

**City of Keene**  
**New Hampshire**

**HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE**  
**MEETING MINUTES**

**Monday, June 2, 2025**

**5:00 PM**

**Room 22,  
Recreation Center**

**Members Present:**

Sofia Cunha-Vasconcelos, Chair  
Gina Burke  
Debra Bowie  
David Morrill  
Dr. Mohammad Saleh, Alternate

**Staff Present:**

Alyssa Bender-Jesse, Youth Services Manager

**Members Not Present:**

Councilor Catherine Workman  
Dr. Dottie Morris  
Marti Fiske  
Rabbi Daniel Aronson  
Ritu Budakoti  
Emma Siemer, Alternate

**Jay V. Kahn, Mayor**

**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. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that Dr. Saleh is a voting member today.

**2) Approval of May 5, 2025 Minutes**

Ms. Bender-Jesse gave corrections for the May 5, 2025 meeting minutes, in the "Members Present" column: Dr. Mohammad Saleh is an alternate member, and Debra Bowie and David Morrill are no longer alternates. Jennifer Nescimento is no longer a member.

Mr. Morrill stated that page 6, line 199, says, “Mr. Morrill made a motion...” and that was not him. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that they will change it to “Rabbi Aronson.”

Mr. Morrill made a motion to approve the meeting minutes of May 5, 2025 as amended. Ms. Bowie seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

### **3) Finance Report**

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated regarding the finance report, there is a mistake – “Pride Event” and “2024 Pride Festival” are switched. She continued that she thinks Excel ended up switching the numbers. The “Pride Event” line should be equal to the \$600, and the “2024 Pride Festival” is the \$238. Number wise, that is still the accurate balance on hand.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that it occurs to her that the HRC does not have the Juneteenth budget. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that she does not have access to it, but yes, normally that is part of this. Dr. Saleh asked what the “\$500” under “Juneteenth” is indicative of. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that the HRC is allotted \$2,000 from the City each year and that is divided equally between the “original” four events the HRC does. She continued that \$500 goes to each event, as seed money, and then the (working groups) for the events fundraise on top of that. She thinks the fundraising has now reached about \$10,000, which is not reflected in this finance report because the Keene YMCA is the fiscal agent (for Juneteenth). Discussion ensued. Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that the Juneteenth expenses will show up in the finance report once they have that exact number, as you can see in last year’s column for that.

Discussion ensued about the formatting of the finance report. Dr. Saleh suggested having an additional column to clarify some of the nuances, like the fundraised amount. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that she and Ms. Bender-Jesse will look at it and bring the HRC a proposal for next month. Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that as she has offered in the past, she would be happy to redo the budget spreadsheet if the HRC wants, and put it in a different format.

Dr. Saleh made a motion for the budget to be reformatted. Ms. Bowie seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

Mr. Morrill asked clarifying questions about the Pride Event budget and expenses, which Ms. Bender-Jesse answered. Discussion continued about the formatting.

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

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if Dr. Saleh or anyone else had an update. Dr. Saleh stated that after a lot of back and forth, the Coalition decided to hire an Executive Director with the idea that documenting its work and progress would help fundraise and will lead to an eventual permanent executive director to achieve the lofty goal they set up. He continued that the most

active group is the Education Committee, which hosted two listening sessions, and he believes they are planning another.

Ms. Burke stated that the Workforce Resource Committee has been active as well. She continued that they will have a training on June 17th about supporting employees through challenging times. She gave more information about it.

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

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that the last update she gave the HRC was about two months ago when the City's DEI Committee was trying to figure out what their direction was, because as an internal committee, they were not able to respond on any of the items from the Racial Justice and Community Safety Report that were outside of the City's scope. They felt those items were more suited for the MDEIB to focus on. She continued that now, what the DEI Committee is newly looking at is creating cohorts throughout the City, talking to employees in a confidential way, about what employees are seeing in the community and what they want, what they think of and want from harassment policies, and so on and so forth.

**6) Acceptance of Committee Event Reports**

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that most of the events' working groups have submitted written updates this month. She asked if anyone had questions or comments to add.

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that per the HRC's request, she added the written updates to the agenda packet. She asked if the way she did it works for everyone. HRC members replied yes and thanked her.

- A) Martin Luther King, Jr., Day**
- B) Black History Month**
- C) Juneteenth**
- D) Pride Event**

Mr. Morrill noted and corrected a typo in his written update. He continued that the Pride Event is next Thursday, so they are trying to get the word out, and he would appreciate people sharing the flyers and the information on social media. He noted that one of the venues they had been talking with had been going back and forth about whether they could participate or not, and today said that they cannot, which is too bad, but there (are other venues) and the event is on track.

