ADOPTED

City of Keene
New Hampshire

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES

Monday, September 8, 2025 **5:00 PM** **Room 22, Recreation Center**

Members Present:
Sofia Cunha-Vasconcelos, Chair
Dr. Dottie Morris
Marti Fiske
Rabbi Daniel Aronson (arrived at 5:03 PM)
Gina Burke
Debra Bowie
David Morill

Staff Present:
Alyssa Bender-Jesse, Youth Services Manager

Members Not Present:
Emma Siemer, Alternate
Julie Odato, Alternate
Councilor Catherine Workman
Ritu Budakoti
Dr. Mohammad Saleh, 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 5:00 PM. Roll call was conducted.

2) Approval of August 4, 2025 Meeting Minutes

Mr. Morrill made a motion to approve the meeting minutes of August 4, 2025. Ms. Bowie seconded the motion which passed by a vote of 4-0. Dr. Morris and Ms. Fiske abstained due to not being present at the August 4, 2025 meeting.

3) Finance Report

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that the only change is an update to the money spent on Pride. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos noted that that was a frugal spend. She continued that so far they are doing well. Budgeting has never been their issue.

Rabbi Aronson arrived at 5:03 PM.

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

Ms. Burke stated that the Steering Committee has been meeting regularly, with a facilitated retreat coming up on the 23rd. She continued that they are in the middle of strategic planning, getting on the same page about their values, vision, and mission and how they can best serve the community. The Coalition will be at Pride Fest, which is exciting. The Coalition's website has launched, mdeib.org. It has a list of resources, community events, and anything that comes across her desk that makes sense and feels appropriate to share, as they are trying to be a central location for all of these things. They are trying to be more active on social media, mainly on Facebook, and they have a newsletter that people can sign up for.

5) Racial Justice and Community Safety Report

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that the Racial Justice and Community Safety (RJCS) report is on the agenda, but the HRC had discussed whether it was time to take it off. She continued that the full committee is not here today, so maybe the discussion needs to be pushed another month, but Ms. Bender-Jesse had shared with them that the City's internal DEI Committee might have reached a conclusion. They have moved through the recommendations of the report and have done everything they can with it. Someone from the HRC, maybe Dr. Saleh, had requested that the DEI Committee give a final report out, knowing that the HRC cannot require that, but they could ask. That was tabled, and the general feeling was for the HRC to revisit the conversation, of whether to remove this item from their agenda, in a month. She asked for people's thoughts.

Mr. Morrill stated that it is a fair question. He continued that he does not think they have "solved DEI," so it does not feel good to say the City is "done." Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that to clarify, when the HRC returned the RJCS Report to the City with the recommendations on action steps, there was no responsible party who took it on to act on it, which was part of the HRC's frustration. Dr. Morris was part of the original committee that wrote the report, and the HRC spent a lot of time digesting the report, as requested by the Mayor, into actionable items. It was disappointing, then, to the HRC and the report's original authors, that it did not find a home where decisive action would be taken. The DEI Committee was an organic one. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that the City Manager asked for the DEI Committee to be created to look at the report, with a representative from every City department, to see what the City could do. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if it is fair to say that of the recommendations the HRC made, the DEI Committee has reached the end of what they are empowered to do. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied yes, at least for the report specifically. She continued that the DEI Committee could only look at recommendations/action steps that pertained directly to the City, not, for example, action items for the Chamber or KSC. She reported to the HRC about what actions the City took and is taking, such as the fantastic work of the Library. She reminded the HRC about how the City Attorney came to talk with them about how if the DEI Committee wanted to put forward a statement, it would have to go through the City Council process just like a statement from the HRC would. She continued that she personally had to step down from the DEI Committee because she had reached her capacity with it, now that they had maxed out on the RJCS Report, and the group had conversations about whether to keep the group going, feeling like the ideas they were putting forward were not getting looked at or followed up on. At this point, she does not know if the DEI Committee is continuing.

Ms. Fiske stated that the DEI will be chaired by Susan Bloom, the Assistant Director at the Library. She continued that they have talked with Deputy City Manager Andy Bohannon, who went back and talked with the City Manager. The HR Department is revising the employee handbook, and employees can review it and give suggestions about content and language. The DEI Committee's focus will be looking at the employee handbook through a DEI lens. Although that primarily affects the work life experience of employees, it kind of also incorporates how the City and community should be interacting with each other.

