

City of Keene
New Hampshire

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Monday, February 3, 2025

5:00 PM

**Room 22,
Recreation Center**

Members Present:

Sofia Cunha-Vasconcelos
Dr. Dottie Morris (via Zoom at 5:04 PM, until 5:47 PM)
Dr. Mohammad Saleh (at 5:04 PM)
Marti Fiske
Rabbi Daniel Aronson (at 5:04 PM)
Gina Burke
Debra Bowie, Alternate
David Morill, Alternate

Staff Present:

Alyssa Bender-Jesse, Youth
Services Manager

Members Not Present:

Ritu Budakoti
Jennifer Nascimento, Alternate
Emma Charles, Alternate
Councilor Catherine Workman

Mayor Jay Kahn

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 5:02 PM.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked Ms. Bowie to step in for Ms. Budakoti and asked Mr. Morrill to step in for Rabbi Aronson.

2) Approval of January 6, 2025 Minutes

Ms. Fiske made a motion to approve the minutes of January 6, 2025. Ms. Bowie seconded the motion.

Ms. Fiske noted that corrections are needed to the paragraph that runs from lines 126 to 131. She continued that it is not clear as to which meeting minutes are public and published monthly on the website. She asked Ms. Bender-Jesse to clarify that for the minute-taker. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that the City's internal DEI Committee is not public, but the HRC's minutes are. She continued that what she meant is that by explaining the DEI Committee's work on the RJCS report to the HRC, going line by line, it all becomes public knowledge in the HRC's minutes.

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

Dr. Morris stated that she is in her office at Keene State College, no one is in the room with her, and the reason she is participating remotely is because she would have been very late to the meeting if she attended in person and would also have to leave early.

The motion to approve the meeting minutes as amended passed by a unanimous roll call vote.

3) **Finance Report**

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that there is nothing new. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that she feels like there are some expenses from the Martin Luther King, Jr. Day event that the HRC is not aware of yet. She asked if that is correct. Rabbi Aronson replied yes, that will be in his report (from the Martin Luther King, Jr. Day working group).

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

Dr. Morris stated that she was out of town for the last Coalition meeting. Dr. Saleh stated that the Steering Committee met, and they are still looking for additional members. He continued that there is a desire to use their current fund to have an interim executive director and hire someone on a more permanent basis. The February 8 event is still on schedule. If anyone wants to make any announcement that involves the community and relates to diversity and equity they should communicate with Mary Gannon. Dr. Morris is part of that anti-bullying organizing team. He asked if she had anything to add.

Dr. Morris stated that she wants to make sure people have seen the notice for the Community Conversation event, which will be Saturday, February 8, at the Alumni Center at KSC. Community building and mingling is at 9:30 AM, with the discussion starting at 10:00. Around 12:15 PM, they will have lunch. She encourages people to attend. The event is being held by the Education Subcommittee.

Dr. Saleh stated that they had discussed having an event in Peterborough. He asked if that is planned for the future. Dr. Morris replied that they were not able to pull it together fast enough for this time. She continued that the Education Subcommittee plans to do three community conversations, plus the one on Juneteenth, and one will be outside of Keene.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if the executive director is a new position. Dr. Saleh replied yes, a new position that has always been in the planning process. He continued that the goal has always been to have a permanent executive director, once they have enough organization and funding. They feel that someone could be in that interim role. The Steering Committee will have more to share in the near future. Now more than ever, it is important to do diversity work. The Coalition realizes they need to ramp up their efforts. The webpage has information people can explore, including the responsibilities, what they are trying to achieve, and the subcommittees.

5) Racial Justice and Community Safety Report

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if the City's DEI Committee has met since the last HRC meeting. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied yes, but they were finishing up the work that she had already explained to the HRC at the last meeting. She continued that the committee has hit a point where they have officially gone through the entire survey, and now their next step is to create action steps for them to move forward.

6) Acceptance of Committee Event Reports

A) Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

Rabbi Aronson stated that he sent the HRC the written update from the Martin Luther King, Jr. Day working group. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos reminded folks to not use "reply all" on emails, to avoid inadvertently creating a quorum, and to send all communication through Ms. Bender-Jesse.

