History Month would happen annually. The HRC needs to figure out whether to make it official and how to allocate the budget accordingly.

As discussion continued about the budget, Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos explained that it has its own budget; the KIF organizers have consistent funding sources

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

Rabbi Aronson arrived at 5:11 PM.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos gave background information about the synergy between the HRC's work and the MDEIB's work, and the people who are members of both.

Ms. Burke stated that she is part of the MDEIB's Business Advisory subcommittee, but does not know what has been happening with the larger coalition. She continued that she thinks they just finalized the strategic plan, but is not sure. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that hopefully Dr. Morris or Councilor Workman can confirm that at the next HRC meeting.

5) Racial Justice and Community Safety Report Update

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos gave background about the work of the Racial Justice and Community Safety (RJCS) Committee, which Dr. Morris was a part of. She stated that the RJCS Committee provided a report to the City, which the then-Mayor asked the HRC to review and give the City recommendations about. After a great deal of review, the HRC provided an Executive Summary of the RJCS Report to the City, with recommendations. The HRC is advisory and has no authority to direct anyone to do anything. The City now has a DEI Committee with representation from each City department, doing good work.

Ms. Bender stated that the Executive Summary just made it to the DEI Committee. She continued that they are reserving their next meeting for going through the entire report.

6) Acceptance of Committee Event Reports

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that one of the HRC's primary functions is to create events for the public that are opportunities to dialogue and learn about human rights issues. She continued that the events (on the agenda) are ones that they have identified as ones to plan every year, and each has a working group.

a) Black History Month

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that she would love a debrief of this event from anyone who attended. Otherwise, they will wait to hear from Dr. Morris. Ms. Bowie spoke positively about the event and what she appreciated about it. She stated that the songwriting workshop with Crys Matthews was helpful and gave ideas on how to have dialogue in a non-confrontational way. The performance was excellent, too. She wishes it had a bigger turnout. Brief discussion ensued.

b) Juneteenth

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that the next meeting is March 27. She continued that the working group has solidified the program for the main event on Wednesday. She gave information about the satellite events they are planning for that week, and spoke of the synergy happening with other groups from the area, and how well it is all coming together. She stated that they need to do fundraising.

Ritu Budakoti arrived at 5:19 PM.

Rabbi Aronson asked who is on the working group and what part of the event the HRC owns. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that the HRC technically owns the Wednesday night concert. She gave more information about the concert. She spoke of the great collaboration with MONIFF, the Keene YMCA, and others, which makes her hesitate to say that anyone "owns" anything. Discussion continued about Juneteenth. Rabbi Aronson spoke about how the Keene

SwampBats asked him and other faith leaders to participate in an event they planned for that Wednesday night and how he is communicating with them and encouraging them to do something for Juneteenth.

Ms. Bowie asked about typical numbers of people attending the event. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos spoke about how it was probably 60 or 70 last year, total, indoors due to rain. Ms. Bender replied that she thinks the number was higher. Discussion continued. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos spoke about how the working group has learned, over the years, about getting the word out. They will have promotional banners this year.

c) Keene International Festival

Ms. Budakoti stated that the planning has kicked back up for the September 28 event, at the Rec Center, from 11:00 AM to 3:00 PM. She continued that the committee welcomes anyone who wants to get involved in any capacity, such as volunteers for the day of, sponsors, or getting the word out. It is about celebrating the great diversity in the Monadnock region. Discussion ensued. Ms. Budakoti stated that the plan is for the event to be outdoors but will move inside if weather necessitates.

d) Indigenous Peoples' Day

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that Ms. Fiske is the chair of the Indigenous Peoples' Day working group and is not here today. She continued that it is probably a little early for that working group to be planning, so she assumes there is no update.

e) Pride

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that the HRC member who chaired the Pride event has left the HRC. She continued that at the last meeting she gave everyone a heads up that she would be asking today for an HRC member to volunteer to chair the Pride event.

Rabbi Aronson replied that he would be happy to work on it.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that since there are new members, she will give everyone another month, to think about whether they have the time/ideas/capacity to chair the Pride event.

f) Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

Rabbi Aronson stated that last month he submitted a report. He continued that many people worked hard on this event. Ms. Fiske took the part at the Library and ran with it, the Community Kitchen ran with their part, Ms. Burke did the press release, and Ms. Bender promoted the event on social media. Bensonwood was an underwriter, which they really appreciate. Rabbi Aronson continued that it was not a collaborative effort (with other community groups), however, in the

way that Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos was describing for Juneteenth. He is interested in learning how some of the HRC's other working groups work in tandem with other (community) groups.

Rabbi Aronson stated that there is the question of what to do with other income that came to the HRC for Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, from the Monadnock Interfaith Project, and the \$500 the HRC budgeted for. He asked if they ever received the money from the college that Dr. Morris had talked about. Ms. Bender replied that they have not received anything. Rabbi Aronson stated that the event raised a good amount for Homeboy Industries, but it would be nice if the City sent something from what the HRC has.

