

City of Keene
New Hampshire

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Monday, February 2, 2026

5:00 PM

Room 22,
Recreation Center

Members Present:

Debra Bowie, Vice Chair
Rabbi Daniel Aronson
Dr. Dottie Morris
Marti Fiske (until 5:43 PM)
Gina Burke
David Morill
Dr. Mohammad Saleh, Alternate (arrived at 5:15 PM, remote)
Sofia Cunha-Vasconcelos, Alternate
Julie Odat, Alternate
Councilor Bettina Chadbourne (arrived at 5:26 PM)

Staff Present:

Alyssa Bender-Jesse, Youth Services
Manager / JCC Coordinator

Members Not Present:

Gregory Kleiner, Chair
Ritu Budakoti

1) **Welcome and Call to Order**

Vice Chair Bowie 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 5:01 PM. Roll call was conducted.

2) **Approval of January 5, 2026 Meeting Minutes**

Ms. Fiske made a motion to approve the meeting minutes of January 5, 2026. Rabbi Aronson seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

3) **Finance Report**

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that the only thing that is different is a reflection of the \$500 that was spent for the MLK Day event.

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

Ms. Burke stated that there are flyers for Black History Month. She continued that the MDEIB has been creating a community survey, working on the reporting tool she talked about at the last meeting, and working on budgets and grant-writing.

Dr. Morris added that they have also been working on the Racial Justice and Community Safety Report.

Rabbi Aronson stated that the Black History Month flyer has a great design. He continued that however, something to think about is that flyers with lots of color become onerous to print. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that if HRC members ever want copies of flyers for HRC events, she would be glad to print them here at the Rec Center.

5) Acceptance of Committee Event Reports

A) Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

Rabbi Aronson stated that he wants to thank everyone who helped make it a really great day. He continued that the day before, his congregation helped sort the food, and the Community Breakfast was great. There were about 70 people there. It exceeded all expectations, and he loved people's participation in the Q&A. The evening program had 103 people. Ms. Fiske was very helpful and gracious. Larry Benquist really appreciated the opportunity to show the film. At 9:00 PM that day, Rachel Maddow had a segment on Jonathan Daniels, using many of the images you see in the film, which was very impressive. At the MLK Day event, it felt like they were doing something very timely and important. Next year's event will be after he is off the HRC, although he might be an alternate member then. He hopes someone else will take over organizing the event. He loves being part of the breakfast and will continue that.

HRC members thanked Rabbi Aronson and Ms. Fiske for their work with the event and spoke positively about it.

B) Black History Month

Dr. Morris stated that they have great flyers for the Black History Month events, thanks to Ms. Burke. She continued that they hope people attend the events. Shadows Fall North is long, so the plan is to have follow up discussions on a different day, instead of immediately following the film. The film is about New Hampshire in general, so the working group decided to make it more specific to the Monadnock region by having the event at the Cheshire County Historical Society and having Ms. Burke talk about a couple of the projects coming out of that. The film is great, and you can learn a lot about the Portsmouth area in particular. She encourages HRC members to attend on February 17, 2026 at Heberton Hall, and added that there will be something to eat. The discussion will be on March 5, 2026 at the Historical Society. She continued that she appreciates Ms. Fiske's help.

C) Juneteenth

Ms. Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that the working group is working on the lineup for the concert. She continued that they decided to have the event at Fuller Park. They are hoping to include some food trucks. Planning is going well, and the next meeting is tomorrow night if anyone wants to join.

D) Pride Event

Mr. Morrill stated that planning is early but going smoothly. He continued that the working group's next meeting is Thursday. He will talk with Ms. Cunha-Vasconcelos more about this later, but just to put it out there, he has been thinking about Pride having a crossover event with Juneteenth, such as an having an open-air artist on Juneteenth. It would be great to find a Black, queer artist.

E) Keene International Festival

No comments.

F) Native American Heritage

Ms. Fiske stated that she submitted a written update about the Native American Heritage event. She continued that thanks to Joyce Heywood, they will be doing a Community Reads event. Ms. Heywood will provide the book at author's cost, and she (Ms. Fiske) is looking for community sponsors. All of the grant money that used to be available for buying multiple copies for book discussions has totally dried up. She will be reaching out to HRC members who have done fundraising for other HRC events, for advice and connections. At the very least, she is aiming for 100 books for distribution, and they would need five community sponsors to pull that off. Brief discussion ensued about ideas for funding the copies of the book.

