

City of Keene
New Hampshire

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Monday, March 2, 2026

5:00 PM

**Room 22,
Recreation Center**

Members Present:

Gregory Kleiner, Chair
Debra Bowie, Vice Chair
Ritu Budakoti (remote)
Rabbi Daniel Aronson
Councilor Bettina Chadbourne
Dr. Dottie Morris
Gina Burke
David Morill
Jennifer Porschitz, Alternate
Dr. Mohammad Saleh, Alternate (arrived at
5:02 PM)
Julie Odat, Alternate
Thomas M. White, Alternate

Staff Present:

Alyssa Bender-Jesse, Youth Services
Manager / JCC Coordinator

Members Not Present:

Marti Fiske
Sofia Cunha-Vasconcelos, Alternate

1) Welcome and Call to Order

Chair Kleiner 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.*" He called the meeting to order at 5:00 PM.

Roll call was conducted. Ms. Budakoti stated that she was participating remotely, because she was not sure she would be able to make it to the meeting on time. She continued that she was at home, and no one was in the room with her.

2) Approval of February 2, 2026 Meeting Minutes

Ms. Bowie made a motion to approve the meeting minutes of February 2, 2026. Councilor Chadbourne seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

3) Finance Report

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that the only thing that is different is the change under the Native American Heritage line. She continued that Ms. Fiske was going to use some of the remaining balance to buy copies of the book for the Community Reads book group.

Dr. Saleh arrived at 5:02 PM.

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

Ms. Burke stated that the MDEIB had a great turnout on February 17 for the screening of *Shadows Fall North*, and the follow-up event, a discussion of the film, is this Thursday at the Historical Society at 6:30 PM. She continued that the film is incredible and she recommends watching it. Dr. Morris stated that it is open access now, so the film is available for people to watch.

Ms. Burke stated that the MDEIB has been applying for grants. She continued that she recently joined the advisory board for the NH Center for Justice and Equity. Today she came across an article about how the Upper Valley can be unwelcoming to people of color. The book *Homesick: Race and Exclusion in Rural New England* came out in November, and it could be a great option for a Community Reads book or education for the HRC. She can send Ms. Bender-Jesse the link to the article to share with the group.

Ms. Burke asked if anyone else has anything to add about the MDEIB. Dr. Morris stated that they continue to go through the Racial Justice Community Safety Report. Ms. Burke replied yes, and they are still working on the reporting tool that she spoke about last time.

5) Acceptance of Committee Event Reports

A) Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

Rabbi Aronson stated that if anyone is interested in chairing the Martin Luther King, Jr. Day working group next year, that is something to think about.

B) Black History Month

Ms. Burke stated that about 30 people came to the *Shadows Fall North* screening, and they had a great spread of food, and some good discussion after the film. She continued that it was a successful event.

Rabbi Aronson asked if the food was donated. Dr. Morris stated that she ended up paying for the food herself, when she went to pick it up, because she did not realize that Black History Month did not have a budget. She continued that people were glad to have the food, so that was good.

Dr. Saleh thanked Dr. Morris for doing that, and asked why the HRC does not have a budget for Black History Month. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that there has never been a line item for Black History Month. She continued that her recollection is that she had just started observing Andy

Bohannon, to become the new HRC staff liaison, at the time when Mr. Bohannon went to the City Council to ask to increase the HRC's fiscal amount from \$1,000 to \$2,000. The HRC set it up so that the \$2,000 was split eventually between the HRC's four events. Native American Heritage, Pride, Juneteenth, and MLK Day each got \$500. She thinks it is because for most of the years prior, everything related to Black History Month was part of MLK Day or part of Keene State College and thus already donated. The group can talk about this more under "New Business." Dr. Saleh stated that he thinks the HRC should reimburse Dr. Morris for the expense.

C) Juneteenth

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that the written update from Ms. Cunha-Vasconcelos is in the agenda packet. She continued that Ms. Cunha-Vasconcelos gave a breakdown of everything the working group has planned and where they are at. Dr. Morris stated that the event will not be downtown this year, because of the construction. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that they are looking at using Fuller Park right outside the Recreation Center. Discussion ensued.

Rabbi Aronson stated that he wants to note that anything scheduled for a Friday night will preclude him and perhaps members of his community. He continued that it will also bump up against anything scheduled at the Colonial Theater, The Showroom, Moco, or wherever else. It is not an optimal time to be doing programming. Dr. Morris replied that she will bring that up to the working group when they next meet.

Ms. Burke stated that she had talked to Councilor Workman about doing the Dr. Johnson historical marker around Juneteenth, but that does not work for the Black Heritage Trail. She continued that she was going to ask the Juneteenth working group if they can think of any other days that would be appropriate. It is always good when there is already something going on in the city. It is about a two-hour event with the Black Heritage Trail. It seems like the Juneteenth working group has a whole series of dates, so this is something to keep on their radar. Dr. Morris asked if Ms. Burke knows which dates work better for the Black Heritage Trail. Ms. Burke replied no, they did not say. She continued that maybe earlier in the month would be better. Dr. Morris thanked Ms. Burke for the information and continued that she will bring it to the working group.