Dr. Morris stated that in retrospect, when the Mayor asked her to co-chair the RJCS Committee with Rick Van Wickler, she and Mr. Van Wickler did not ask enough questions before they started. She continued that they should have asked who would have the power and authority to act, once the RJCS Committee had gathered all that information from all those different people and groups. With each recommendation, the RJCS Committee suggested who could take it on, but again, they did not know who had the power and authority. She also thinks they should have planned to create an implementation team when they agreed to do the report. At the time, they were just so excited to do the report, and thought others would be equally excited, understand the importance, and get on board. It did not work out that way. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that that was a lesson learned, and going forward, if they have an opportunity like that again, they know what to do differently. She continued that she has a similar take on this recent request for the HRC to draft language for a statement in cooperation with different community members. She should have asked more questions first, and there was not a process for it. There is a lot that should have been done differently, but at the time, they just wanted to cooperate. The lesson learned is the importance of stopping to ask questions and to think about the process.

Rabbi Aronson stated that clearly, DEI is going to be ongoing work. He continued that he thinks the MDEIB is the place for the RJCS Report at this point, because it is an independent, citizen group, more powerful than the HRC is. It can provide oversight and broader oversight beyond Keene. He recommends they hand the report over to safekeeping by the MDEIB, if the MDEIB agrees. Ms. Burke replied yes, and as Ms. Bender-Jesse was saying that the City cannot address actions that are for KSC or the Chamber to take, for example, she was thinking about how the MDEIB could have more influence there. It would be amazing to try to work more together, instead of everyone doing their own work in silos. She asked how she can help facilitate that conversation.

Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that the RJCS report is public knowledge, published on the City of Keene's website. She continued that she could email it to Ms. Burke, and the MDEIB could review it and come up with some ideas. Maybe the HRC could keep it on the agenda for at least another month, and maybe Ms. Burke could report back next month with some thoughts from the MDEIB. Dr. Morris reiterated the need to identify and involve the people who actually have the power and authority to act on items. She continued that there might be parts of the report that different groups could work on, which was part of the original thinking when they wrote the report. Ms. Bender-Jesse spoke of how Trauma Responsive Monadnock is creating what they call a "menu" of resources area businesses can choose from to start creating a more trauma-informed workplace, such as research articles explaining the benefits of being a trauma-informed workplace, and actionable steps they could take right now, and how that might be something the MDEIB could do. For example, create a "menu" of tangible items for various businesses and organizations, of steps to take to make the business or organization more diverse and inclusive. Discussion ensued.

Mr. Morrill stated that that all makes sense, but he would still vote for requesting some sort of report from someone, explaining all of this. Ms. Burke replied that it would help the Coalition to have clarity about what has been done and accomplished, and what is left over, and what feels out of scope, and if so, who else could take it on. She continued that some summary would be helpful. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that she gave that report at the January meeting, and she can give that document to Ms. Burke. Dr. Morris stated that to take it even a step further, they need to know who has the authority to act. She continued that if the report goes to the Coalition, they might be able to work on some of the items if they knew who had the authority to act and they could work with them to do that action. For example, the Education Subcommittee is not meeting, because they were told by a person in K–12 education that they could not do it anymore because of the New Hampshire House Bill 2. If the Coalition knew who else could have the power and authority to help with that, maybe they could do something. Discussion ensued about private schools and charter schools, and who the law applies to.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos summarized that Ms. Bender-Jesse will send a copy of the RJCS Report, and a copy of the report of the City's internal DEI Committee's work, to Ms. Burke, who will re-share it with the MDEIB. She asked Ms. Burke if she thinks the MDEIB will have time to look at it before the HRC's next meeting. Ms. Burke replied that she thinks so; it feels like a very appropriate time to be looking at it.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that she wants to be responsive to the request for a report out. She asked if Ms. Bender-Jesse could email the January report from the DEI Committee to the HRC again, assuming that nothing has really changed since then. Ms. Bender-Jesse agreed. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that it is a report of what the DEI Committee has done against the items in the RJCS report that the committee/City arguably has authority over. The HRC can look at that report again, and if anyone feels that it is not answering their questions, they can have that discussion at the next HRC meeting. They will leave it on the agenda for one more month, and figure out at that point whether to hand it over to the MDEIB or what the next steps are.

6) Acceptance of Committee Event Reports

A) Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

Rabbi Aronson stated that he submitted a written report about the MLK Day working group. He continued that they had a meeting, but only he and Julie Odato were able to be there, so they need to schedule another meeting. They have not gotten very far yet. He has not heard from Ms. Odato about whether there has been any movement with the Colonial Theater. There probably cannot be movement with the Colonial unless the HRC indicates to them that they want to move forward with this theater program. His question for the HRC is whether the HRC would be prepared to do the fundraising that would make a program like this possible. It would be about $8,500, or maybe $10,000. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that that is a lot, but they have been able to raise that for Juneteenth. Discussion ensued about whether the schools would be able to join, given what they just discussed about HB 2, and about how the schools are so busy with their own programming that expecting them to co-sponsor or promote anything else is difficult. Discussion continued about how fundraising for MLK Day has been done in the past, and what past years' expenses were, and previous sponsors and donors.