6) New Business

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that the HRC needs to re-vote Gregg Kleiner in as Chair, for the sake of the record, since he was only an alternate member when the HRC nominated him/voted for him as Chair. She continued that the Minute Taker and City Clerk want one more official vote for him on the record.

Dr. Morris made a motion to nominate Gregg Kleiner as Chair of the Human Rights Committee. Ms. Fiske seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

A) Guest Speaker: Keene Mayor, Ms. Carroll, Ms. Heywood

Mr. Morrill introduced Joyce Heywood. He continued that she is the editor of Woven Through the Sweetgrass, a collection of her mother's journal entries, which tell the story of her mother's grandfather. Israel Sadoques was an Abenaki man from the Quebec area and was not able to make a living up north, so he moved to this area on the Connecticut River and ended up in

Keene. He purchased a farm on Elm St. Ms. Heywood can tell them much more about it. He invited her to come speak to the HRC because through the Cottage Court the City is working on, the property that Ms. Heywood's grandfather's farm is on is planned to be demolished. The HRC might not have a lot of power to do anything about it, but they can hear what Ms. Heywood has to say. He thanked Ms. Heywood for coming.

Joyce Heywood stated that she is a descendant of the Sadoques family. She continued that she is the granddaughter of Elizabeth Sadoques, who was the 12th and final child. Israel Sadoques and his family were in Odanak, Canada, in an Indian Reserve there. It was originally comprised of people who fled from all parts of New England, as the colonial settlements were encroaching on their territory. There was no actual Abenaki tribe, per se – they were made up of different clans from all different parts. They took the name “Abenaki,” a variation of Wabanaki, which is more of a confederacy. It means “People of the Dawn.” Her family has always pronounced “Abenaki” with the older, more French pronunciation. Her family lived in Odanak and were not doing so well. Israel and Mary got married in 1872. He was a trader for the Hudson's Bay Company. Over time and by that time, they had over hunted. There was a tremendous demand for the beaver pelts used to make the big top hats people wore, and the hunting was getting scarce, so it was tough to make a living. Mr. and Mrs. Sadoques decided to try and find a better life, for the sake of their children.

Ms. Heywood continued that they traveled by canoe, down the Connecticut River. They went to Norwich, CT in 1878 and stayed there for about two years, where there was a group of Abenakis. They did not do too well there, either. Her great-grandmother got sick. When the family first came down to CT, there were two children, Israel, Jr., and Mary, Jr. They had had a son who died up in Canada before they left. Mrs. Sadoques was pregnant again in 1880 and gave birth to another boy, and somewhere in there, they decided they needed to go back, because it was not quite working out in CT. They went back to Canada, via canoe on the Connecticut River again, for a brief period. Then, they decided to try again, and came back down. They met a man from Keene, in Brattleboro where they were camped. He was friendly, and they asked him if there was a good place to settle. He recommended they settle in Keene, so that is how they came to be in Keene. They came with almost nothing. Somewhere along the way, Mr. Sadoques convinced someone from the bank in town to give him a loan. There was a property that had been in foreclosure for a few years, and the bank wanted to get rid of it, so they struck a deal and Mr. Sadoques got his loan. They settled there on Elm St. They originally were in another spot further down Elm St., but Mrs. Sadoques had complained that she did not get a good feeling in the house. It was discomfoting to her. So, they left. They found out years later that the new people who were in that house were digging in the cellar and discovered a baby's bones. That was not uncommon in those days, but in this instance, Mrs. Sadoques always said she could feel that baby, and that the baby was not happy. That is how the family ended up at 454 Elm St.

Ms. Heywood continued that at their home at 454 Elm St., they farmed. Mr. Sadoques ran his own tannery business and also made chair splints for the chair factory in Keene. Thus, her family had these little cottage industries going, and they had about 12 employees at one time. Many were family members who had come down from Canada, and she is not sure, but some might have been non-Native people from the town. Census records show there was another Sadoques resident boarding at their house, so that is good evidence that they were from Canada. Those

employees must have helped make the slats for the chairs, but they also made Indian baskets. They brought some down from Canada, which Mr. Sadoques resold, but they also made some. Mrs. Sadoques was a Master Basket Maker, which means she made baskets of excellent quality. Today, she herself has some of the baskets Mary Sadoques made. Her family had a presence in Keene for over 100 years. Her great aunt Margaret lived to be 102. She was the last surviving one. She stayed in Keene as long as she could, then went to a nursing home in Winchester. She had wanted to stay in Keene; they all loved it there.

