

City of Keene
New Hampshire

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Monday, March 3, 2025

5:00 PM

**Room 22,
Recreation Center**

Members Present:

Sofia Cunha-Vasconcelos, Chair
Dr. Dottie Morris
Marti Fiske
Rabbi Daniel Aronson
Gina Burke
Ritu Budakoti
Debra Bowie, Alternate
Emma Siemer, Alternate

Staff Present:

Alyssa Bender-Jesse, Youth Services Manager

Members Not Present:

Dr. Mohammad Saleh
Councilor Catherine Workman
David Morill, 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."*

She called the meeting to order at 5:01 PM. Roll call was conducted. Dr. Morris stated that she is participating remotely from her office at Keene State College (KSC) and no one else is in the room with her. She continued that if she had come in person, she would have been late and would have had to leave early, due to work commitments before and after the meeting.

2) Approval of February 3, 2025 Meeting Minutes

Ms. Fiske made a motion to approve the meeting minutes of February 3, 2025. Rabbi Aronson seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

3) **Finance Report**

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that there has been no change to the HRC's budget since last month.

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

Dr. Morris stated that last week, the Coalition planned to have a session with students at the high school, but due to the low number of RSVPs, they decided to postpone it. She continued that the other gathering, the listening session, had to be postponed as well, due to the weather. It will now be March 29, from 10:00 AM to 1:00 PM and there will be breakfast and lunch. The Coalition will send out information about that.

Dr. Morris continued that the Coalition is trying to redefine itself and figure out what direction to go in. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if the Coalition has any requests of the HRC or of the community. She asked if there is anything that the Coalition might need in its efforts to move forward that the HRC might be able to help with. Dr. Morris replied not that she knows of. She continued that Catherine Workman is the chair, and she might have a better idea of that. It would be great to have HRC members show up for the conversation on March 29, at KSC.

Ms. Budakoti asked if they need to RSVP if they are coming. Dr. Morris replied that it is not required, but it would be helpful. She continued that she will send the flyer to Ms. Bender-Jesse to send out to the whole group.

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

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that as a quick refresher, the Racial Justice and Community Safety (RJCS) Committee had created a report, which the HRC distilled, and the life it has taken on is that there is now a DEI Committee for City employees. She continued that Ms. Bender-Jesse is on the committee and provides the HRC with regular reports about its activities, when there is something to report.

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that there is not much to report right now. She continued that now that they have looked at the entire report, the committee is, similar to what Dr. Morris said about the Coalition, trying to figure out their direction and purpose. As she reported to the HRC before, regarding the RJCS report, the City acted on what they could act on, and now there are just smaller things constantly being in the work, like hiring practices. The committee is setting up a meeting with the Deputy City Manager to try and figure out what their hope is and a new direction for the committee going forward.

6) **Acceptance of Committee Event Reports**

A) Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that Martin Luther King, Jr. Day was recent and she imagines there is nothing to report for planning the next event. Rabbi Aronson replied no, he has nothing to report. He continued that the working group has not yet met to review how this year's event went; that was rescheduled.

B) Black History Month

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that Black History Month just ended, and she thinks the HRC was unable to pull something together this year for a Black History Month event, for a few reasons. She asked if that is correct. Dr. Morris replied yes.

C) Juneteenth

D) Pride

E) Keene International Festival

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that the Juneteenth, Pride, and Keene International Festival working groups each sent a written update.

F) Indigenous People's Day

Ms. Fiske stated that she wanted some feedback from the HRC, given the conversation they had last month about the holiday's name [per NH HB1014 and RSA 288:1's definition of "Columbus Day."]. She continued that it reopens the opportunity for the HRC to talk about what happened when Columbus came and opened up the West. She is interested in looking at some things, such as a lecture or movie, which focus on what happened when the Western Hemisphere was opened up to European influences. She welcomes any recommendations people have for speakers, beyond KSC and Franklin Pierce staff. She has started looking through the Council in Humanities speakers for VT and NH, and will look at MA's offerings, too. MA has a speaker who has something on the topic, but given the controversy of State-recognized tribes versus the Federally-recognized tribes, having that person here might cause some additional complications. Thus, she is looking for another opportunity.

Discussion ensued. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if Ms. Fiske is looking for someone from a Federally-recognized tribe. Ms. Fiske replied yes.

Dr. Morris asked why they are looking for a federally-recognized group, because that is a whole can of worms. Ms. Fiske replied that two years ago, there was a discussion at the University of Vermont where members of the First Nations Abenaki tribe laid out many negative accusations against NH and VT State-recognized tribes as hurting the Federally-recognized tribes and First Nation Canadian tribes by taking away funding that should be going to them, engaging in

cultural appropriation, and actively working against goals that the First Nations tribes are working towards. They (First Nations Abenaki people) claimed that they (NH and VT Abenaki people) only had Native heritage – for example, a great-grandmother who was a member of a tribe - but were not Native themselves. A week or two ago, they spoke at the Statehouse, actively trying to start the process of removing State recognition in VT. Thus, the issue is getting even hotter than it was two years ago.

Discussion ensued. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if one of the issues is that the State-recognized tribes have a different definition of what Abenaki identity is. Ms. Fiske replied yes, in Federally-recognized tribes you have to show an unbroken lineage with a Native group, and most State-recognized groups cannot meet that standard. She continued that the argument has been, in VT in particular, that eugenics caused many Native peoples to go underground and claim other heritage in order to avoid being harassed, sterilized, and harmed in numerous other ways. Thus, most people in State-recognized tribes cannot show multiple generations of Native forebearers, and are only able to find one or two. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that it sounds very complicated. Others agreed.

