

City of Keene
New Hampshire

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Monday, October 6, 2025

5:00 PM

**Room 22,
Recreation Center**

Members Present:

Sofia Cunha-Vasconcelos, Chair
Dr. Dottie Morris
Marti Fiske
Gina Burke
Debra Bowie (Remote)
David Morill
Dr. Mohammad Saleh, Alternate
Julie Odat, Alternate

Staff Present:

Alyssa Bender-Jesse, Youth Services Manager

Members Not Present:

Rabbi Daniel Aronson
Councilor Catherine Workman
Ritu Budakoti
Emma Siemer, 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. Ms. Bowie stated that she is participating remotely because she has a cold, and she is at home, in a room alone.

2) Approval of September 8, 2025 Minutes

Ms. Fiske made a motion to approve the meeting minutes of September 8, 2025. Dr. Morris seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

3) Finance Report

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that the main update is the addition of the \$75 they got from fundraising at the Pride event. She continued that she finally got updated numbers for Keene International Festival, regarding donations. Their total revenue is updated, along with their estimate for how much they have spent this year.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that they are well funded, and doing great.

Dr. Saleh stated that this new template Ms. Bender-Jesse is using for the financial report is good.

[Note: this comment was made toward the end of the meeting, as an aside during “New Business,” and moved here by the Minute Taker.]

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

Ms. Burke stated that the MDEIB tabled at Pride Fest, which was really well received. She continued that they did a rock painting activity, and conversations around the table happened organically. They were busy all day, and in a great location.

Ms. Burke continued that the MDEIB’s Steering Committee had a retreat, facilitated by the YMCA’s CEO, and a lot of great things came from that. They homed in on their strengths, values, and opportunities, and looked at the data from the survey they conducted, regarding community needs and how to best serve the community.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if there was anything else on MDEIB. She continued that there has been some talk about having another community conversation, and they would love to hear more about that when appropriate. The HRC would be glad to assist if needed.

5) Racial Justice and Community Safety Report

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked how they left this one. She continued that she thinks there was some talk about wanting an update, but they have not quite figured out who to request that from. Ms. Fiske replied that the City’s DEI Committee has not had a meeting since the last HRC meeting. She continued that the City has work to do on the employee handbook and there are upcoming staffing changes to the HR department, which will delay that.

Dr. Saleh asked about the City recognizing Juneteenth as a holiday. He continued that they had talked previously about that, and about exploring what the City’s pathway for that could be.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that that was not through the RJCS report; that was a request that the Juneteenth Committee has made for a couple years in a row to the Mayor. She continued that they have been told that there are challenges around union contracts. There might be an option to make it a floating holiday. There has been no progress on that. The Juneteenth working group is about to have its first meeting for the 2026 planning period, and they might be

in a position to request that again. Ms. Fiske replied that they should keep in mind that the City starts working on the fiscal year budget in January, so requests that would impact the budget should be timed with that in mind.

Mr. Morrill stated that the HRC had talked about maybe handing the RJCS Report over to the MDEIB. He asked if there has been movement on that. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied no, she thinks there was a request for a last wrap-up from the DEI Committee, and since the DEI Committee has not met since, they should probably wait a bit, touch base, and make sure everyone is comfortable. Or they can take this off the HRC's agenda. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that she sent the entire report to Ms. Burke and Councilor Workman, and she sent the list that she had shared with the HRC in January, of what the City's DEI Committee had worked on. She continued that as she said before, she knows the HRC talked about getting a final report out from the DEI Committee, but there will not be anything new in that report because the DEI Committee is finished working on the report. What she already reported is what has been done. That is why the conversation turned to turning the report over to the MDEIB.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if the HRC is comfortable with taking the RJCS Report off of the HRC's agenda, leaving it in the hands of the MDEIB, and asking the MDEIB to tell the HRC what they can do to support. Dr. Saleh replied that there is the report as a whole, and then there is the executive summary/recommendations from the HRC about the report, taking into consideration that there are certain pieces that only the City can do. He continued that the MDEIB can act as a social force, but cannot enforce something City-wide or legislate policy. He asked if the HRC has received a proper explanation of which recommendations were implemented, which were not, and why. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that the HRC should be conscious of their status as an advisory committee and the limits of their power. She continued that the City is not obligated to give them answers. Dr. Saleh replied that they can still ask. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that Ms. Bender-Jesse has tried to explain to them a few times now that she provided the HRC with that information in January, and there have been no changes since then.