Rabbi Aronson stated that there was a snowstorm the night before/morning of the event, and the 8:00 AM breakfast planned at the Community Kitchen did not take place. He continued that they moved the interfaith panel discussion, which Ritu Budakoti moderated very well, to the evening program. That was great. Mayor Kahn spoke at the event and did a great summary of the essay by Martin Luther King, Jr. that the event was based on, in terms of creating a more beloved community. There were six student presentations. Two students sang a song, and others read poems and an essay. The KMS string ensemble played Lift Every Voice and Sing. Many students did not want to read their works out loud, but all of the poems and some artwork from Cedarcrest were on display in the library's atrium, and are still there. The interfaith panel followed the students' presentations. He, Dr. Saleh, and Rev. Elsa Worth spoke. The recording is available via Fact TV, as is the recording of the previous year's event. There were about 70 people in attendance for the student part of the program, and about 30 for the discussion after.

Rabbi Aronson continued that the working group will meet this Thursday to review the event. A big question for them to discuss is whether they want to make another attempt at centering student voices and working with the school district, starting as early as April, on this effort. Other school districts that have done this have not had great response, so he is not sure. The

Sentinel published a great article about the event, and Dan Mitchell interviewed him the week before. The only expenditure was \$300 for an ad in the Monadnock Shopper News.

Discussion ensued about the event. Rabbi Aronson stated that it worked well to have a bigger working group this year and be able to delegate. He continued that having a big-name speaker (last year) really drew people out. Ms. Fiske stated that from her perspective, as someone involved in many library programs, she thinks the attendance at this year's MLK event was still great. Rabbi Aronson stated that because the students represented the diversity of the community, the audience did as well, which was nice. He thanks the library staff for their great work.

Mayor Kahn stated that he met with the St. Joe's teacher who gave the assignment for Father Boyle last year, a reading. She continued that she reminded him of the event in the Cohen Room where Father Boyle gave a talk and the students had the opportunity to talk with him. He suggests Rabbi Aronson talk with the (working group) about the thought of a group read, which could be proposed for classes across multiple school districts or school types. Rabbi Aronson replied that that was part of the program this year, with high school and middle school students that had advisory sessions/small group discussions. He thinks they chose not to use the essay, but it was available to them. The school districts could have structured programming around the essay. The parochial schools, including St. Joseph's, were invited to participate, but there was no response. That was disappointing.

Mayor Kahn stated that this came up with (people) who are going to start a charter school, which will be the fifth high school in the city. He continued that if there is a suggested read at the high school level, there is the opportunity of working through five different schools and seeing who takes it up.

B) Black History Month

Dr. Morris stated that there is nothing to report at this time, because there is so much going on. She continued that if it is not too late, she and Ms. Fiske can talk about which film to show at the library. Ms. Fiske replied that it might be too late, since they are less than two weeks out from the program. She continued that maybe it could happen if they were done (planning) by noon tomorrow, but they would still only have 10 days to advertise. February 15th was the only day the library had available. Dr. Morris replied that in that case, she will just show (a film) on campus later in the month and invite the HRC to it. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that there was a list of films. Ms. Fiske replied yes, she and Dr. Morris had emailed back and forth about some films. She continued that the list she sent Dr. Morris was mostly of DVDs, so unless the college has the same DVDs and the same license, Dr. Morris would have to go through a different batch of films. Dr. Morris replied that she will check in with the person she is meeting about this tomorrow.

Mayor Kahn stated that if there is an event he could promote through the Mayor's webpage, such as a library event, he would like to put something out there. Ms. Fiske replied that she will look at the library's calendar. Mayor Kahn replied that he would love to promote something and remind people that (Keene) did the Lost Boundaries film screening in January, to show that they are actively supporting (Black History) Month. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that if Dr. Morris finds a date to (show a film) on campus, Mayor Kahn could promote that as well. Mayor Kahn agreed.

Dr. Morris replied that she will send the information. She asked if there will be book displays in the library. Ms. Fiske replied yes, they always have displays for the month.