- E) Keene International Festival**
- F) Indigenous People's Day**

7) **New Business**

A) **Compassionate Communities**

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if this is something Ms. Bowie was looking at. Discussion ensued about who brought Compassionate Communities to the HRC's attention, and what the next steps are. Ms. Bowie stated that she will get more information for the next meeting.

B) **Welcoming City**

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked to hear from Mayor Kahn.

Mayor Kahn stated that they are still with the same statement that folks (from the HRC) were not real pleased with last time. He continued that in 2019–2020, he worked on the re-write of the NH non-discrimination statute, and was pleased when that passed. Thirty copies of the statement that Councilor Jones described are planted around the city. He could immediately see it fell short of what the non-discrimination language has. There are clearly 12 classes in the non-discrimination statutes. Minimally, it seemed, (the City) has to do that. The reason they adopted the language was because of the inequities relative to gender identity and sexual orientation. Along with that comes marital status and family status questions. Thus, all five of those classes are not included in the 2021 statement. It was intended to recognize that there are some historic inequities, and they should recognize that some people have a more difficult time finding their way to the table than others.

Mayor Kahn continued that given that, things have changed. We (the City) can put a target on our back, as the City has done in the past. They fought to get that target removed. Dr. Saleh asked the Mayor to elaborate on what he meant. The Mayor replied that Keene was the object of a Representative who was bringing the legislation against sanctuary cities in 2024. Dr. Saleh asked if Keene was specifically mentioned. The Mayor replied yes, in legislative testimony. He continued that he contacted that legislator and invited him to Keene, but he never responded and never came. The City works with local legislators to offer testimony. Multiple contacts have some impact to change the rhetoric. Lebanon, NH does not have a sanctuary city mandate.

Dr. Saleh stated that his understanding is that Keene never passed the sanctuary city Resolution, either. He continued that there was a very contested Welcoming Resolution in 2017, with welcoming language that was *not* the language of this (2021) statement, and some people on the other side of the political spectrum interpreted it to mean that because Keene passed the Resolution, it somehow makes Keene a sanctuary city. The Mayor replied that that is possible, but it does not say anything about sanctuary city; it says the police will carry out their duties as they are defined in law. Dr. Saleh replied that his question was whether Keene was targeted/identified as one of NH's "sanctuary cities" based on the Welcoming Resolution, and not necessarily based on this particular statement/declaration that was passed in 2021. He asked if there is an actual statement from anyone that leads them to believe the 2021 declaration is the focus. Mayor Kahn replied no, not really. He continued that what they have are two pieces of

legislation in this legislative session that specify that “DEI” must be removed from any statement, curriculum, or principles in public schools. Dr. Saleh replied that those passed. The Mayor replied yes, and they are going to the Governor to sign. Ms. Bowie replied that hopefully, they will be lost. The Mayor replied that that is what happened with the “divisive concepts.” There is a lawsuit, which no one has acted upon. These are the times we are in.

The Mayor stated that he thinks that the statement before them now as a draft is a statement of values and aspiration. He continued that it is not a vow, because vows are difficult to fulfill. Ms. Burke asked where this statement would go. Mayor Kahn replied that it would be a declaration. He continued that the 2021 statement is printed with 15 Councilor’s signatures. It is just a declaration, but the fact that it is unanimous carries meaning. As the Mayor, he delivers a proclamation nearly every week, and he would like to be able to have a welcoming statement that he could read to be inclusive of all the classes that are represented in the non-discrimination statutes.

Mayor Kahn stated that this would be on the Planning, Licenses and Development (PLD) Committee’s agenda a week from Wednesday, and should it pass, it would then be on the City Council’s agenda for June 19. Discussion ensued about how that is the date of Juneteenth. Mayor Kahn stated that the HRC could ask the City to take a look at (Juneteenth) next year, which the City has not taken a position on. Dr. Saleh replied that he is glad the Mayor is encouraging them to do that. He continued that he was not aware that Keene did not recognize Juneteenth. Mayor Kahn replied that Keene recognizes it as a parking holiday, because it is a national recognition. Dr. Saleh asked if he heard correctly that the HRC could ask for the Resolution in Keene, and ask the City Council to consider it as a holiday. Mayor Kahn replied yes, and likely the City Council would refer it to staff, and staff would need to deal with it in the ways that they deal with it, which is through negotiated agreements with bargaining units, and they would have to figure out what the cost would be to the City for an additional holiday. They would probably check with other cities to see how unique Keene would be in taking that position.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that to clarify, in answer to Dr. Saleh’s question, the HRC would have the same weight as any citizen. Dr. Saleh stated that in Rindge, the Selectmen passed a resolution that allows employees to take Juneteenth as a holiday. It is a floating holiday for them, and he is not sure how floating holidays are structured in Keene.

