

City of Keene
New Hampshire

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Monday, January 6, 2025

5:00 PM

**Room 22,
Recreation Center**

Members Present:

Sofia Cunha-Vasconcelos
Dr. Dottie Morris (arrived at 5:04 PM)
Dr. Mohammad Saleh (arrived at 5:04 PM)
Marti Fiske (arrived at 5:04 PM)
Rabbi Daniel Aronson
Ritu Budakoti
Debra Bowie, Alternate
David Morill, Alternate

Staff Present:

Alyssa Bender, Youth Services Manager

Members Not Present:

Councilor Catherine Workman
Gina Burke
Jennifer Nescimento, Alternate
Emma Charles, 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 5:00 PM. Roll call was conducted. She asked alternate member Ms. Bowie to stand in for Dr. Morris, and alternate member Mr. Morrill to stand in for Dr. Saleh.

2) Approval of December 2, 2024 Meeting Minutes

Mr. Morrill noted a correction to line 219 – “career artist” should be “queer artists.”

At 5:04 PM, Dr. Morris, Rabbi Aronson, and Dr. Saleh arrived. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that Mr. Morrill and Ms. Bowie return to alternate member status.

Ms. Budakoti made a motion to approve the meeting minutes of December 2, 2024, as amended. Rabbi Aronson seconded the motion, which passed with a vote of 4-0. Ms. Fiske and Dr. Morris abstained due to being absent at the December 2 meeting.

3) **Finance Report**

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that the only change is the \$500 under Indigenous Peoples Day.

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

Dr. Morris stated that there has been a lot of discussion about the future of the Coalition, and the group's direction. She continued that there is some concern that not enough is being done, because there are so many people joining and leaving the group. Another Community Conversation is proposed for Saturday, February 8. Details about that will be disseminated soon.

Ms. Fiske asked what the topic will be. Dr. Morris replied that it will be a continuation of the previous one, regarding building the community we want to have. Ms. Fiske asked where it will be. Dr. Morris replied that the Coalition talked about wanting to have it somewhere outside of Keene so the Coalition is not too Keene-focused, but no one suggested an actual location, so it might end up being in Keene. Ms. Fiske stated that they could consider having it at the library in Peterborough. Discussion continued.

Dr. Saleh asked how many of these community conversations the Coalition plans to have, and if they are planning any kind of action to follow the discussions. Dr. Morris replied that they want to build community and trust and then move to the actions. She continued that the plan was to have three more community conversations. The Education Subcommittee suggested having one with youth, at the high school. They realize they need to think of how to reach youth at other schools, while holding the event at KHS. She thinks the HRC had talked about holding one on Juneteenth. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that they had talked about that in the Juneteenth subcommittee/working group meeting. Dr. Morris replied that she can help plan that and set that up but might be traveling on the day of.

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

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that per the HRC's request at the last meeting, she is reporting on the process being made (by the City) for each section the HRC had in the (executive summary) they sent for the Racial Justice and Community Safety Report. The full conversation can be found in the September meeting minutes, which are on the website.

She continued that she did not write anything under "1.B." because the City's internal DEI Committee discussed that 1.B. might be more fit for the MDEIB, since the DEI Committee is focused on the City.

Ms. Bender-Jesse continued that regarding the other two, as she spoke about at the last HRC meeting, the City has new (HR) software for application tracking that allows staff to redact certain information (about candidates), which is great. The City surveyed staff in all departments, and the DEI Committee added five questions to the survey to get a feel for whether employees understand the harassment policies, feel comfortable talking to their supervisors, and feel like they are in an inclusive environment. The DEI Committee has just received the full packet of information of their five questions and are beginning to go through it.

Ms. Bender-Jesse continued that she finally got the affiliation form with Keene State College (KSC). One of the HRC's recommendations was for the City and Keene employers to focus on creating more paid internships and opportunities. The City has an affiliation form with KSC that says KSC students doing internships with the City have to be paid. That does not necessarily apply to all colleges, but it a step. She is not aware of any City departments that do not pay their interns. The City has an internal pay scale specifically for interns. That is universal throughout the City.

Rabbi Aronson asked if interns being paid is KSC's requirement, not the City's requirement. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that it is both. It is an agreement between the City and KSC.

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that 4.G. is a recommendation that the City and Keene employers seek incentives to promote equity in employment. She continued that the HRC wrote that they hope that when the City seeks contracts or connects with outside organizations, they work with ones that have strong DEI policies and focus on DEI programs within their organizations. The City does not have a specific policy on this, and she has not gotten access to see what the City has in words. HR informs her that no exact wording in a policy states that the City focuses on DEI-centered organizations for contracts and bids, but in talking with Finance Department staff, she knows they do heavily focus on making sure to bring in outside organizations that have a strong DEI focus.

