

City of Keene
New Hampshire

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Monday, August 4, 2025

5:00 PM

**Room 22,
Recreation Center**

Members Present:

Sofia Cunha-Vasconcelos, Chair
Councilor Catherine Workman
Rabbi Daniel Aronson
Ritu Budakoti
Debra Bowie
David Morill
Julie Odato, Alternate

Staff Present:

Alyssa Bender-Jesse, Youth Services Manager

Members Not Present:

Gina Burke
Emma Siemer, Alternate
Dr. Mohammad Saleh, Alternate
Marti Fiske
Dr. Dottie Morris

Jay V. Kahn, Mayor

1) Welcome and Call to Order

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos called the meeting to order at 5:01 PM. She 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."*

2) Approval of June 2, 2025 Minutes

Ms. Bowie made a motion to approve the meeting minutes of June 2, 2025. Councilor Workman seconded the motion.

Rabbi Aronson stated that he did not receive the minutes and thus will abstain from voting. The motion passed with a vote of 6 to 0.

3) Finance Report - NEW

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that since it is the beginning of the fiscal year, the finance report does not have much on it. She explained the new formatting of the finance report and stated that she is open to feedback on it. She continued that the Keene International Festival (KIF) budget is in process right now, which is why there is an asterisk on it.

Dr. Saleh arrived at 5:04 PM.

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

Councilor Workman stated that the Coalition hired Gina Burke as its temporary executive director. She continued that they are currently reviewing and revising the Coalition's governing documents and updating their strategic plan. They are developing a survey, starting with sending it to the members of the steering committee and all the subcommittees, and then it will be open to the general public.

Councilor Workman stated that in light of the correspondence from Keene Pride, and the issue the HRC will be taking up as new business, the Coalition hopes to be a conduit to some of those conversations and to be able to help in this situation as well. They are mindful of that and they are working with Keene Pride on some other initiatives for community engagement.

5) Racial Justice and Community Safety Report

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that as a reminder, the Racial Justice and Community Safety (RJCS) report was referred to the HRC about two or more years ago, and Ms. Bender-Jesse has been reporting on the City's DEI Committee activities.

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that the main reason she joined the DEI Committee was because it was focusing strictly on that RJCS report, and they felt it was a good connector, for her to be a part of that, since she is the staff liaison for the HRC. She was with the HRC at the tail end of the HRC putting together that (executive summary of the) report, so she had some background knowledge of why the report was being created and sent to the DEI Committee in the City. The City's DEI Committee worked on the City-related aspects of the RJCS report that they were able to work on. A few other (recommendations) were ones the Coalition was more equipped for, because they were more county-wide, not just related to Keene. She had to step off the DEI Committee. There have been conversations about whether the committee will continue, due to a lot of different directions it was going. Between running Youth Services and supporting the HRC, she did not have the capacity to be part of the DEI Committee anymore. She was hoping Ms. Fiske would be at tonight's meeting, but she was not able to make it. She has been wanting to follow up with Ms. Fiske to see about the continuation of the Committee. Going forward, Ms. Fiske might be the best one to talk about it. Ms. Bender-Jesse continued that regardless of that, she knows the RJCS report is no longer being discussed by the DEI Committee, because they have hit all the points that the City can.

Rabbi Aronson stated that the RJCS Report has been on the HRC's agenda for 3 or 4 years. He asked if there is a point at which this comes off the agenda as a regular point of business. He continued that he does not know the answer and is not suggesting one way or the other. However, if they routinely have nothing to say about it, maybe their work here with this is done.

Dr. Saleh asked what the likely path forward is, in terms of the City's engagement. He continued that he heard from Ms. Bender-Jesse that they should hear from Ms. Fiske about the DEI Committee. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that there is an open question about whether the DEI Committee is continuing at all. She continued that they could ask Ms. Fiske the next time they see her.

Councilor Workman stated that she agrees with Rabbi Aronson about re-evaluating whether it should come off the HRC's standing agenda. She continued that before they do that, she wonders if they could ask the DEI Committee for a comprehensive "close-out report," for lack of a better term, about exactly what initiatives they completed, where they are on them, any barriers, and so on and so forth. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that they could ask, but the HRC does not have the authority to require it. She continued that she is not sure if Ms. Fiske is the best person to ask that question through. She suspects she is.