Dr. Saleh made a motion to ask the City Council to consider recognizing Juneteenth as a holiday.

Discussion ensued. Mayor Kahn suggested the HRC hold its Juneteenth event and then debrief on that day, and in that debriefing, recognize that it is essential for the City to recognize the day more fully. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that they will put it on next month’s agenda, to determine whether the HRC wants to request that the City examine this. Discussion continued.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that they will now return to the topic (of the Welcoming City agenda item). She asked Mayor Kahn if he had a request for the HRC. Mayor Kahn replied that if the HRC recommended this (statement), and if someone from the HRC could be a spokesperson for the (PLD) Committee, that might be influential.

HRC members asked if the statement is still the same one that Councilor Jones presented to them last month. HRC members noted that they had made recommendations about edits and changes. Discussion ensued about the language of the statement.

Mayor Kahn stated that the HRC recommended changing the language of the 12 classes, which is difficult to do, although he understands their points. HRC members noted that they had recommended adding “socioeconomic status” and “ethnicity,” and changing the word “inclusion” to “belonging.” They also recommended replacing the second usage of “belonging” with “active participation,” in the interest of avoiding using the word “belonging” twice. Mr. Morrill stated that replacing “inclusion” with “belonging” was his suggestion because “diversity,” “equity,” and “inclusion” are not randomly chosen words. Those three things put together equal belonging. If people do not want to use those words (“diversity” and “equity”), they can replace them with “belonging.” Discussion continued about the wording.

Councilor Phil Jones stated that the words are not (the most) important here, because when this goes to the (PLD) Committee, the PLD Committee could change all the wording. He continued that they (he and Mayor Kahn) are more asking the HRC about the concept. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that they can discuss the concept. She asked if it is accurate to say Mayor Kahn and Councilor Jones are writing this statement and participating in this process because they feel the 2021 statement is not (sufficient). Mayor Kahn replied that it (the 2021 statement) falls short of what the State statutes have. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that if that is the spirit, she has no trouble supporting that intention. Discussion continued. Ms. Bowie spoke about how the bottom line is that they want everyone to be part of a community, equally, and for everyone to take care of each other. The question is how to say that easily. They could wordsmith it on and on. Dr. Saleh spoke of how he appreciates the effort to be more inclusive in specifically mentioning the 12 categories, but he cannot in good conscience support the removal of the words “diversity” and “equity” just because it offends some people.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that two things are happening here. She continued that the first is the idea that the 2021 statement does not go far enough, which is why they are creating a new statement. The second is what the statement actually states. Dr. Saleh is saying that he cannot get behind the statement as it currently exists because of the word choices and the removal of the words “diversity” and “equity.” Dr. Saleh replied yes, and spoke of his opposition to the bill enforcing the avoidance of the words “diversity” and “equity”. To him, that is an authoritarian form of legislation, and part of human rights advocacy is standing up against authoritarian sentiment. He spoke of how the City Council is an administrative entity that has to do what is good for the city, and may have to consider factors like finances, but the HRC is here to stand for human rights, and it makes sense to take the moral position. He continued that Keene is the city

of Jonathan Daniels, who gave up his *life* for human rights, for diversity, equity, and inclusion to be the norm.

Mayor Kahn stated that he sees a few options here. He continued that (one option is) the HRC could give a statement of support (for the Welcoming Declaration). (Another option) is for the HRC to not make a statement, and to just appreciate that he and Councilor Jones have tried to explain the statement and its purpose, and HRC members could come to the (PLD) Committee, as individuals, to express their personal thoughts and feelings about it. The third option would be for Councilor Jones to withdraw this (Welcoming Declaration), and then the 2021 declaration stands.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that the HRC does not determine any of that. She continued that this could go forward without the HRC's support. Mayor Kahn and Councilor Jones spoke about the PLD Committee and City Council process.

Dr. Saleh stated that he fully agrees with the City Council's effort to be more inclusive. He continued that the HRC's endorsement of it is not required. He personally will not get in the way of the Council passing the resolution. It is a delicate balance the City is trying to achieve.

