

**City of Keene**  
**New Hampshire**

**HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE**  
**MEETING MINUTES**

**Monday, May 4, 2026**

**5:00 PM**

**Room 22,  
Recreation Center**

**Members Present:**

Gregory Kleiner, Chair  
Debra Bowie, Vice Chair  
Ritu Budakoti  
Rabbi Daniel Aronson  
Councilor Bettina Chadbourne  
Dr. Dottie Morris  
Marti Fiske  
Gina Burke  
Jennifer Porschitz, Alternate  
Dr. Mohammad Saleh, Alternate (5:07 PM)  
Thomas M. White, Alternate

**Staff Present:**

Carrah Fisk-Hennessey, Parks and Recreation  
Director

**Members Not Present:**

David Morill  
Julie Odatto, Alternate  
Sofia Cunha-Vasconcelos, Alternate

**1. Welcome and Call to Order**

Chair Kleiner called the meeting to order at 5:02 PM. He 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.*"

Roll call was conducted. Chair Kleiner noted that KPRD Director Carrah Fisk-Hennessey is filling in for staff liaison Alyssa Bender-Jesse today. He continued that he also notes that unfortunately, today is Dr. Morris's last meeting with the HRC. Her position was eliminated at Keene State College (KSC). Dr. Morris stated that she can no longer serve on the HRC because she is not a Keene resident. Discussion ensued. HRC members expressed gratitude for Dr. Morris's work with the Committee.

**2. Approval of April 6, 2026 Minutes**

Ms. Fiske made a motion to approve the meeting minutes of April 6, 2026. Dr. Morris seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

**3. Finance Report**

**A) Changes: Native American Heritage reflects expenses for the books, balance remaining has been updated to show appropriations that is reflected in the account**

Chair Kleiner stated that the only change to the finance report is to the Native American Heritage line item, which reflects the expenses for the books. He continued that the balance remaining has been updated to show appropriations that are reflected in the account.

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

Ms. Burke stated that the MDEIB has some upcoming events and things they will be participating in. She continued that first is the Pride Art Crawl, which Dave Morrill is not here to give an update about, but that has been moving along well. The Pride group is still looking for artists, and they would like the HRC members to please keep circulating the link for that, which is in the written report from Mr. Morrill.

Ms. Burke continued that the historical marker for Dr. Johnson is scheduled for August, and a “save the date” will go out soon. The MDEIB is moving forward with that with the Black Heritage Trail. The MDEIB will be at Pride Fest, and they are working on a book club for the book Homesick, by Emily Walton, which had a presentation at the library a couple of weeks ago. The MDEIB is also working on some funding. They are excited to participate in Community Conversations that Ms. Fiske secured the grant for.

Rabbi Aronson asked for more information about what is happening in August regarding the marker for Dr. Johnson. Ms. Burke replied that Dr. Johnson’s former home and office is on the corner of Washington St. and Beaver St., and the MDEIB and Black Heritage Trail will be putting up a historical marker and doing some sort of presentation, and potentially doing tours of the building. There are details to work out. Dr. Morris spoke of how there is usually a ceremony of some sort when a marker is put up.

Dr. Saleh arrived at 5:07 PM.

**5. Acceptance of Committee Event Reports**

**A) Martin Luther King, Jr. Day**

Brief Discussion ensued about the need for a chair for the MLK Day working group. Rabbi Aronson stated that he thinks Julie Odatto was interested in chairing it, so he will extend his support for that and work with her.

**B) Black History Month**

**C) Juneteenth**

Chair Kleiner stated that the Juneteenth working group’s report is the same as last month’s. He continued that they are swapping out one of the acts for the concert, but all the other ones are still there. Dr. Morris stated that if anyone knows anyone who wants to help with funding for

Juneteenth, that would be very helpful, so please let the working group know, through Ms. Cunha-Vasconcelos. She continued that they are behind from previous years. Ms. Fiske asked if the Library has agreed to sponsor, because they usually sponsor one of the acts. Dr. Morris replied that she does not think so, but she will make a note to check. Discussion continued.

#### **D) Pride Event**

Chair Kleiner stated that Ms. Burke covered a lot of the Pride Event working group's update in her MDEIB report, but the social media pages are up, and it would be great if the HRC members shared those. He continued that it is nice that the Pride event is gaining traction.

#### **E) Keene International Festival**

Chair Kleiner and other HRC members welcomed Hunter Kirscher, former HRC member. Mr. Kirschner stated that he is glad to be here today, on behalf of the KIF. He continued that the KIF will be Saturday, September 26, out in front of the Rec Center. The committee is beginning to organize and plan, connecting with performers, community organizers, and vendors. It will be another wonderful event. Ms. Budakoti has been integral to the KIF but has needed to step back this year, so the group wanted to ensure the continuation of a good connection between them and the HRC, since the HRC is the fiscal sponsor. He is here to make that connection, and to see whether there are particular things to explore in their working relationship.