Rabbi Aronson stated that the Community Kitchen sent an invoice. He continued that during planning, the Community Kitchen only asked the HRC to pay for the food, but the itemized invoice is like what one would expect from two fully catered meals, which the Community Kitchen needs for their own taxes, although they do not expect the HRC to pay for more than the cost of the food. Discussion ensued about the event's expenses and money raised.

Ms. Bender stated that since the HRC did not meet last month, she wants to add now that outside of the money received from the sales of (Father Greg Boyle's) books, there were substantial donations made online, and via check, for Homeboy Industries. She continued that it is amazing how much they have been able to give Homeboy Industries. Rabbi Aronson stated that there is Bensonwood's contribution to Homeboy Industries, too, which is great. He continued that he was very happy with the event, which had great attendance. The only disappointment was the lack of attendance of (public) high school students. The working group would like to work more with the MDEIB, and wanted youth singers, but that would have had to be planned months in advance – those are things to think about for the future.

Rabbi Aronson stated that the question on the table is whether the HRC should pay the Community Kitchen just for the food, as agreed, or give them more. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that she thinks the HRC does not need to vote on that, because it is the MLK Day working group's budget to make decisions about, unless there is a process she is unaware of.

Ms. Bender replied that she asked Rabbi Aronson to bring this to the group to have a conversation about it. She continued that the question is whether the HRC wants to use the balance on hand or the money raised. Rabbi Aronson asked if the HRC wants to send more of the remaining money to Homeboy Industries, or give it to the Community Kitchen to cover the cost of the labor for the event. Discussion ensued.

Ms. Budakoti made a motion for the HRC to send the remaining money to the Community Kitchen. Rabbi Aronson seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that they are looking at sending \$1,550. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that sounds good.

Rabbi Aronson stated that earlier, Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos had asked the HRC for their thoughts on the best method for getting working group chairs to submit their event updates (for the HRC meetings/agendas), and it would be helpful if they could get a reminder about two weeks prior, such as “Please submit reports by [date].” Discussion ensued. Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that she can send the working group chairs a reminder a week in advance. Ms. Budakoti asked if that reminder will come at the same time as the email HRC members reply to to say whether they are coming to the meeting. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that anyone who knows they *cannot* attend a meeting should let Ms. Bender-Jesse know in response to the email; there is no need to send “I’m coming” emails.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that for the MLK Day event, today they discussed its finances and briefly touched on the fact that it was a great event, and she wants to say again that it was a wonderful event. She continued that she wants to thank Rabbi Aronson and the working group for the program. Others agreed that it was great. Ms. Bowie stated that it had a great turnout. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos agreed, noting that it was standing room-only in the back. She continued that it was the best turnout she has seen for a Martin Luther King, Jr. Day event.

7) New Business

Ms. Budakoti stated that she was told she is now a full member instead of an alternate. She asked if that will be reflected in a future agenda and meeting minutes. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied yes. She continued that if anyone is interested, she has the membership list showing everyone’s membership status and when people’s terms are expiring.

Ms. Budakoti introduced a friend who came with her today and is interested in the HRC.

Rabbi Aronson stated that it is the Cohen Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies’s genocide awareness month and there are upcoming events. He continued that there is a film screening of “First They Killed My Father” at the Library at 6:00 PM on March 7. The next day at 12:30 PM in the Mason Library or via Zoom is Cohen Conversation: Reflections on The Killing Fields, with Bodie Barton, a survivor of the Cambodian genocide. There is a photography exhibit at the Library from March 4 through April 9. On April 3 from 3:00 to 4:30 PM, the author of “First They Killed My Father” will be speaking and doing a book signing in the Mountain View Room of the Student Center. The Genocide Awareness lecture is April 3 at 5:30 PM at Keene State College, with more details at the Cohen Center’s website.

Ms. Bowie stated that she will send a link to the Cohen Center’s website to Ms. Bender-Jesse, who can send it out to the HRC members. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos reminded the HRC to not click “reply all” to avoid inadvertently creating a quorum. She thanked Rabbi Aronson for the information.

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that many people were very moved by having Father Greg Boyle here for MLK Day, to the point where someone else is trying to get him to come back to Keene to

continue the conversation. She continued that recently, Omar Ndizeye came to Keene, through the Cohen Center, for a fantastic event that included restorative circles and a panel. As a result of those two events coming together and bringing that restorative conversation to the area, she and people from several area organizations have come together to discuss bringing something like that to Keene again. They understand how much work Father Boyle has done and they want to continue that conversation and see how the community can keep working together in that restorative light. It is something for the HRC to be aware of, if they are interested in helping make a continuation out of the amazing event.

Ms. Bowie stated that to add to that, she is a chair on KSC's Truth, Reconciliation, and Equity Collaborative. She continued that she has also been attending the United Church of Christ (UCC), which is working on a Compassionate Community program. She is seeing all of these different groups (doing similar work) and she is telling everyone that they have to find a way to come together, because they could then accomplish so much more. Gail Somers is working on a multicultural center, too. How can they all work together? Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that that is a great question for everyone to mull over, and maybe they will have suggestions for next time.

8) Adjourn – Next Meeting April 1, 2024 at 5:00 PM

There being no further business, Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos adjourned the meeting at 5:56 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Britta Reida, Minute Taker

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