Ms. Bowie stated that she agrees with Dr. Saleh. She continued that the fight in her says "no," but the other part of her says this has a benefit and she does not want to cause any harm to the City, its residents, or funding. Maybe down the road, the language (the HRC is looking for) can be put in.

Mr. Morrill stated that he supports the concept, the idea of updating this declaration, but cannot personally support it as it is written. He continued that he would be more supportive of something with the word "belonging" instead of "inclusion," for the reasons he stated earlier.

Ms. Burke stated that she is with Dr. Saleh and Ms. Bowie here, on saying it more clearly. She continued that she does not know what being a "Welcoming City" means or what that framework is. The question is whether this will be a sign to put on the wall to look nice, or whether the City is doing this because they mean it, they care, and they want to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in the city. This revised statement is better than 2021 one, but does not go all the way and say everything that it should.

Discussion continued. Councilor Jones stated that he does not think "welcoming city" is a national framework. He continued that it is something he made up. Ms. Burke replied no, it is a framework. She continued that Rabbi Aronson brought it up; it is [certifiedwelcoming.org](https://www.certifiedwelcoming.org), and the town he grew up in is a certified Welcoming City. Councilor Jones replied that that would be done with an ordinance or a resolution. He continued that what they are talking about now is just a declaration.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that she wants to note that the meeting is over time, but this an important conversation that hits on something they will continue to face in the current climate, which is the question of whether to fight back tooth and nail and take the consequences, or to do the best they can with the framework they are provided with.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos continued that the HRC has to decide fairly quickly, since this (declaration going to the PLD Committee) will happen before the HRC meets again, whether they want to support the declaration in any way. She asked if there is anything the HRC members feel they can say about this declaration from Councilor Jones and the Mayor.

Discussion ensued. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if they can say they support the effort to strengthen the language from the 2021 declaration. Others replied yes. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that by saying that, the HRC is not making a statement on how they feel about the declaration's language as presented. Individuals could attend the PLD Committee meeting and make commentary as they see fit.

Mr. Morrill asked if such a motion would imply that the HRC supports the declaration language. Discussion continued, and Councilor Jones and the Mayor spoke of how the exact language in the declaration could change before it reaches the PLD Committee; they could change "inclusion" to "belonging" and change "a sense of belonging" to "we value active participation."

Dr. Saleh stated that he wants to comment that he sincerely, truly appreciates the Mayor's and the Councilor's efforts. He continued that since the HRC does not have authority, they are in a unique situation. If he were on the City Council, he would be looking at this differently. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied yes, since the HRC is advisory only, they have a lot more freedom.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that she, personally, is not willing to vote on any language that is not finalized. She continued that the HRC could have another conversation about it if Councilor Jones and the Mayor make those wording changes and bring it back to them.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if anyone was ready to make a motion.

Ms. Bowie made a motion to support the City making a stronger statement from August 2021.  
Ms. Burke seconded the motion.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked for discussion.

Mayor Kahn asked if the motion could include "as shared by Councilor Jones" to give context. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that if he is asking for "Move to support the intent to strengthen the language in the August 2021 resolution, as described in the language by Councilor Jones," she thinks they will struggle to get support from the HRC, because there is still dissent about the language. She thinks the most they will get is the HRC's support for the intent, not support for the language.



Discussion ensued about the wording of the motion. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos suggested, “Move that we support, as a committee, the intent to strengthen the language of the August 2021 declaration.” Mr. Morrill suggested “the intent to update and strengthen,” and discussion continued about the words “update” versus “strengthen.” Ms. Bender-Jesse spoke about how even just updating the classes will strengthen a sense of belonging, for people who are not mentioned in the 2021 declaration and will be mentioned in the updated one. She agrees with the word “strengthen.” Dr. Saleh stated that he thinks “strengthen” is ambiguous, and he thinks the motion would be they appreciate the effort to update the 2021 statement to be more inclusive. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if they should say they “support the effort.”

Dr. Saleh made a motion to support the effort to update the 2021 statement to make it more inclusive. Ms. Bowie seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

Councilor Jones stated that the 2021 statement was written at the time by the (MDEIB). He continued that at the time, COVID was here, and Black Lives Matter was in the news all the time. Now, they are updating it. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that “update” was in the motion.

**8) Adjourn – Next Meeting July 7, 2025 at 5:00 PM**

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that at the beginning of the year when they voted on the meeting schedule, the HRC said that they would not meet in July because they would likely not have a quorum the week of the Fourth of July. She continued that thus, there is no July meeting.

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