Ms. Bender-Jesse continued that for the next (recommendation), she brought in the work that is already going on with the Vision Keene 20-Forward project. The Community Development Department had a strong foundation of when they started going out into the community to get more information. For example, outside of work, she is part of a Rotaract group, which Community Development reached out to and asked to come talk with. Community Development did multiple meetings and hosted events with organizations such as Hundred Nights and the Community Kitchen, going to a variety of areas. They did a good job showing how when the City is trying to have conversations with the community, they can reach people where they are at and make the conversations accessible to everyone, instead of doing something limiting like holding all of the meetings at City Hall.

Ms. Bender-Jesse continued that regarding the HRC's recommendation about the Library, she has received information from Ms. Fiske, and can personally attest to the fact that the Library

does a fantastic job with keeping a diverse collection. Regarding the HRC's recommendation that the City review the FACT TV programming and encourage changes that promote diversity and inclusion, FACT TV has new leadership. This new leadership has informed the City that they have a big focus on wanting to promote the community. This might be a great way to keep focusing more on DEI in the community as a whole.

Ms. Bender-Jesse asked if this (report from her) is helpful. HRC members replied yes and thanked her. Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that the DEI Committee includes representatives from every City department, and they try to meet monthly, but it is difficult to coordinate everyone's schedules. She will update the HRC on any progress the DEI Committee is making and will probably create written updates like this on a quarterly basis.

Dr. Saleh stated that it is satisfying to see they are making significant progress. He asked if there is a way they could update the citizens of Keene about the progress, so the information is not available only to the DEI Committee and the HRC. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that all the HRC meeting minutes—including the reports that are provided to the HRC of the DEI Committee's work on the RJCSR—are public and published monthly on the City's website. She continued that she does not know if there is a process beyond that, other than sharing the DEI Committee's progress with the HRC and the public via its minutes when available. She will bring that question to the DEI Committee.

Dr. Saleh replied that he thinks it is important for people to be aware of (what committees are doing), and he does not know how many people actually read the meeting minutes. He spoke of how each committee could have an initiative to, for example, write a letter to the editor or have an engagement with the Sentinel, to keep the community informed. He asked if the document that Ms. Bender-Jesse wrote can be included in the meeting minutes. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that she can have it attached to the agenda packet that is published on the website.

Mr. Morrill asked if the DEI Committee has a webpage. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that it is a new committee, created as a response to the HRC's action report. She continued that the DEI Committee's power is similar to the HRC's, in that they can make (recommendations) to the City Council and that is about all. The intent is to make progress on these actions, within the City. It is a good starting point. They do not have a webpage, as they are still trying to find their footing and determine their next steps. It was important to them to survey the City employees to see how people are feeling and what the DEI Committee should be concerned with. They are now progressing with looking at the input they received on the five survey questions, potentially having action items for each of those.

Mr. Morrill replied that many businesses have a "DEI" or "Sustainability" tab on their websites. He continued that it seems like it could be an effective way to disseminate this information, sometime in the future. Ms. Fiske replied that she is not sure how the City would handle it, because it is an employee committee, focusing on employee activities. She continued that

typically, something like that is not posted out to the general public; it is meant to be internal to the City.

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that she has been thinking lately and has been trying to set up a meeting with Deputy City Manager (Rebecca Landry) and Asah (Cramer), about reworking the HRC's webpage. She continued that she thinks there is a lot to update on it, and it could be much more (visually appealing) and engaging. She would love to have help and support from some HRC members. Once the webpage is updated, people could start sharing it on social media and connect with the Sentinel. Maybe the (HRC) could do a column on the webpage, updating the community on the progress happenings, events, and so on and so forth.

Discussion ensued about the webpage. Dr. Morris asked for specific ways the HRC can support the webpage, and asked if there are ways the HRC can support the City employees in doing the (DEI) work. Ms. Fiske replied that as they start having opportunities for education for City staff, it would definitely help if they could get community contacts from people. If (HRC members) know people who could do trainings, that would be great. Ms. Bender-Jesse agreed.

Dr. Morris spoke about someone from Brattleboro they could talk with, who works in HR and has a diversity committee that does trainings. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that she thinks they met with her a few years ago, to get ideas of best practices. Discussion continued. Ms. Fiske asked Dr. Morris to send the information about that person.

Dr. Saleh stated that his hope for disseminating the information was that it would be not just for the City and employees, but that other private entities would get inspired by seeing the ideas, such as neutralizing the hiring process, which is not done as much as it should be. He is not an IT person, but he would be happy to be involved with this anyway.