Ms. Heywood continued that her great aunt Margaret ran a millenary shop in Keene. She went to New York City to train, to learn to make hats. Margaret's sister, Maude, became an Episcopalian nun, and she is believed to have been the first Native American nun in the Episcopalian church. The church wrote that to Mary Sadoques. Also, she (Ms. Heywood) is very proud that her grandmother, Elizabeth Sadoques, became a registered nurse in 1919 and served the Keene community through Elliot Hospital and private duty nursing, until retiring in about 1960.

Ms. Heywood paused to ask if there were any questions, knowing that they had to leave time for the other two speakers. Mr. Morrill replied that the Mayor and Ms. Carroll were unable to make it today, so Ms. Heywood still has time.

Ms. Heywood stated that she could mention that she and others are trying to preserve the house. She continued that she met with the owner of the house recently. He seems very nice and wants to save the house, so she was happy to hear that. Anything that any of the groups in the area can do to help move the preservation efforts forward would be great.

Rabbi Aronson asked if the owner realized the significance of the house when he purchased it. Ms. Heywood replied that he did, up to a point. She continued that he said it was in his mind that he wanted to see if he could preserve it. His wife definitely did not want it torn down; she really loves it there. In a way, he was happy that she (Ms. Heywood) contacted him. The Historical Society let her know that the house was in danger, and after she cried, and got over that part of it, she wrote to the Mayor and asked if there was anything he could do to help. She asked if he could at least put her in touch with the owner, which the Mayor did. She thinks once the owner was contacted by her, that was the catalyst he needed to say yes, he should preserve it.

Cunha-Vasconcelos asked why the house is at risk. She asked if there is a structural issue. Ms. Heywood replied no, the owner is still living in it, and has been in it for 30 years, and he and his wife love it there. She continued that they want to downsize and retire. The house is two stories, and the owner and his wife are getting to the age where they want to have one-story living. So, he came up with a plan to develop the property into cottage dwellings, and they will move into one of them. However, the house is in beautiful condition. It is perfectly preserved and there is nothing that needs to be fixed. His plan is that he can move the house slightly from where it is, down more toward the street. He would have to alter his design plan for the cottages, and he might lose one or two cottages, but he is willing to do that. His idea, which she thinks might be the most practical way to go, is to have the building moved down and use it for nursing school students or interns for the hospital. He thought the hospital would get behind that. It would be temporary housing for people. He also envisioned some sort of set-up where it would be not a museum, but it would have information about the Sadoques family and denote its history. She is

not sure, and she is not clear on how open to the public it would be, but they will form a non-profit organization to start, to see what they can do.

Mr. Morrill asked if there has been any talk about fundraising to raise funds to move the house. Ms. Heywood replied yes, but not a lot. She continued that the developer feels that if it gets used for the housing for the students, the fundraising would sort of take care of itself. He told her not to worry about it, because he was confident they could get funding through the hospital and people associated with it. But again, his ideas and plans are not fully developed yet. What he is really looking for is support, confirmation that this preservation is wanted by the community, not just the family and not just his wife.

Ms. Fiske asked what has been going on with the work with the Historical Society. Ms. Heywood replied that Ms. Carroll wants to record the family members inside the house reminiscing and telling what they remember about their experiences there. She continued that that will potentially happen next week. She will be traveling up, and maybe her cousin or two, but she is not positive about the date and who is coming. Ms. Fiske replied that she is glad to hear there is some progress. Ms. Heywood replied yes, she was glad the developer at least wants to preserve the house, because she is kind of powerless. She continued that the best she was hoping for was to be able to go tour the house before he tore it down. The reason she got so upset is because she has so many memories there and used to visit and play in the yard. Her family had quite a bit of property with it. The original property also included down to what she thinks is now 470 Elm St. They had given a plot of land to their daughter when she got married, and she and her husband lived there. They never had any children, so after her great-aunt died and her husband got older, he invited her grandmother, the registered nurse, to move in and take care of him, saying that once he passed, she would have the house. That is what happened. When he passed, her mother's family, the Masons, moved in there. They had been living in Marlborough. They go way back. Merrill Mason, Jr. was a Marlborough Selectman. They lived there from about 1960 until they closed out the house and moved to an apartment in downtown Keene. When her grandfather died, her grandmother moved in with her sisters. She also lived with many different family members. Originally, there was quite a bit of land there with the 454 Elm St. property, in which the Sadoques had their big farm, raising their own food and animals, and trees that they cut to make the wood slats for the chair factories.