D) Pride Event

Mr. Morrill stated that the Pride working group is making progress. He continued that the opening for the Art Crawl will be Friday, June 12 at Brewbakers. There will be some speakers and performers, and a community art project – a mural painted on the wall of Madame Sherri's. They have an artist who will organize all of that, once they give him a topic or subject matter for him to design. He will create a "paint by number" design on the wall for people to paint on. The closing party will be the last weekend in June, on Friday or Saturday at Madame Sherri's. The working group is putting the call for artists together and looking for donations from folks.

E) Keene International Festival

Chair Kleiner asked Ms. Budakoti if she had a KIF update. Ms. Budakoti replied that she is taking a break from the KIF this year because she is not here the majority of the time. She continued that when the KIF committee regroups, they will probably assign a liaison for the festival, and at that point, more will be shared.

F) Native American Heritage

Chair Kleiner stated that there is no report at this time. He continued that people can refer back to February's report.

6) New Business

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that the City Clerk's Office would like the HRC to confirm Ms. Bowie's nomination as Vice Chair by voting again.

Rabbi Aronson made a motion to nominate Ms. Bowie as Vice Chair. Dr. Morris seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that someone from the Durham, NH human rights committee reached out to her, just to connect. She continued that the Durham group was researching whether there were any other human rights commissions or committees in the state that are similar to theirs, in that they are overseen by a municipality. Keene's HRC is the one that came up. She just connected Chair Kleiner and Vice Chair Bowie with the chair of the Durham group, and she will keep the HRC in the loop about what comes from that. It would be phenomenal to have a connection with a group that operates potentially similarly to the HRC.

Chair Kleiner asked if there was any other new business.

Ms. Bowie asked if the HRC has money to pay for the food at the Black History Month event. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that the HRC has \$3,793 in its account.

Ms. Bowie made a motion for the HRC to reimburse Dr. Dottie Morris for \$441 for the food items for the Black History Month event. Ms. Budakoti seconded the motion, which passed by a vote of 7 to 0. Dr. Morris abstained.

Ms. Burke stated that she thinks they should also make a motion to give the Black History Month event a budget moving forward. Mr. Morrill asked if this is something they need to bring to the City Council. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that to clarify, the HRC could make a motion to allocate funding to that line item, either by splitting the \$2,000 they receive in July five ways for the five events, or by asking the City Council for another \$500, thus asking for \$2,500 each year instead of \$2,000.

Ms. Odatto stated that she questions the idea of the HRC funding five events, if they oversee six events. She continued that she understands that the KIF is its own thing, but she wonders if the

HRC should be funding all of its events equally. Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that the reason the KIF is listed throughout the HRC's budget is because it is overseen by the HRC, but the KIF is its own nonprofit, 501c3 organization, she believes - Ms. Budakoti can correct her if she is wrong. Thus, the KIF's budget is, while still under the HRC, a completely different line item. She cannot even go into the system and allocate any funds to KIF, because the Parks & Recreation Director oversees them directly.

Ms. Budakoti stated that Ms. Bender-Jesse is correct about most of that. She continued that the KIF is not registered as a 501c3 yet, but the KIF operates under the HRC's umbrella because the City does the KIF's finances and it is the safest way for them to be able to do the community festival. She appreciates what Ms. Odato said about having equity, but in the past, the KIF has been very fortunate to receive donations and sponsorships from supporters in the community, so they have never been in a situation where they needed to request more. However, she wants to be on the record in case there comes a time in the future when the KIF does not have the money and the city really wants to continue the festival. At that time, she thinks there should be some sort of step up in order to have that resource for them to be able to continue. She wants to again express her huge gratitude for the community, because the festival is because of the community and for the community, and she hopes it continues.

Ms. Burke stated that she is not sure if they are talking about five events or six, but her motion would be for the HRC to allocate \$500 to each event the HRC oversees. Dr. Saleh replied that if the KIF remains independent, the HRC has five events to fund, which means requesting an additional \$500 from the City Council. He continued that he thinks it cannot hurt to ask. They should request the additional \$500, and have the five events covered by whatever allocated funds the HRC receives, so that even if the City Council denies the request for the additional \$500, the events are still covered. Discussion ensued about whether the HRC will be requesting \$2,500 or \$3,000 from the City Council. Councilor Chadbourne stated that as a member of the Finance, Organization, and Personnel Committee, she can say that it is going to be a very difficult budget this year.