Discussion continued. Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that she will set up a meeting, and HRC members who are interested and available can attend and give ideas about what should be on (the HRC's webpage) and how they think it should be set up. She continued that she could then give all that information to Ms. Landry and Ms. Cramer and ask them to help create it.

Discussion continued about the City's website in general, and what is and is not possible to do with it. Ms. Fiske spoke of how an individual department or group does not have the ability to do whatever they want with their webpage, because the City's website has strict limits to ensure it works for the entire organization.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that the underutilization of the HRC's webpage has been an intermittent discussion topic for years now. She asked if the HRC thinks this should be a subcommittee/working group. Others replied yes. Mr. Morrill stated that he could do a meeting or two but could not join a subcommittee. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that she thinks it will only be one or two meetings, to discuss what the HRC wants for the webpage, and then it is about

getting Ms. Landry and/or Ms. Cramer to (implement) it. She herself does not even know how to get access to edit anything.

Ms. Budakoti asked for clarification. She asked if they are talking about creating a completely different website for the HRC. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that they have a webpage, which is part of the City of Keene's website. She continued that they are talking about reconceptualizing what it serves to do and how to best maximize its value in communicating with the community. Currently, it only has agendas, meeting times, and some photos of HRC events. The HRC can do the creative thinking, and Ms. Landry and Ms. Cramer can do the execution. She does not know how everything works, but maybe it is more complicated and the HRC needs to discuss a budget for this. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that the HRC, as a City committee, has a webpage that is part of the City's website and it thus has to stay within certain parameters. She spoke more about what the City departments do with their webpages, and continued that this is about updating the HRC's webpage to make it look more engaging, and seeing if there is a way for the HRC's posts to be promoted with more than just a link.

Dr. Saleh stated that even an updated webpage is still a passive form of communication, a webpage they hope people will find. He continued that he wants to know if there is something more active, a way for the City to broadcast the good work that the HRC does as well as the good work of other committees. His question is whether the City has a communications team, and whether such a team could take on the task of highlighting some of the committees' work. Ms. Fiske replied yes, the City has a communications team, but it has limited time, because they are also communicating about pragmatic things like road closures. She continued that the HRC could design a post they want on social media and submit it to the communications team for them to post, but they cannot just say, "Take care of all of our social media for us."

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if it is correct that Mayor Jay Kahn had been talking about revamping his webpage as a way of broadcasting events and highlighting certain things. Discussion ensued about how that is what others recall as well, but they have not seen that happen.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that Mr. Morrill and Dr. Saleh will have a meeting or two with Ms. Bender-Jesse (about the HRC's webpage). Ms. Budakoti replied that she hopes to join virtually, if that is possible.

6) Acceptance of Committee Event Reports

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos thanked the people who submit committee event reports in writing. She asked if people are amenable to receiving a written report and then asking questions at the meeting as needed, as opposed to going through each event on the list at the meeting. Others replied yes.

A) Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

Rabbi Aronson stated that the event is January 20 at 5:30 PM at the Keene Public Library. He continued that the Library person who is working with them is Amy Kramer, who is great, and very helpful. A question the working group had was whether to record the event or stream it. He did not realize FACT TV is undergoing some transition, so they cannot rely on FACT TV as they did last year. If they stream the event, that would be through the Library's zoom, or someone's personal account. Ms. Fiske replied that Ms. Kramer will find out whether they can do that.

Rabbi Aronson continued that the working group member he thought was going to reach out to the Sentinel about publicity and seeking submissions for the event thought that *he* (Rabbi Aronson) was going to do that. Thus, he reached out to the Sentinel to see how much support the Sentinel can give the event, at this very late date. Today was the initial submission deadline for students to submit creative pieces for performance or exhibit. The working group extended the deadline to January 13. Ms. Budakoti created a great flyer design for that, and the flyer is going out. They hope students will submit poetry, pieces of art, or things that they can perform at the event. As of today, the working group does not know what the event will look like, as it depends on the (submissions) they get. The center of the event might be performances or might be the exhibit in the Library's Atrium, which they would like to stay up for two weeks, longer if the Library has the capacity. Ms. Fiske replied that she will need to check the Library's calendar, but often exhibits can stay up for three or four weeks.