Mr. Morrill stated that he does not know how much the HRC, as a committee, can do, but he is happy to hear any suggestions. He asked if there is anything they can do as individuals. For example, they could reach out to the Mayor. Ms. Heywood replied that she thinks it could go through the Mayor, because he is doing quite a lot. She continued that she thinks at this point, it might be a little too early, because she thinks they should have a more solidified plan before the HRC members or others would know what they are supporting. However, eventually, it would help to have letters of support or something to show that there is a community interest. She would also appreciate people spreading the word around town about the fact that there is an effort to preserve the house.

Ms. Bowie stated that she thinks that once there is a plan, letters to the newspaper would be good, to help people understand the importance of acknowledging this land and the house and keeping the Sadoques family's presence in people's memories. Ms. Heywood replied yes, from a

historical perspective, this family was Native American. She continued that when they came to town, there were some people who were less than nice to them, but overall, they made their way in town. They were accepted and contributed quite a bit to the town. They prospered, and the town prospered because of them, to some degree. That aspect is important to the town's history. Also, her grandmother and her sister, who became RNs, are some of the first Native American nurses in the country. At one point, she found a newspaper article about a Native American woman from Montana who claimed to be the first. She got her RN certificate in about 1924 or 1927, and there was a movement to honor her by putting her on a postage stamp. That would have been inaccurate, because her (Ms. Heywood's) grandmother predated that, so she wrote to the people who were trying to do the stamp, and it actually put a stop to that. At the time, her family wondered if their two family members were the first Native American RNs. It turned out they were probably not, but it is difficult to figure out because it depends on the criteria you use. It is hard to tell exactly who the first was. But their two family members were definitely among the first Native American RNs. That historical aspect is worth saving.

Mr. Morrill asked if, in Ms. Heywood's conversations with the Historical Society, there has been any talk about having a historical marker at the site. Ms. Heywood replied no, they have not gotten that far in the conversations, but that is a possibility. She continued that she does not know anything about trying to get it on the National Historical Register, but maybe that could happen. That process takes a while, so there would not be enough time to get it right now. The developer plans to start work there in March or April. He had this plan and went through the process to get all the approvals through the City, before she even heard about it. She was late to the process. However, he is willing to save the house, if it is possible.

Ms. Bowie asked if Ms. Heywood has made connections with Cheshire Medical, regarding the idea of them using the house. Ms. Heywood replied no, but the developer said he would take care of that, so she assumes he is working on that. She continued that she might learn more when she goes up next week.

Regarding a question about where on Elm St. the house is located, Ms. Heywood replied that 454 Elm St. is right near the school.

Mackenzie Bemuset stated that if there is any fundraising needed for the Native American Heritage reading, he has several family members who still make canoes and whatnot. He continued that they are all indigenous. He can see people probably spending money for those.

Mr. Morrill thanked Ms. Heywood for coming today, and encouraged her to reach out to him via email if there is anything else. Ms. Heywood thanked the group.

Councilor Chadbourne stated that years ago, before CVS was where it is, there were two historical brick houses that people wanted to save. She continued that they ended up relocating them to Castle St., for Keene Housing. She is not exactly sure how it worked, but there was money to do it. She wonders if someone could get in touch with Keene Housing to find out the process of how they saved those houses. At the last meeting, Mr. Morrill had asked about whether the City Council was involved in demolitions, so she called the Community Development Department. She found out that the City Council is not involved at all. Whoever

wants to tear a structure down has to get a permit from the Community Development Department. If for some reason they could not relocate it or could not get the money, there is a company in Brattleboro, Deconstruction Works, that takes houses apart and saves pieces that people can take to preserve the history without having the entire structure. That is something else to keep in mind.