C) Juneteenth

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that the Juneteenth (working group) has effectively come up with a plan. She continued that they have two artists, in final confirmation for the June 19th concert, which they will be able to do in Central Square since the City pushed back the (infrastructure) work being done. They have kid flix and are well on their way to having another venue for a movie targeted at adults on the subject. Heberton Hall is the rain location. About a month ago, the Howard University Gospel Choir reached out and asked if there was any programming they could participate in. Discussions ensued, and the group was not available on Juneteenth itself when the concert will be, and their fee was a little higher than what (the HRC) is used to. They have been working on the issues, but the Juneteenth working group might have missed the window and other people might have grabbed up the Choir's available dates. If they have missed the opportunity to work with the Choir this year, they want to try for next year.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos continued that the Juneteenth budget is roughly in place. They raised, between in-kind and cash donations, about \$11,000 last year. They are on track to do the same this year, thanks to some consistent donors and there being a lot of community engagement with this event. Things are moving along nicely. They have banners reserved for June, through the Rotary Club.

Mayor Kahn stated that the City has declared Juneteenth a "no parking" holiday for which there will not be any parking fines. He continued that it is a small step, but a step toward designating the day as a City holiday. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that he says it is a small step, but she remembers that there were complaints about people attending the event having to pay parking tickets, so this will be appreciated. She continued that maybe next year they can get it to be a City holiday. Mayor Kahn replied that it is being worked on.

D) Pride Event

Mr. Morrill stated that the (working group) is moving ahead with planning. He continued that they plan to do an art show featuring queer artists, not just in one location, but more of a "pub crawl" style with multiple venues. They will have an opening event at one location and about

half a dozen locations where artwork will be displayed, and an after party at one of those locations. They hope to have an outdoor artist doing live painting as well. They are coordinating with Art Walk folks so they are collaborating with them, not competing, and building each other up. Art Walk will be the first weekend of June. The Pride group does not want to compete with Juneteenth, either, which means the one weekend they could have the queer art show is June 13th or 14th. The artwork will be left up for the rest of the month.

E) Keene International Festival

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that Ms. Budakoti usually gives this update, and she is not here today. Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that the KIF group met on January 28 to kick off the planning for this year's event. She continued that it will be on September 27. The planning team is encouraging people who share the community-building mindset to join them. If any HRC members are interested, they can email keeneinternationalfestival@gmail.com.

F) Indigenous Peoples' Day

Ms. Fiske stated that there is no report.

7) New Business

A) Indigenous Peoples' Day conversation

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that there has been a change in law. She continued that there are a few copies of the bill here for the HRC to look at. It has three parts. One is a change in language for how civics is taught, another is a change to the school holiday language, and the third is a change to municipal language. RSA 288:1 defines the holidays. It calls out, "*The second Monday in October, known as Columbus Day.*" The bill (House Bill 1014) says, "*Any school, college, or university described in paragraph I,*" which is supported by money that is appropriated by the State or by any city, town, or school district, "*that adopts a holiday described in RSA 288:1, shall use the name for such holiday as designated in RSA 288:1 with respect to any official communication, publication, document, or calendars.*" She continued that the other impact was to RSA 31:6-a, Holiday Designation, "*Any municipality, town, village, or unincorporated place that adopts a holiday on a date indicated in RSA 288:1 shall use the appellation for such holiday designated in RSA 288:1 with respect to any official communication, publication, document, or calendars.*"

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that she has not finished sifting through this, but she does not see any penalty for not doing (what the RSA says). Dr. Saleh stated that he was not thinking about it in terms of penalty; he was thinking about it in terms of symbolism. How did they sneak this in? The assault is on Indigenous Peoples' Day, but they grouped it as if no one would notice. At the last meeting, the HRC seemed to agree that this should not go unprotected from the HRC, which worked hard to validate Indigenous Peoples' Day. He thinks the HRC should do something to protest it, in whatever way is allowed under the law. Dr. Morris replied that

what is so disturbing about this bill is that it feels like it is dictating what not to do, in a way that other laws do not, which is troubling to their continued assertion that this is a country about freedom. Juneteenth and Black History Month cannot be taken away, because (people) created those on their own. She agrees with Dr. Saleh that they have to do something, even if it is just a letter of disapproval. One state legislator she talked with said it is very important for people to raise their voices, and she gave an example of how many people wrote in, which swayed some authors of a distressing viewpoint they were putting out there in a bill. If people remain silent, it could lead to presumptions of agreement. They should raise their voice here. She strongly agrees with what Dr. Saleh said.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that she wants to make a point that might add to the HRC's workload, but she would be remiss as an attorney if she did not mention that the ideal time to protest such legislation is when it is a bill and it is being voted on, not when it is an RSA. She continued that the HRC might want to find a way to keep track of things that are moving through the legislature, so they can make their voice heard in that timeframe.