Dr. Morris stated that it sounds like what the HRC needs to do is realize that some of the report's recommendations might not be met, and determine the priorities. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that the internal DEI Committee was only tasked with the shortened report, not the full RCJS report. She continued that the DEI Committee only had as much authority as the HRC has, and had to make requests of the City Council just as the HRC has to. They tried, by asking the City Council to adopt the statement that the HRC wrote and begins its meetings with, and that is why City Attorney Amanda Palmeira came to speak with the HRC about why the City Council was unlikely to approve the request – because if one group requests to have such a statement, any/every other City committee could make such a request. The DEI Committee thought it would be best for the MDEIB to work on this, because they have a broader scope and could focus on recommendations that City employees could not, such as recommendations that were about the colleges. The MDEIB has those connections and can have those conversations. The DEI Committee worked on things they had the authority to act on, like how the Library

continually works on having a broad, diverse collection. The DEI Committee, made up of City employees, did not have the authority to implement recommendations outside of the City. That is why they thought going to the MDEIB would be best.

Dr. Morris replied that she thinks there will be a problem with authority, even with the Coalition. Dr. Saleh replied yes, his understanding is that the Coalition has as little authority as the HRC. He continued that he is okay with moving it to the Coalition. Ms. Burke stated that she came in after all of this happened, so she is confused and does not understand what everyone is talking about, regarding “the list” or “the January list,” what was accomplished, what is left, and so on and so forth. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that in the interest of everyone being on the same page, she proposes that at the next HRC meeting, they review the executive summary of the RJCS Report, which the HRC provided to the City, review the list Ms. Bender-Jesse provided in January, and compare the two. Through that, they can either confirm their determination that the MDEIB is the place for the RJCS Report to live, or determine what the next path forward is. From its inception, unfortunately, finding someone with accountability for this list has been a challenge. Dr. Morris stated that she was Co-Chair of the Racial Justice and Community Safety Committee, and one of the lessons she learned was that the RJCS Committee should have recommended an implementation team be tasked with figuring out how to implement the report and who would do that. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that it would have had to be an implementation team with members who had authority.

Discussion continued. Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that she will again re-send, via email, the document that she had shared in January, regarding the DEI Committee’s work on the RJCS Report recommendations. She continued that she will also have printed copies of it at the HRC’s next meeting. She is also available for conversation, if anyone from the HRC wants to sit down with her and talk about the report, compare the two documents side by side, or answer questions. As long as there are fewer than five HRC members present for such a conversation, so a quorum is not created, that would be fine.

6) Acceptance of Committee Event Reports

A) Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that Rabbi Aronson is not present, but she can share that Larry Benaquist confirmed that he and co-producer Adar Cohen will speak after the Jonathan Daniels film. She continued that the Community Kitchen said yes to a breakfast.

B) Black History Month

Dr. Morris stated that the working group has not met, but she has looked into the institute at her undergrad that has the Jewish Black Institute. She has reached out but has not heard back yet.

C) Juneteenth

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that the Juneteenth working group will have their first meeting next week to kick off the 2026 planning. Anyone who is interested in participating is welcome to join.

D) Pride Event

Mr. Morrill stated that they tabled at the Keene Pride event on September 21 and it went really well. He thanked the HRC members who participated. He continued that they gave away lots of stickers, buttons, and bracelets, and had some great conversations with people. Some people are interested in learning about or joining the HRC. They received \$71 in the donation jar.

Mr. Morrill stated that he will be looking at meeting to plan the 2026 event, and has some people to reach out to about collaborations and planning. Anyone interested in joining can let him know. Last year's Pride art crawl went very well, and they would like to do that again.