Dr. Saleh asked what the HRC's justification would be for asking the City Council for \$3,000 instead of \$2,500, since the KIF has been adequately self-funded over the years and appears to have a surplus. Rabbi Aronson replied that the justification would be that the HRC could help compensate for any drop in funding the KIF might have in the future. Ms. Budakoti stated that to clarify, it might look like the KIF has a surplus now, but this has not always been the case, and the reason the budget looks very healthy right now is because one of the sponsors expressed that the KIF needs to be made more sustainable and that sponsor donated an amount at the end of last year that was intended for the KIF's continuation in future years.

Discussion continued about what the HRC will request of the City Council. Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that although the fiscal year begins in July, she would need to present the HRC's request next week. She continued that if it is the HRC's desire, she can write the memo as a request for \$3,000 to give \$500 to each of the six events the HRC puts on every year. She appreciates the comments about having equitable access for the KIF, because the HRC is also not the actual fiscal agent for the Juneteenth event anymore since that switched over to the YMCA a couple of years ago, but the HRC puts \$500 into that budget each year. Dr. Morris replied that the

Juneteenth group fundraises for the rest. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied yes, and it is similar with the KIF – the festival costs over \$10,000, and the HRC could offer the \$500 because it is the same with every other event. The HRC could put their increase request forward in that sense. Ms. Burke replied that it seems equitable that if the HRC hosts six events, they should fund six events.

Ms. Burke made a motion for the HRC to request \$3,000 from the City’s upcoming budget, to fund all six events that are under the HRC. Ms. Bowie seconded the motion.

Ms. Burke stated that to reiterate what Dr. Saleh said before, if the HRC ends up only getting \$2,000, the HRC needs to decide whether to include Black History Month as an HRC budget item for next year, which she thinks they should do. Chair Kleiner replied that if the HRC only had \$2,000, that would be \$400 per the five events. He continued that it would not include the KIF unless they decide it should, which would further bring the amount down. Rabbi Aronson suggested the HRC make a motion about that in July or August, or whenever it is that they hear back about the City Council’s decision. Dr. Saleh asked if the only reason the City Council needs to be consulted is regarding the HRC’s request for the increase, or if they would still need to consult the City Council regarding the decision to split the money among the five events. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that it is up to the HRC to decide how to spend their budget. She continued that when the HRC is asking for an increase in funds, they need to really justify why they are asking for that. That is, they are asking for the extra \$500 and \$500 for two events, not just asking for more money because they simply want more money. If the HRC gets approved for the \$3,000, they are still allowed to allocate the HRC’s funds the way they need to that year. For example, if someone suddenly donates funds to cover all of Juneteenth, and the HRC then does not need that \$500, the HRC could decide to put that money in their balance on hand.

Chair Kleiner asked if there was further discussion. Hearing none, he called for a vote. The motion passed with a vote of 7 to 0. Councilor Chadbourne abstained.

Chair Kleiner asked if there was any other new business. He welcomed the two new members, and continued that the committee membership is now full. He asked everyone to briefly go around and introduce themselves. Introductions occurred.

As Ms. Bender-Jesse introduced herself and explained her role as staff liaison, she stated that her one piece of advice to new members is to never hit “reply all” to the emails she sends to the group. She continued that doing so would mean the group was having a conversation as a quorum, which would make the email conversation a “meeting” and thus require a minute taker. She also asks that anyone who knows they will not be able to make it to a meeting to let her know as early as possible, to ensure there will be a quorum. She welcomes feedback.

Dr. Saleh asked Ms. Bender-Jesse to clarify who is allowed to participate remotely, and how. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that HRC members are expected to attend in person, because a meeting cannot happen unless a quorum of members are physically present. She continued that however, in certain circumstances when a member cannot attend, they can ask her for the link to the Teams meeting to participate remotely. Brief discussion ensued. Ms. Bender-Jesse clarified that the

Teams meeting link is not available to members of the public, only for the Minute Taker, HRC members, and invited guest speakers like last month.

Ms. Bowie asked if there are updates on the Elm St. property. Mr. Morrill replied that he emailed the Mayor for an update on what is happening with the Sadoques family home, 454 Elm St. He continued that he did not get much of an update – just that the Mayor is still working on it with the Historical Society and Joyce Heywood. He was hoping to hear more details, and hoping to hear suggestions on what the HRC can do. While he does not want to direct anyone to flood the Mayor’s email inbox, he thinks it would be a good idea for people to contact him. When Ms. Heywood spoke to the HRC at the last meeting, she said that one of the best things they can do is show that there is support in the community for saving this house. It thus makes sense for people to share their support for this with the Mayor. He himself submitted a story suggestion to the Keene Sentinel, but he has not heard back from them. The more the word gets out there, the more likely it is that something will happen.

7) Adjourn – Next Meeting April 6, 2026

There being no further business, Chair Kleiner adjourned the meeting at 5:48 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Britta Reida, Minute Taker

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