Rabbi Aronson continued that he will reach out to local radio folks, because he recently learned that there are more local radio stations than he knew about. He will see about doing interviews to help promote the program. There will again be a breakfast on the morning of the 20th. (SAU 29 Superintendent) Rob Malay is coordinating the invitations for that. It will be at the Community Kitchen, per the Community Kitchen's invitation, and will not cost the HRC anything. It will be less formal than last year's and will include three "voices of faith" talking about the theme of creating a more beloved community. He asked if Dr. Saleh will be one of those speakers. Dr. Saleh replied yes. Rabbi Aronson continued that he would love to hear from Dr. Saleh about who else to invite from the faith leaders team.

Rabbi Aronson asked Ms. Bender-Jesse to share the digital flyer with the HRC. He asked HRC members to share the flyer with their contacts, especially anyone in grades K through 12 who might be interested in submitting something.

B) Black History Month

Dr. Morris stated that the working group has not met yet. She continued that she was trying to see if there are any films out (for Black History Month). She spoke about a movie that might be a possibility, and some contacts she can reach out to. She will check in with the other subcommittee/working group member to see if she has other ideas.

Ms. Fiske asked where they were thinking of showing the movie. Dr. Morris replied the Showroom, which seemed to work, or Heberton Hall. Ms. Fiske replied that Kanopy, a huge video catalog, has public viewing rights, and the Library and KSC both have Kanopy. She continued that a search of that catalog for “Black history” yields many results. She gave more information about Kanopy.

C) Juneteenth

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that the next meeting is on Thursday. She continued that they are in the early stages of solidifying the program of events and the program for the concert. They are making good progress, and she will have a written update next time.

D) Pride Event

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that the working group gave a written update.

E) Keene International Festival

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that the working group gave a written update.

F) Indigenous Peoples’ Day

Ms. Fiske stated that there is no information at this point. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that is fair, given that it has been two months (since Indigenous Peoples’ Day).

Dr. Morris stated that she has been looking at some of the State legislative items that will be acted upon. She continued that she does not know how any of it will affect the work they do in the City of Keene. One says that institutions of higher learning and cities have to call Columbus Day Columbus Day, not Indigenous Peoples’ Day. Discussion ensued. Ms. Fiske stated that she found out this legislation has already passed and went into effect on September 1. Discussion ensued about what the legislation means. HRC members spoke strongly in opposition to it. Dr. Morris stated that the City or KSC would have to call an event “Columbus Day/Indigenous Peoples’ Day.” Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that they might have to talk with the City Attorney to see if the HRC needs to change the wording of their agenda.

Ms. Budakoti asked if/how they could advocate against this State law. Discussion ensued. Dr. Saleh asked that this formally be on the next HRC agenda. Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that she will put this on next month’s agenda under “New Business,” for the committee to discuss, if they want. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos and others replied yes. Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that she will send the HRC the text of the actual bill for them to look at beforehand. Discussion continued about how this bill got passed, and its implications. Dr. Morris, Ms. Budakoti, and Dr. Saleh spoke about the importance of respect for indigenous peoples’ history, and the rights and safety of immigrants and refugees. Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that for the next meeting, she will try and

get information from the City Attorney about her interpretation of the law, regarding whether the HRC agenda has to be changed right away, and see what her input is for the HRC.

Dr. Saleh stated that the HRC should be open to having conversations with partner groups that actively work to protect immigrants and refugees. He continued that he will soon be going to a meeting to revive the conversation with the Sheriff. Rabbi Aronson suggested the HRC invite Eli Rivera to the next meeting or the one after, to let the HRC know what his concerns are and how the HRC can be supportive. Others agreed. Dr. Morris stated that Greenfield's MLK Day event is about bringing together vulnerable people and people with means to help them. She continued that the ACLU will be doing more "Know Your Rights" (sessions), and maybe they could have one here. Discussion ensued. Dr. Saleh stated that one is happening in Keene. Ms. Bowie suggested they get a supply of "Know Your Rights" cards to share with people. She spoke of her concerns for the safety of local immigrants and refugees. Dr. Morris stated that they could bring in an immigration lawyer who is here in NH, willing to speak to anyone, and great at organizing immigration lawyers throughout the east coast. She continued that he spoke with students and the students really liked him and asked a lot of questions.

7) **New Business**

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that next month's new business will include reviewing the State law about "Columbus Day." She continued that they will invite Eli Rivera to talk with the HRC about his concerns. The HRC will also examine holding some trainings in the Keene area around knowing your rights and how to support vulnerable people in this time.

Ms. Budakoti stated that the Historical Society is showing a film, Lost Boundary, at the Colonial Theater on Sunday, January 12, at 2:00 PM. Discussion ensued about the film.

8) **Adjourn – Next Meeting February 3, 2025 at 5:00 PM**

There being no further business, Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos adjourned the meeting at 6:15 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Britta Reida, Minute Taker

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