Dr. Morris replied that she agrees, and there is so much going on that it has been hard to keep track of it all. It would be a full-time job for someone. Dr. Saleh replied yes, the other discontent they had in the last meeting was that there is so much going on, and things happen so fast that there is not always time to react, but that does not give them an excuse to just ignore it. He continued that he understands the point that they need to be cognizant of the workload. If, as Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos wisely pointed out, there is no penalty, he thinks the HRC could request that Keene continue to designate the holiday and refer to it as Indigenous Peoples' Day. Then as they advertise it that way, others could learn from their example.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that the action she will take is to read through the RSA to make sure that she is correct (that there is no penalty), and report back to the HRC next month. Ms. Fiske stated that all the HRC can do is make a recommendation to the City Council, and she thinks the City Attorney would want to be involved in this. Others agreed.

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that she reached out to the City Attorney and the Assistant City Attorney, Amanda Palmeira. She continued that Ms. Palmeira was very busy today and thus unable to give her an update. Ms. Palmeira is still looking into the action since the City has been made aware of (the RSA). They had to figure some things out, regarding how the City was going to approach it. She last talked with Ms. Palmeira about this on January 29 and they were still trying to figure it out. She does not want to say anything now that is potentially inaccurate, but what she got from Ms. Palmeira at that time was that to follow the law, they were going to say "Indigenous Peoples' Day/Columbus Day." Once she has an update from Ms. Palmeira, she will send it to the HRC. If HRC members have comments back, they can send those comments to her (Ms. Bender-Jesse) to share with Ms. Palmeira.

Dr. Morris left at 5:47 PM.

Rabbi Aronson stated that part of this just feels arbitrary. He continued that most of the holidays, as they are here, are not how people would refer to them, except maybe in a calendar listing. (For example), people would celebrate “Christmas,” but if you are going to have a flyer about a Christmas celebration, it must say “Christmas Day.” People do not say “Martin Luther King Civil Rights Day.” It was federally founded as Service Day, not Civil Rights Day. Maybe people say Washington’s Birthday, but on the calendar he just looked it, it says “Presidents’ Day.” People also tend to say “Thanksgiving” instead of “Thanksgiving Day.” This whole thing is a little problematic and arbitrary. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that part of what they are seeing is what can happen when there is a citizen legislature.

Mayor Kahn stated that the State called the day Civil Rights Day prior to the recognition of Martin Luther King Day in 1999. He continued that he thinks this is a concatenation of the new with the old, without removing the old (term) of Civil Rights Day. Rabbi Aronson asked if the HRC needs to call the event Martin Luther King, Jr. Civil Rights Day. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that the City Attorney can dictate that.

Mayor Kahn stated that filing for new legislation for 2026 would begin around the time of the holiday. He continued that were there people wishing to act individually to talk with their legislators about these sections, they could do so. Rabbi Aronson asked which holiday he means. Mayor Kahn replied Columbus Day.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that they have a guest today, (Sheriff Eli Rivera). Dr. Saleh stated that there are people in our community who have a different status, and their human rights might be violated, and law enforcement will play a role in ensuring that everyone’s human rights are preserved. He continued that the HRC wanted to invite Sheriff Eli Rivera, who recently was recognized by Franklin Pierce for his service for standing for human rights. He would like to hear how Sheriff Rivera interprets the current situation, what he expects law enforcement’s role will be, and how the HRC can partner and work together.