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that at the HRC's January 6 meeting, she presented the full list of all the points the DEI Committee touched on from the RJCS report. She continued that she could re-share that if the HRC wants her to. She does not have the copies available today. Councilor Workman replied that she was thinking more about any work that has been done since January, if any. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that there were two virtual and two in-person trainings. She continued that the DEI Committee could not make the trainings mandatory, since they, like the HRC, do not have any standing power.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that they will leave the RJCS Report on the agenda for one more month and ask Ms. Fiske for her input. She continued that if there is a desire to request more information from the DEI Committee, they can figure out how to ask that question, if the committee continues to go forward. She asked if that sounds reasonable. Dr. Saleh replied yes.

6) Acceptance of Committee Event Reports

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that they have written updates for the Committee event reports. She asked if anyone had questions.

Mayor Kahn stated that he wishes he had something to add to Indigenous People's Day, but Ms. Fiske is out of town. He continued that he will get in touch with her next week. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that Ms. Fiske's written report is in the agenda packet. She continued that Indigenous People's Day is October 18, and KIF is coming up on September 27.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos noted that the agenda says "acceptance" of Committee event reports, but they have never voted on them in the past, so she will not ask for a vote now. She will just ask if anyone has questions about the written reports, or has anything to add to them. Hearing none, she moved on in the agenda.

- A) **Martin Luther King, Jr. Day**
- B) **Black History Month**
- C) **Juneteenth**
- D) **Pride Event**
- E) **Keene International Festival**
- F) **Indigenous People's Day**

7) **New Business**

A) **LGBTQ+ Statement**

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that as the group should be aware, a petition was made to the City Council (requesting that) a statement be made by the City. As a consequence of those discussions, the City Council has asked the HRC to come up with some proposed language. A couple of HRC members got together as a starting point, because having 9 to 12 people come up with a written statement can be quite challenging. Thus, there is a 6-paragraph statement with “draft” at the top. She asked everyone to take a moment to read it.

The draft statement [read aloud later in the meeting, per Dr. Saleh’s request] is as follows:

“WHEREAS, the City of Keene, New Hampshire, is committed to fostering a safe, inclusive, and equitable community for all residents, regardless of socio-economic status, age, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, color, marital status, familiar status, mental or physical ability, religion, ethnicity, or national origin, immigration, or other marginalized characteristics; and

WHEREAS, federal policies or external actions may, at times, threaten the rights, safety, and well-being of Keene’s residents, particularly marginalized groups such as LGBTQ+ individuals, immigrants, and those seeking gender-affirming or reproductive care; and

WHEREAS, cities across the United States, including Worcester, Massachusetts and Kansas City, Missouri, have declared or implemented policies supporting those in marginalized communities, demonstrating that local governments, even in small communities, can create lasting protections for vulnerable population; and

WHEREAS, Keene, as a proud and progressive city with the heart of a town, has a moral and legal obligation to uphold the rights of all residents and ensure access to essential services, including healthcare, education, and public safety, free from discrimination or external interference; and

WHEREAS, making this statement will affirm the city’s enduring commitment to inclusivity, strengthen community trust, and protect residents for generations to come;

NOW, THEREFORE, the City of Keene commits to maintaining a safe space for all establishing comprehensive and sustainable protections for all residents by not using funds, personnel, collected data or other resources to cooperate with or enforce policies or laws targeting or restricting the rights and freedoms of marginalized communities.”

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked for the committee's thoughts, and discussion ensued. HRC members noted a typo/misspelling to correct, and a place to add a comma.

Dr. Saleh proposed changing "*free from discrimination*" to "*freedom from discrimination.*" Discussion ensued about the grammar.

Rabbi Aronson proposed that instead of adding the missing word "to" in "*and protect residents for generations to come,*" they could say "*and protecting residents for generations to come.*"

Dr. Saleh asked for an explanation of the phrase "*proud and progressive city with the heart of a town.*" Ms. Bender-Jesse and Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that the wording was taken directly from the Welcoming Declaration from 2021, and the intent is to describe Keene as a closer-knit community.