Ms. Bowie asked if there is anything the HRC could bring in that is a little more regional, such as from Massachusetts. Discussion ensued. Dr. Morris spoke about a group of people she knows who have been doing this work for many years, and possibly reaching out to them. Rabbi Aronson stated that another idea is to do a 60th Anniversary of Jonathan Daniels's murder, or asking Adar Cohen, an international conflict resolution mediator, to do something here. He shared more information about Mr. Cohen and his work. Discussion continued about ideas, such as asking Mr. Cohen to facilitate a discussion after a showing of Larry Benaquist's film about Jonathan Daniels, and about possible venues, such as the Colonial, Cohen Center, or the Library. Regarding contacting Mr. Benaquist and Mr. Cohen, HRC members talked about how the MLK Day working group should first lay out what they want out of the event, and see how it goes together, and what they could expect from Mr. Cohen and Mr. Benaquist working together. Rabbi Aronson stated that he will have a conversation with each of them, and he will watch the documentary.

Rabbi Aronson stated that if the event includes breakfast at the Community Kitchen for the third year in a row, it will thus become a tradition. He continued that he has not had a conversation with Barbara Weisman, but he would like to do that again with City leaders. Last year it was canceled because of snow. Discussion continued.

B) Black History Month

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that Dr. Morris used to be the chair of this. Dr. Morris replied that she can put something together. She asked who else wants to join this working group. Ms. Burke and Ms. Fiske replied that they will help. Rabbi Aronson stated that he will talk with Dr. Morris about it, too. He wants to see if there is a Jewish connection they can bring into that. Dr. Morris replied that her alma mater has a Jewish Black Institute, because there were some connections; maybe they have an exhibit they could lend. She could look into it. Discussion continued.

C) Juneteenth

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that Juneteenth has its first meeting for the new season on October 12. She continued that they will start planning for the next event.

D) Pride Event

Mr. Morrill stated that the HRC's Pride group will have a table at the Keene Pride Festival. He continued that they are looking for volunteers to be at the table. Ms. Bender-Jesse has the sign-up sheet. Last year, the HRC gave out free items like stickers and buttons, and people were asking if they could donate money to the HRC. They were not prepared for donations. He asked if the HRC had thoughts on whether to charge for the stickers and buttons, or how to accept donations. Discussion ensued. HRC members spoke in favor of having a jar for donations, rather than charging for items. Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that they could specify for people that the donations are going towards the Pride event the HRC will put on next year.

E) Keene International Festival

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that Ritu Budakoti is not here. She asked if anyone else is participating in planning the KIF. Ms. Bowie replied that she is not participating in the planning, but she plans on taking the random acts of kindness wheel there with some other people. She asked if the HRC is having a table there. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that the HRC does not usually have a table there, but maybe that is something they should do. They can talk with Ms. Budakoti about it. Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that she will not be available that day. Discussion continued about the schedule, and Ms. Bender-Jesse clarified that the KIF is September 27, from 11:00 AM to 3:00 PM.

F) Indigenous People's Day

Ms. Fiske stated that everything is all lined up and ready to go. She continued that she is in contact with the person who will be doing the talk at Heberton Hall. Once the event is up on Facebook, she will send the link to Ms. Bender-Jesse and Ms. Bender-Jesse can share it with the HRC members to share on their social media pages. They are working on the press release for the event to go out this week. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if they are working with legal in regards to the branding of the holiday and how it is addressed. Ms. Fiske replied that it is not on the holiday. She continued that it says it is “co-sponsored by the Human Rights Committee.” In the future, she will move the event to November, which is Native American Month.

Ms. Fiske stated that she is working with the Mayor at the high school’s Youth Council. She continued that they have their first meeting this Thursday. The Youth Council wanted to put on their own event related to indigenous peoples, and the Mayor has a group of 15 or 20 youth interested in joining this year. He has Dr. Robert Goodby coming in to have a conversation about the history of indigenous peoples in this area. She will give them a bibliography of books and other materials available at their high school library and the Keene Public Library, and helping them organize.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if anyone had anything else, regarding HRC events. Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that if there is an HRC event she cannot make it to, it would be great if others would take photos at the event and send them to her.

Ms. Fiske asked where the HRC’s tent will be at Keene Pride Fest. Ms. Bender-Jesse gave information about that. Discussion continued about setup and supplies, and the schedule and logistics of the event.

7) **New Business**

8) **Adjournment**

There being no further business, Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos adjourned the meeting at 5:59 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Britta Reida, Minute Taker

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