Sheriff Rivera stated that they are all scratching their heads, trying to put it all together. He continued that both from the federal and state governments, they are getting this basic attempt to erase a lot of the work that has been done with DEI and to make sure that everyone’s human rights are taken care of. He is taking it all in and figuring out. There are a lot of bills in the House, and a lot of push from the Federal government. A lot of what they want to do or will do will end up in Federal court. Once he sees bills actually getting enacted, then he has to figure out what he can and cannot do, how much he can push, and how much he cannot. From the beginning of his career as the Sheriff, he has been an advocate for human rights, especially for undocumented people. He has always said that if someone is here to work and to support their family or flee from violence or persecution, absolutely (he supports that). However, if someone is here to continue criminal activity, he will be the first one to walk them across the border. His standing is on the front line at the Statehouse because he went public with it. Thus, every time they bring an immigration bill, they say that “Cheshire County is a sanctuary county.” They can say that, but he has no control over what the cities or towns will do.

Sheriff Rivera continued that he is on the board of the ACLU and works closely with them on some of these bills, providing his perspective as law enforcement and how law enforcement officers can support the ACLU's work. He does not agree with them 100%, but in this situation, it is very clear to his heart, and they are strong in the position that local law enforcement is not to be doing the federal work. That belongs to the federal government. The federal government is trying to pass it down, forcing it on (local government), and they (local government) are fighting it back.

Sheriff Rivera continued that he thinks it would be good for the HRC to bring in the (Keene Police) Chief for a conversation. As a sheriff, he deals (very little) with undocumented people in the community, and maybe the officers in the towns and cities work them with them a little more. He thinks many law enforcement officers take the same stand that he does but just have not gone public about it. They (undocumented people) do the work that (others) do not want to do, and there is a place for them. We just have to figure out how to make it right. He supports finding a place here for undocumented people, but if an undocumented person is here to hide because they are a criminal, he will be the first to support that person being returned home. Again, he is figuring things out and waiting to see what modifications he will have to do. He cannot break the law and has to enforce the law. As much as he can, he can take a stand against it, as an elected official, but the law is in place for him to enforce.

Rabbi Aronson asked if Sheriff Rivera's department is affected by the federal funding freeze. Sheriff Rivera replied that there are a couple of funds that would have been frozen, but since that (freeze) is now in court, they can draw down on those funds. He continued that they do not know what will happen. You cannot just stop in the middle of a project. He does not know what the intent is. There has to be a way to review these without putting a hard stop like that overnight. They (his department) have a communications system that is halfway done, which they are still drawing down on (federal) grants for. It would not work to tell taxpayers they need tens of thousands of dollars to complete it because the federal government took the money away.

Dr. Saleh stated that what he understands from Sheriff Rivera's comments is that his position is that they (local law enforcement) will not do I.C.E.'s job for them, and if I.C.E. comes and does something, that is I.C.E.'s responsibility. He continued that he hears similar sentiments from others in law enforcement. He himself is part of an immigrant support group. There is so much in the news that it is hard to make sense of it. He asked if Sheriff Rivera has seen anything that would force local law enforcement's hand to support I.C.E. Sheriff Rivera replied that there are several State bills currently in place that are highly supported for them to do that. He continued that one is to engage in doing immigration enforcement with federal government. One was that any federal agency coming into the county had to report to the sheriff first so they can become aware of what they were doing. The sheriffs are not supporting that, because they (the sheriffs) have enough to do themselves and do not need to oversee federal agencies. They (the sheriffs) are watching the bills. That will put them in a position to be more engaged with the federal activity.

Dr. Saleh stated that if citizens want to take a stand for building a beloved community, they could stand and speak against those bills. Sheriff Rivera replied yes, absolutely, as individuals and in groups. He continued that they all have the right to provide testimony against or in favor of bills. He gave more examples of bills that are going around. Discussion ensued.

Ms. Bowie stated that the ACLU is interested in coming to Keene to give a “Know Your Rights” session or education on legislation. She continued that if anyone is interested, she has the contact information and to set it up they would need a location, day, and time. Mayor Kahn replied that he thinks Dr. Morris is the chair of the ACLU. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that this can be on the agenda under “New Business” for the next meeting.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos and others thanked Sheriff Rivera for coming.

Ms. Bender-Jesse asked if there was any other new business. Mayor Kahn stated that in terms of HRC membership, there is one regular member vacancy and one alternate member vacancy. He continued that he welcomes nominations, if HRC members have names to suggest to him.

8) Adjournment

There being no further business, Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos adjourned the meeting at 6:05 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Britta Reida, Minute Taker

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