Dr. Morris asked who is leading the charge besides the Historical Society. Mr. Morrill replied that along with Jenna Carroll from the Historical Society, the Mayor has been working with Ms. Heywood on it. He continued that the Historical Society is not allowed to raise funds for it, due to a conflict of interest with other properties they are raising funds for, which he is a little unclear on. Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if anyone has looped in the Heritage Commission. She continued that she assumes the Mayor has. Councilor Ruttle-Miller replied that Councilor Ellis is aware, and she is on the Heritage Commission.

Rabbi Aronson asked where monies raised would be going to. Others replied that they need to know what the plan is before they can answer that question, is what Ms. Heywood said. Ms. Bowie stated that hopefully, Ms. Heywood and others can start to put together a plan next week and begin to understand what the finances are, too. Councilor Chadbourne replied that she does not know if they have researched all the options yet – for example, the option she mentioned, of moving the building like the ones from CVS were, might not be on their radar. If they are making a decision with limited information, she thinks the HRC should reach out to them about it. Dr. Morris replied yes, especially if March is the potential starting date. Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that a Keene Sentinel article does not talk about the historical property, but talks about the approval of the development plan. She continued that when it was approved in December, the developer had plans to start developing the property as early as February. Ms. Bowie stated that if Cheshire Medical is interested in moving the house and using it, it sounded to her like Cheshire Medical would cover the costs of moving it. Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that given how nonprofits are doing at the moment, that is not a bet she would make. Others agreed.

Rabbi Aronson stated that at the Community Breakfast with civic leaders, something that came up was a desire to meet again and a desire to reach out to more folks in the business community. He asked what people think about putting out an invitation to reconvene that group, and inviting Ms. Heywood to give this presentation to the group. He does not know what would come of it, but maybe a bank would offer to establish a fund or trust for this, and people might contribute to it. Mr. Morrill replied that it sounded like one of the main things Ms. Heywood is looking for is spreading the word, so that would be good. Councilor Chadbourne replied that the Savings Bank of Walpole has been quite a force in the community. She continued that they would be a good place to start. Mr. Morrill stated that he feels like they are missing a lot of information, because he knows the Mayor has been working on this quite a bit. Discussion continued about how they do not know the cost or scope, and all the logistics of moving a house.

Ms. Odatto stated that she wants to make sure that the HRC hears that the property owner and his wife are invested in preserving the house. She continued that it seems unlikely that if they are already preservation-minded to some degree that February is a hard and fast development start date for them. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that to clarify, the article says the February date is for starting to clear land for development later in the spring. She continued that there is no date set

for demolishing the house. Ms. Odató stated that she would hesitate to bring the preservation efforts to another group before the homeowner/developer has the opportunity to make good on the things they are discussing. She continued that if they are in conversation with the hospital, the HRC should probably wait and see what happens with that, before they ramp it up. Others replied that they could ramp it up to include the developer and see what he needs. Rabbi Aronson asked if they should invite the developer to a meeting. Mr. Morrill replied that it would be nice to get an update from the Mayor. Brief discussion ensued, and Mr. Morrill stated that he will reach out to the Mayor to check in, and if there is anything that needs to be distributed to the HRC, he will go through Ms. Bender-Jesse for that.

Mr. Morrill continued that the HRC does not have a lot of power, but maybe they can organize an event or fundraiser. Dr. Morris stated that she likes the idea of a historical marker, which would be a recognition even if the house ends up demolished. Councilor Chadbourne replied that Deconstruction Works could potentially save significant pieces, too.

A member of the public asked how to join the HRC. Ms. Bender-Jesse spoke about the interest form to fill out on the City's website.

Councilor Chadbourne stated that she would like to look into the demolition approval process a little more. She continued that before she had a garage torn down, staff came out and asked her a series of questions, including about historical value, so it was not as simple as paying a fee and receiving a permit. Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that she is the Chair of the Historic District Commission (HDC), and she knows that anyone who wants to demolish a structure within the Historic District has to get permission from the HDC. She continued that she did not know the City considers historic issues when considering demolitions of properties outside of the Historic District.

7) Adjourn – Next Meeting March 2, 2026 at 5:00 PM

There being no further business, Vice Chair Bowie adjourned the meeting at 6:00 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Britta Reida, Minute Taker

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