Councilor Workman stated that regarding paragraph [4], which says "*...access to essential services*" and then lists the qualifiers, she thinks it is important to add the language "*including, but not limited to.*" She continued that that leaves extra room for additions. Language changes, depending on the culture and times. The minute they write these qualifiers, they are already outdated. Even within certain marginalized groups, there can be debate on the language. Saying "*including, but not limited to*" gives them a buffer, so they would not need to update the list of qualifiers every year or six months. She also thinks the "*regardless of*" language in the first paragraph, followed by the list of qualifiers, should be "*including, but not limited to*" instead, or something like that.

Discussion ensued about how to phrase it, and the correct grammar. Councilor Workman stated that the 2021 statement says "*We as a city truly welcome people of all colors, creeds, beliefs, lifestyles, nationalities, physical abilities, and mental abilities to live, work, play....*" Maybe the first paragraph (of the new statement) could read like that sentence of the 2021 statement. Discussion continued. Ms. Odato asked if the sentence ending "*or other marginalized characteristics*" sufficiently allows the statement to expand, with the understanding that language shifts over time. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if that was okay with Councilor Workman. Councilor Workman replied that she does not love the language but is okay to move on.

Per Dr. Saleh's request, Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos read the statement aloud for the sake of the record.

Councilor Workman asked if the City Attorney has seen the statement. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied no, not yet. She continued that before it goes to City Council, that will be a step.

Councilor Workman stated that she asks because she had a couple questions regarding the authority of the Keene Police Department (KPD) for some other issues, and she is a little concerned that they might not be able to enforce "that," based off her understandings of the conversation. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked for specifics. Councilor Workman replied that the Chief of Police would have the final say about, for example, whether to "*use other resources*

to cooperate with or enforce policies or laws restricting the rights and freedoms of marginalized communities.” Her question was who has the authority for the KPD signing on to the ICE trainings and assisting with ICE initiatives, and she was told that the RSA protects that authority made just by the Chief of Police. The RSA, the way it was explained to her, (means) that the Chief of Police does not have to ask permission from the City Council or the City Manager.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that the City came to the HRC and asked the HRC to recommend language. She continued that it will go through legal review. It will go through the Planning, Licenses, and Development (PLD) Committee and the City Council. The HRC is not obligated to make it conform to the expectations of the City. The City asked for the HRC’s take on the language, without any limitations. Thus, if the statement goes from here to the City Attorney’s Office, the PLD Committee, and the City Council and gets edited, that is beyond the HRC’s control and beyond the HRC’s remit. She thinks the question before the HRC is what language the HRC would like to see, in the interest of protecting the human rights of the members of the community, in the interest of supporting the City’s request and the spirit of what Keene Pride requested. If anyone disagrees with that or has any counter to that, she is open to hearing it.

Rabbi Aronson replied that he wants to affirm what Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos just said, with the understanding that this is the beginning of the process. He continued that nothing would be served by submitting a minimalist statement as this time. He thinks (they should) come with as much as they can, even if it is pressing up against the boundaries. People with other expertise can further hone the language.

Councilor Workman replied that she is just letting the HRC know that that might be problematic.

Dr. Saleh stated that to go back to the grammar of “...*and protect residents for generations to come*” in the second to last paragraph, upon reflection, he thinks it should remain as is instead of being changed to “*to protect*” or “*protecting*.” It was correct the first time. Others agreed. Ms. Budakoti stated that her suggestion is for the HRC to make it known what final draft they are proposing, so that when it comes out in whatever iterations it has, it will be very clear what was submitted (by the HRC). She continued that then, community members can see in full transparency what changes have been made at what level. Thus, they are still, in principle, doing their work as the Human Rights Committee and people can see what the HRC did, not just what the outcome is.

Ms. Odato stated that she is thankful that they took this on as a subcommittee and looked at it, because they have tossed these ideas around, from Councilor Jones’s welcoming city statement, for several months as a larger group, and it was hard to come to consensus. This is very well done. It is broadly inclusive, well worded, and captures a lot of the conversation they have had around the table for several months. She thanks the people who took the time to do it. Ms. Bowie stated that she, too, offers her thanks. She continued that she had many questions, which were answered in conversation.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that she gives credit to Ms. Bender-Jesse and Mr. Morrill, who were the power behind this effort. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos was

part of it, too. Other HRC members expressed appreciation and support of the statement, which “really grows the 2021 declaration.”

