

City of Keene
New Hampshire

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Monday, December 1, 2025

5:00 PM

**Room 22,
Recreation Center**

Members Present:

Sofia Cunha-Vasconcelos, Chair
Marti Fiske
Rabbi Daniel Aronson
Debra Bowie
David Morill
Gregory Kleiner, Alternate
Julie Odatto, Alternate
Dr. Mohammad Saleh, Alternate (Remote)

Staff Present:

Alyssa Bender-Jesse, Youth Services Manager

Members Not Present:

Councilor Catherine Workman
Ritu Budakoti
Gina Burke
Dr. Dottie Morris

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 November 3, 2025 Meeting Minutes

Ms. Fiske made a motion to approve the November 3, 2025 meeting minutes. Mr. Morrill seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

Dr. Saleh arrived remotely at 5:02 PM.

3) Finance Report

Ms. Bender-Jesse reported that the only update is reflecting the \$150 expense for basket-weaving, from the Native American Heritage budget. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that the basket-weaving was the school event.

Julie Odatto arrived at 5:03 PM.

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

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that she does not think there is anyone here to give an update on the MDEIB.

Ms. Bowie stated that she wants to say that she thought the MDEIB's event, Building Community, was very good. She continued that she knows Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos and Mr. Morrill were there, too. The event got people to think about community in their workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods. She appreciated it and would like to see more attendance at events like that. Discussion ensued, and regarding the number of people present, Mr. Morrill and Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos agreed that it was approximately 30 people.

Dr. Saleh asked what the "takeaways" were from the event. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that she thinks the biggest takeaway was, pay attention to your surroundings, and make time for the people around you. Ms. Bowie stated that another takeaway was a desire for workplace camaraderie, and opportunities for people to get to know their coworkers and their families as people, rather than just workers. She continued that a high school senior spoke impressively about the work to build community in schools. Regarding neighborhoods, it is important for neighborhood groups to find ways to communicate more with each other. Discussion continued about the benefits of neighbors connecting with each other.

5) Racial Justice and Community Safety Report

Ms. Bender-Jesse apologized for mistakenly including this on the agenda.

6) Acceptance of Committee Event Reports

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that for working groups that did not submit written updates, if the group has an event coming up, she left the update the same as it was in the month prior. She continued that for the other working groups, she did the best she could to come up with roughly what she has been informed of for each of those.

A) Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

Rabbi Aronson stated that the working group meets next Monday at 5:30 PM, on Zoom. Ms. Bender-Jesse asked him to send her the link.

- B) Black History Month**
- C) Juneteenth**
- D) Pride Event**

Mr. Morrill stated that the working group is meeting next Thursday, in this room.

- E) Keene International Festival**
- F) Native American Heritage**

Ms. Fiske stated that there is a revised book talk, on December 4, online.

- 7) New Business**
 - A) Chair Position**

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that her term is up at the end of the month. She continued that it is unclear whether she will continue as an alternate member, or what the protocol is there; they are waiting to hear from the Mayor on that. The HRC needs to identify a new chair. She is looking for a member to volunteer, or to nominate another member.

Discussion ensued about Committee membership. Ms. Bender-Jesse spoke about how the HRC has a full voting membership, and she is trying to figure out whether the people who have been alternate members the longest automatically get bumped up to full membership, or if alternate members have the choice to stay as alternates if they wish, and how it all works – she is waiting to hear from the Mayor.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked Dr. Saleh to state, for the record, why he is participating remotely, where he is, and who is present with him. Dr. Saleh stated that he is in Victor, NY, visiting his partner, and he is in a room by himself.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos returned the group to the conversation about who can be the next chair. Discussion continued. The group discussed whether the HRC needs a chair, or if they can take turns chairing the meetings, or if two people could be co-chairs. Regarding membership terms, Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that she believes Dr. Morris, Ms. Fiske, Ms. Burke, and Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos are all on their second terms, and everyone else is still in their first term. Discussion continued about the role and duties of a committee Chair, and how the Chair works together with the support of the Staff Liaison.