Dr. Morris replied that they (the HRC) could do a whole thing on how colonization and colonialism created this rift. She continued that there is a lot of literature about definitional genocide, and how the US government engages in a certain way of counting who is Indigenous. Indigenous People are the only race of people who have to prove their identity like this. The HRC could create an (event/lecture/forum) about how colonization has created this rift and the impact it has had on identity. Ms. Fiske stated that if the HRC did that, especially if the Library was part of it, she would want it to include a “third party view,” because if they include people from a State-recognized group and people from a Federally-recognized group, she does not have the energy to mediate that. Dr. Morris replied that to her, bringing in a “third party” would be even more problematic due to the cultural appropriation that goes along with that, with someone speaking for a group or on behalf of a group. She suggests the HRC reach out to some Indigenous people in the area and see what they think.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that she thinks Ms. Fiske was suggesting a third party as a moderator, not as someone to speak for the groups. Ms. Fiske replied yes, that is what she meant. She continued that she personally does not have the skills or knowledge base to mediate that sort of conversation. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that putting together any event is complex, in light of the situation. Ms. Fiske replied yes, which is one of the reasons why she has been focusing on things like documentaries by Federally-recognized tribes outside of the immediate area, to try and work around this.

Discussion continued. Dr. Morris stated that a (presentation) about colonialism could be given by a historian. Ms. Fiske agreed. She continued that she is interested in a conversation about what happened when the Western Hemisphere opened up, because she thinks many people are not familiar with that history. They know “bad stuff happened,” but not the details of what, exactly, and how. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if Ms. Fiske is asking for the HRC to

recommend contacts who might be able to speak about that. Ms. Fiske replied yes, and obviously, there are local staff members at KSC and Franklin Pierce, but she appreciates other recommendations. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that there have been some good PBS documentaries from the past 10–15 years. Dr. Morris stated that *Killers of the Flower Moon* is a movie to look into; it deals with similar issues. Discussion continued. Ms. Budakoti stated that the book *Cobalt Red* might be good.

Rabbi Aronson stated that a program on the eugenics would also be interesting, as many people do not know it affected Indigenous people here. Discussion ensued about whether this area of New England had schools for Indigenous children. Dr. Morris stated that she will try and find the dissertation one of her students did, regarding interviewing survivors of Indian boarding schools and the abuse and trauma they endured.

7) New Business

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that last time, the HRC said that they wanted “ACLU” to be on the agenda under New Business, regarding the discussion with Mayor Kahn and Eli Rivera and possible Know Your Rights trainings. Ms. Bowie replied that she has been in touch with them (people from the ACLU) but now is waiting to hear back from them again; she knows they are really busy. She will reach out again to see if they can come. It might not be “Know Your Rights” specifically; the ACLU might give an overview of some of the things they are doing.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that she is the vice chair for the Cheshire County Bar Association, and she raised the idea of helping sponsor a Know Your Rights event, and there was interest. She continued that she has not reached out to the ACLU independently, but she will. Dr. Morris replied that she was on the phone with someone from the ACLU today about something else, and that person could help them facilitate getting something here. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if Dr. Morris is the Chair of the NH ACLU. Dr. Morris replied yes, she is the board chair, and Rick Van Winkler is the vice chair. She continued that Eli Rivera and Hunter Kirschner are also on the board. Discussion continued.

Ms. Budakoti stated that the ACLU has done a few sessions in Keene already, with Keene Community Education and other local places. She continued that there is also a local solidarity group that is working toward hosting some of the sessions and bringing ACLU people to be able to train people in Know Your Rights. They have also provided some red cards in multiple languages. Discussion continued.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if there was any other new business. Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that Jennifer Nescimento has resigned. She continued that the HRC now has three vacancies for alternate members, if anyone knows anyone. Ms. Budakoti replied that her friend is a great candidate. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked her to introduce herself.

Julie Odato, Librarian at Benjamin Franklin Elementary, introduced herself and stated that she has an interest in the HRC's goals and thinks she would fit in well here. She continued that she would like to be an alternate member. Discussion ensued and HRC members welcomed Ms. Odato. Ms. Bender-Jesse explained the process to Ms. Odato for applying to be an alternate member.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if there was any other new business.

Ms. Budakoti stated that at the Keene International Festival, there was a thought people were sharing, which she wanted to share with the HRC – with everything they are seeing and hearing against diversity, and the KIF standing *for* diversity, there might be forces at work that want a different outcome for those things. Maybe they are just skeptical thoughts, but with everything going around, they want to be mindful, knowing that people from many diverse backgrounds come to be part of the festival. They (the festival organizers) want to make it safer for people, both psychologically and physically, so that people want to continue to participate. More than any other year, this is the year when they will be put to the test. As a KIF chair, she wants to say that the KIF needs more hands on deck. They need people who can support them in any way possible. She welcomes the HRC's ideas for how to make it better, stronger, and bigger, which sends a clear message that they recognize and celebrate diversity and will continue to do so.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked how people should share ideas. Ms. Budakoti replied that people can send them to her, or wait until the next meeting, whatever works. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that she thinks the thoughts Ms. Budakoti has shared are ones that are in many of their minds, about how the work they do is going to be tested and all the more important this particular year.

8) Adjourn – Next Meeting is April 7, 2025, at 5:00 PM

There being no further business, Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos adjourned the meeting at 5:36 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Britta Reida, Minute Taker

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