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if the group is comfortable with this language. Ms. Budakoti spoke in favor of it.

Discussion ensued about the minor edits. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that to summarize, the edits are as follows:

Paragraph 1 – remove the “or” after “ethnicity” and before “national origin.”

Paragraph 4 – add “but not limited to” between “including” and “healthcare.”

Paragraph 5 – correct the second-to-last word from “co” to “to.”

Paragraph 6 – add two commas, one after “safe space for all,” and one after “collected data.”

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked for a motion.

Rabbi Aronson made a motion to approve the language to go forward with the mentioned edits. Dr. Saleh seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos opened the meeting to public comment.

Anne Farrington stated that at the PLD Committee and City Council meetings, (Councilors) said it (the statement) was referred to this Committee, which would “work with all concerned parties” to come up with language. She continued that it sounds like the HRC’s interpretation is that the HRC will come up with their ideal proposal and send it back to the PLD Committee. She asked what the process is, then, for public commentary, and whether people should give their comments here to the HRC, or to the PLD Committee.

Tom Savastano stated that the exact language from the PLD Committee and City Council was, *“On a vote of 5-0, the Planning, Licenses, and Development Committee recommends directing the Human Rights Committee to work with the concerned parties to draft a statement recognizing the LGBTQIA+ community, ensuring dignity and respect for all persons and all communities in the City of Keene.”* He continued that he recognizes that the HRC is trying to thread a difficult needle. But it is a matter of whether the HRC is following this. He asked how the HRC proposes to work with the concerned parties to draft (the statement).

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that the HRC has received feedback, from Keene Pride. She asked if Mr. Savastano and Ms. Farrington are from the Keene Republicans. Ms. Farrington replied that they are part of the “concerned parties.” Mr. Savastano replied that 500 people signed a petition, and they are not all Keene Republicans, but concerned parties.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that anyone who has comments about the statement’s language is welcome to share them tonight. She continued that the language will go through iterations, through public hearings, and her understanding is that there will be opportunities for modifications at that point.

Rebecca Montrone of Keene stated that the document is clearly “trying to set apart Keene as going against everything that many of [them] voted for, Donald J. Trump.” She continued that they agree with Trump’s policies about illegal immigration and DEI. Keene is clearly trying to say it will not be a conservative, NH community. New Hampshire will do what it wants, Kelly Ayotte will do what she wants, but Keene will do what it wants. Her suggestion for a language change is to change “*immigrants*” to “*illegal immigrants*.” (The HRC should) recognize that human rights apply to everyone, not just “those who feel they deserve special treatment.” This is wrong. This is not about human rights, it is about Keene’s far left, progressive politics. It is etiology. This (statement) is inclusion for everyone on the left, and exclusion for everyone else. She is not behind (the HRC). She completely backs Trump’s policies about DEI and the government and “*mutilating surgeries for children in this state*.” The HRC does not speak for everyone and they are not the ones with virtue. They need to stop virtue-signaling, hear and pay attention to others, and “not make Keene this ridiculous spectacle when it comes to human rights.”

Mr. Savastano stated that he appreciates that the first paragraph says “*religion*.” He continued that the second paragraph includes “*those seeking gender-affirming or reproductive care*.” He does not know why reproductive care was made part of the statement. To him, that is a different matter, and involves state laws, whereas this (statement) is voted on by citizens. He does not know that the statement can override things. He does not see why those seeking reproductive care are included as a marginalized group. It seems like extra language that is not relevant. He has questions about how gender-affirming care relates to State law. That is very controversial. There are people on the other side of gender-affirming care for adolescents who believe that it is wrong to do gender-affirming care for adolescents before they reach the age of maturity. These are difficult issues, which he thinks are being generalized. He would appreciate the opportunity for a subcommittee to work with people from different groups, the “concerned parties,” as the PLD Committee and the City Council said to do. He thinks there is a way forward to come up with language that might work, but this feels like it is being pushed through inappropriately to the City Council vote.