Ms. Fiske stated that she would be willing to Chair the HRC. Discussion ensued about how they do not know if she would be allowed, since she is a City employee. Mr. Kleiner stated that he would be willing to Chair, but he is an alternate member and would need to be made a full

member. Rabbi Aronson stated that he is willing to be Vice Chair, but he only has a year left of his term. Ms. Bowie stated that she is willing to be co-Chair or Vice Chair. Discussion continued. Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that she will ask the Mayor if Mr. Kleiner can be a voting member so he can be Chair.

Mr. Morrill stated that they could nominate Ms. Bowie for Vice Chair. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos and Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that that is a good idea. Ms. Fiske continued that if Mr. Kleiner is not officially the Chair by January, Ms. Bowie could run the January meeting. Ms. Bowie agreed. Discussion continued about how Ms. Bowie should expect to run the January meeting, given the time the process will likely take to move Mr. Kleiner up.

Mr. Morrill nominated Ms. Bowie as Vice Chair. Ms. Fiske seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

B) Compassionate Communities

Ms. Bowie stated that she has gotten involved with a group that is working on building community and having a compassionate community. She continued that Carole Sands has paid attention to the United States Compassionate Community group for the past year. Ms. Sands would like for the City to declare Keene a Compassionate Community. She (Ms. Bowie) thinks the HRC should do a little homework first, to have other people interested in this beyond Ms. Sands's church group, and look at how Brattleboro, VT has put together "Compassionate Brattleboro" as a model. They should then define what they see Keene as being a Compassionate Community, and if it goes forward enough, the HRC could put together a proposal for the City. The intention is, essentially, taking care of your neighbors, and caring about each other. She thinks it is a great idea. She has not talked with Ms. Burke about it yet, but the other proposal is to see if the MDEIB would work on this, too, since it fits their mission.

HRC members asked questions, and discussion ensued. Mr. Morrill stated that on the Compassionate Communities website, he saw a pledge for communities to sign, which seemed great, but it looked like the organization is rewriting the pledge, so they might want to wait until the rewrite is complete before asking the City to sign on. He continued that he saw that one of the steps to becoming a Compassionate Community is to inventory what your community has that makes it compassionate. His other takeaway was that it is less like having a central organization that controls these things, and more about connecting all the different groups that do something regarding compassionate communities. It seems like a great program. Ms. Bowie replied that Ms. Sands has more knowledge about it than she does, but it is something to look into and figure out how to build. Ms. Fiske suggested having Ms. Sands give the HRC an educational talk about it.

Rabbi Aronson stated that he would be concerned about having the HRC be the hub for the Compassionate Community, given the pushback they received on their statement of inclusion. He continued that they risk "igniting a kerfuffle." Unfortunately, in this political climate,

“compassion” is a partisan issue. Discussion ensued about the possibilities of moving forward with the initiative without using the word “compassion,” or seeing if MDEIB could take the lead on this, or moving ahead with the Compassionate Communities initiative despite the risk of pushback. HRC members stated that they think it would be better if the MDEIB could lead this initiative, and the HRC could help in some way, maybe as being a touch point to help connect compassionate groups together. Ms. Bowie thanked the group for their feedback, and stated that she will talk with Ms. Burke next week, and keep the HRC updated.

C) Education Options for Committee

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that this is around Dr. Saleh’s suggestion that the HRC take some time in their calendar to educate themselves. She continued that their remit is to educate the public, but sharpening their own education as well is a wonderful idea. The group had talked about ideas such as having one longer meeting each quarter, or setting up a special meeting, on the understanding that all meetings with a quorum of members must be public and have meeting minutes. She asked for thoughts on how to do this.