E) Keene International Festival

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that the Keene International Festival happened a couple of weeks ago, and she was not able to attend. Ms. Fiske stated that a Library staff member attended and said it was great. There was smaller attendance than last year. Dr. Saleh stated that lower attendance was because of the anxiety people have been feeling.

F) Indigenous People's Day

Ms. Fiske stated that the event is not this Saturday, but the following Saturday, at 1:00 PM at the library. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos encouraged HRC members to attend.

7) New Business

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that in December, her term is up as an HRC member. She continued that she hopes to continue as an alternate member, if there is space, with the Mayor's permission. The HRC will need a new chair, and the vote will need to be at the December meeting. She would like HRC members to give careful consideration to running for Chair.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that when she first joined, the HRC was sort of struggling to find its feet, in terms of its program of events, and what holidays and matters they wanted to address. She thinks the group has come a long way in the past six or seven years, and she wants to put a kernel of an idea out there. They are doing a great job of fundraising and putting together some wonderful programming. She wonders if there is an opportunity to expand their perspective and include things like mental health, neurodiversity, incarceration, indigency, and

other facets of human rights. She wonders if they are in a position to be able to expand in such ways. It is something to think about.

Dr. Saleh stated that he has been thinking about how the HRC is addressing many of the issues, but from the same point of view, without properly further educating themselves. He continued that he was wondering if they could save a few minutes of their one-hour agenda to invite people who could educate them on complicated issues and expand their thoughts. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that she loves that idea. She continued that it is food for thought, and maybe they could look at extending their meetings, if they are allowed to. Ms. Fiske stated that another idea is to dedicate certain meetings to educational events, with no regular business on the agenda. They are open meetings, so they could invite the public as well. Dr. Saleh spoke about how they could do a combination, such as sometimes extending their meetings beyond an hour, such as four times a year. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that these are great ideas to ruminate over.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if there was any other new business. Ms. Fiske stated that since New Hampshire is requiring “Columbus Day” instead of “Indigenous People’s Day” now, she wonders if the HRC can officially change the name of the event they support to “Native American Heritage.” She continued that November is Native American Heritage Month. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that it would avoid all of the kerfuffle around it.

Dr. Morris made a motion to change the name of the Human Rights Committee’s “Indigenous People’s Day” event and working group to the “Native American Heritage” event and working group. Ms. Burke seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

Dr. Morris stated that that reminds her of someone who might be a good person to reach out to for future events for Native American Heritage Month, a storyteller from RI, who was at the Black New England conference. Ms. Fiske asked her to email her with the information.

Mr. Morrill stated that he has been trying to reach out to the Abenaki Museum in Quebec. Ms. Fiske stated that two years ago, she had someone from there do a presentation with the Library. Brief discussion ensued, and Mr. Morrill stated that he will reach out to Ms. Fiske after the meeting.

Ms. Burke stated that Ms. Bender-Jesse emailed the HRC members a copy of the Proclamation the Mayor read the Keene Pride Festival. She asked if that is just for the HRC’s knowledge, or if something else is happening with it. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that the Mayor read it at the Pride Festival and at City Council, so it is now on City Council record. Ms. Burke stated that the HRC spent weeks and weeks talking about the proclamation, and then suddenly it just stopped. She just wants to make sure she did not miss something significant. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that she does not remember the exact date of the City Council meeting, but she will find out and let Ms. Burke know, so that she can watch the meeting video. She continued that Ms. Burke can hear why the City Council accepted what the HRC put forward as informational.

Dr. Morris recommended a book, *I Never Thought of it That Way: How to have Fearlessly Curious Conversations in Dangerously Divided Times*, by Monica Guzman. She gave more information about it and spoke about how helpful it is. She continued that she would like to do a book group with it. Discussion ensued.

Ms. Fiske stated that the City Council meeting Ms. Bender-Jesse was talking about was the September 18th one.

8) Adjournment – Next Meeting November 3 at 5:00 PM

There being no further business, Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos adjourned the meeting at 5:45 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Britta Reida, Minute Taker

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