Anthony Ferrantello of Keene stated that the first paragraph says “*equitable community for all residents*,” but the second paragraph, “*particularly marginalized groups such as LGBTQ+*,” favors the second group. He continued that the fifth paragraph says that they are strengthening community trust by doing this, but no, they are “making divisiveness” by “favoring one group at the expense of others.” That does not engender trust.

Anne Farrington stated that she has practical questions about what this means from an implementation perspective. She continued that the fourth paragraph says, “*...free from discrimination*,” which is already law. She asked what “*or external interference*” means. She understands the point, but wonders who decides what that is. She stumbles on that. Similarly, she questions the last paragraph’s statement, “*...by not using funds, personnel, collected data, or other resources to collaborate with or enforce policies or laws targeting or restricting...*” What does that mean? Does it mean that if there is a law, it will not be implemented in Keene? That is an interpretation of those words. She would like to understand better what the HRC thinks that would look like, from an implementation, practical perspective. Those are her initial thoughts, but she likes to mull things over for a while before giving additional comments.

Tom Savastano stated that regarding the phrase “*proud and progressive city with the heart of a town*,” it would be “so much more unifying” if they could leave out the words “*proud and progressive*” so it reads “*city with the heart of a town*” and just welcome everyone to be part of it. The words “*proud and progressive*” have different connotations in today’s politically charged environment. He suggests they leave that out and have people come together as best they can.

Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that that is the wording from the City’s statement, which is on the wall (of this room). She continued that they copied and pasted the words from the City’s statement on that, instead of wordsmithing it. That is how those words were chosen.

Per Rabbi Aronson’s request, she read the statement out loud:

“Keene is a progressive city with the heart of a town, attracting people who seek to shape their community. We value and practice sustainability, innovative problem-solving, and highly collaborative engagement with our residents and businesses, creating a resilient and self-reliant community nestled in southern New Hampshire’s idyllic landscape. Keene features a strong, business-based, vibrant downtown and amazing parks and trails built to encourage active lifestyles and experiences, advancing our city as a cultural and economic hub for the Monadnock region.”

Rebecca Montrone stated that (she questions) words like “*external interference*.” She continued that cities all over the country are deciding to not cooperate with ICE, deciding to set themselves apart. That is the language Keene Pride first used – it was about a “sanctuary city.” She and others are very alarmed about Keene having the reputation of “being a hotspot, safe spot for left-wing, progressive ideology,” inviting more of those people and discouraging others, like families and businesses who want to locate here. She wants to point out that Adam Toepfer (of Keene Pride) has a conflict of interest. He owns a business here that will only be frequented by the Keene Pride community. She wants it clear that the HRC is not speaking for everyone. She and others will continue to make their voices known and expect to be represented.

Jennifer McCalley stated that she agrees that this is a start. She continued that it is important for people to continue to be involved in the process, both at the subcommittee and public level, so she appreciates the dialogue. She thinks the statement acknowledges that there are many different people in this [City], and when all of us in the City are safe you know there is safety for everyone, which is important. It is like (what happened with) curb cuts. When the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed, people were initially complaining that curb cuts were being put in sidewalks, but it turns out that curb cuts help everyone. Thus, if we know that (Keene) is safe for all sorts of people, then we know it is safe for anyone. That is important to her, as someone who is raising children here.

Ms. McCalley continued that there has been some implication that if you do not see something happening, it is not happening, but that is not true. There are many things we do not see. We do not see fathers raping their children. Many families keep that private and secret, but we know it happens. Terrible things happen all the time, not in front of our eyes, but that does not mean it is not true when people tell their stories. The safer we can make everyone, the better.

Ms. McCalley continued that she has a grammatic change for the fifth paragraph: “*Making this statement will affirm the City’s enduring commitment to inclusivity, strengthening community trust and protecting residents for generations to come.*” If this is truly the start of something, she agrees that the HRC should start with the statement they want to make, so that other parties can come in with statements they want to make, and then that is the democratic process. A community that is safe and fair for the most vulnerable is safe for everybody.

B) Welcoming City

8) Adjourn – Next Meeting September 8, 2025 at 5:00 PM (September 1 – Labor Day)

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that she has to adjourn the meeting, as 6:00 PM is a hard stop. She thanked everyone for coming.

Respectfully submitted by,
Britta Reida, Minute Taker

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