Discussion ensued. Ms. Bender-Jesse spoke about her initial conversation with the HRC’s Minute Taker, who has been with the HRC for a long time, really knows the group and cares about the HRC’s work, but is only available for the HRC meetings until 6:15 PM because she has another meeting at 6:30 PM. She continued that she recommends the HRC consider having one or two longer meetings per year, and she could see if another Minute Taker would be available from 6:15 PM on.

Dr. Saleh suggested the HRC consider a different day of the week, to see if there is more flexibility there. Ms. Fiske suggested using the July, August, or September meeting for the education event/retreat instead of the usual agenda, and maybe extend it by a half hour.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that she wonders if they are putting the horse before the cart by trying to determine a schedule before first determining what topics they want education in. Discussion continued. Rabbi Aronson proposed tabling this, and at the next meeting, discussing what kinds of education they would like.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that another possibility is to identify and participate in third party trainings, which would not require a Minute Taker. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied yes, if HRC members attend a training or event that the HRC does not host, which is hosted by a different group such as the MDEIB, they do not need to worry about quorum and do not need a Minute Taker. Discussion continued about the different possibilities, and about whether the HRC members should all attend trainings/educational events together, or individually. Ms. Odato stated that there might be certain topics that some members feel up to date with, while other members want more training in. Ms. Bender-Jesse agreed. She continued that if an HRC member attends a helpful training or event and sends her notes or a document from it, she could share that with the HRC.

Rabbi Aronson stated that he is not even thinking so much about trainings, he is thinking about the HRC being in touch with the human rights issues the Keene community is facing. He continued that he would love to devote 20 or 30 minutes of some HRC meetings to hearing from different groups on various topics such as accessibility issues, LGBTQ issues, the Muslim community, and more. Dr. Saleh replied that he agrees, and he, too, was thinking about them being more aware of their surroundings and society. Ms. Fiske agreed and stated that rather than focusing on online trainings, she likes the idea of being more in touch with the community, and networking. Quarterly, they could invite a community member to give the HRC a 15-minute presentation. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that they could probably do that every month. She continued that the question is how to identify the people to ask. Ms. Fiske spoke of how the HRC members could take turns finding people to ask to come speak, and keep a living document of the potential guests and topics, to keep it organized.

Ms. Bender-Jesse spoke about how the HRC could, at their next meeting, come with ideas for which topics or issues they are interested in, and ideas for people to invite to come speak or groups to learn about, and then they could start to map it out. She could create a living document the HRC members would all have access to, and they could keep updating it. She continued that meetings would have to be structured in a way that the HRC gets through their business agenda in time for the guest to speak. Discussion continued.

Mr. Morrill asked if they are talking about having these guest speakers instead of the original idea of educational opportunities, or if they are talking about doing both to kind of complement each other, or if they are not deciding at this point. Discussion ensued. HRC members spoke about how they all tend to reach out for educational opportunities already, on their own, but at the same time, not everyone is aware of the same/all of the opportunities and events that are out there, and it would be good to share with each other when possible.

Ms. Fiske left at 5:50 PM.

Dr. Saleh stated that if the HRC has a guest scheduled to speak at a meeting, they could advertise that ahead of time, and thus increase awareness of the HRC. He continued that he would like to reach more people, such as people who may need the HRC's help but are not aware of the HRC. Discussion continued about how to promote the HRC more. Rabbi Aronson spoke about how the guest speakers are intended to be for the HRC members' education, so the HRC can learn what the community needs are, not like a public seminar, and half of the meeting will be for the HRC's business. He would rather keep the focus on the HRC's own education, so they can function at a higher level as a committee. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that presumably, what the HRC learns will inform the HRC's events, so it can be brought to the community in that way. Dr. Saleh replied that Rabbi Aronson has a good point, and he thus withdraws his recommendation for them to publicize the HRC meetings more. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that this is just a touch point, not the end of the conversation.

8) Adjournment

There being no further business, Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos adjourned the meeting at 6:30 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Britta Reida, Minute Taker

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

Additional edits by,
Katryna Kibler, City Clerk's Office