In response to an HRC member's question, Mr. Kirshner replied that currently, the planning group meets monthly, but the meeting frequency will increase as the date gets closer.

Ms. Budakoti asked what help the group needs from the HRC. Mr. Kirshner replied that they would like to recruit more HRC members to help put on the festival, which is quite a lift. He continued that they understand that HRC members already have a lot going on, but perhaps through their networks, there are people who would be inclined to support the KIF. If so, they can connect with him via email.

Dr. Saleh asked if any of the larger communities in NH, such as Concord, Manchester, or Nashua, has anything similar to the KIF, and what those events are called. Discussion ensued. Mr. Kirschner stated that although the KIF group is not in contact with/do not coordinate with the other communities, yes, there are some similar festivals throughout the state, with different names.

Dr. Saleh asked if going to the KIF is a good way for people who are new to the neighborhood to connect with their community. Mr. Kirschner replied yes. Dr. Saleh asked if it has a website and if it shows up on a Google search. Mr. Kirschner replied yes to both.

In response to an HRC member's question, Mr. Kirschner stated that the KIF committees are Performers, Food Vendors, Publicity, Community Tables, and Arts and Crafts. Ms. Budakoti added the Volunteer Finding committee.

## **F) Native American Heritage**

Ms. Fiske stated that the books that she ordered are in, and she made sure they are in good order. She continued that Joyce Heywood had warned her that because the books are self-published, sometimes there have been problems with the printing. Thus, she went through all the copies to see that they are in good shape. She will start reaching out to local businesses and ask them to sponsor copies for their staff members to be involved in the discussion, and ask if they would be willing to do some public outreach.

### **6. New Business**

Ms. Fiske stated that regarding the Community Conversations, she received an email today from New Hampshire Humanities, a preliminary one to let them know they will be getting the grant. They will follow up with the details. What she can say from the interview is, New Hampshire Humanities said they would be flexible about the date. Originally, the Community Conversation was supposed to be scheduled for May or June, but because they were so delayed in awarding it, that would not work. Pulling it off takes at least three weeks of advertising. The primary availability of the dates will rely on their artist, a graphic artist who creates comic book panels as the minutes of the meeting. They have several facilitators to choose from. It is a reimbursement grant. New Hampshire Humanities would provide up to \$700, and they encourage spending the money on food and childcare, as well as any needed supplies. The event would be an hour or two. Then, Keene needs to do one more event before the end of the calendar year as a follow up, building on whatever the topic was that was brought up. The Community Conversations facilitator comes in with a group of questions and then they let the group decide which questions they want to address. The follow up event would specifically focus on the things that were brought up. She is traveling for the last three weeks in June, so she hopes they can find a date for after the 4th of July.

Rabbi Aronson stated that before the meeting, Ms. Bowie inquired about the testimony he gave to the House Legislation and Administration Committee, regarding Representative Travis Corcoran. He continued that Rep. Corcoran is a Free Stater in the House who, in response to a social media post by another member of the House, said something that evoked Holocaust genocide: “We need a final solution for theater kids in politics.” It was very upsetting to the Jewish community. Rabbi Aronson gave more information about the incident, and continued that the committee he testified before, along with about 35 other people, was going to make a recommendation for what the House should do, such as censoring, reprimanding, or expelling Rep. Corcoran. He (Rabbi Aronson) made the front page of the paper, as the face of the testimony. Rep. Corcoran’s words were an attack not just on Jewish people, but also on theater kids, a group that is disproportionately creative, liberal, and LGBTQ.

Discussion continued. HRC members thanked Rabbi Aronson. Dr. Saleh stated that Free Staters are supposedly a separate political entity, but he thinks 100% of them caucus with the Republican Party. He asked Dr. Saleh to explain “theater kid” some more. Rabbi Aronson replied that it is kids who like theater; there is not really a double meaning. He explained more and discussion continued, about theater kids, Rep. Corcoran’s politics, and Free Staters. Mr. White stated that Andy Bohannon, previous Parks and Recreation Director, used to document

when anti-Semitic content was put up around town. He continued that he has photographic evidence of a Free Stater being behind it. When he (Mr. White) served on the Commission of Holocaust and Genocide Education, there would always be a bad egg from the House trying to back Holocaust denial, which the Commission would immediately squelch. That has to continually happen. His advice is to not overreact, because once you give one of these people spreading hate a headline, which is what they are seeking. People need to, as Rabbi Aronson did, continue standing up and standing out, showing that they are stronger than the anti-Semitic people. He does not want to give them too much of a platform, but this is something percolating behind the scenes of a lot of his work.

Dr. Saleh stated that something similar happened a month earlier, not in Keene, but at the Statehouse. He continued that someone came up with a bill that was particularly hurtful to the Muslim community, stating that the Sharia law is an existential threat to NH. To add context, Sharia law has been given special interpretation by people who are spreading anti-Muslim sentiment. In the Muslim community, Sharia law just means the Islamic way of living. It means something different in every Muslim community. For example, people in Bangladesh would interpret it differently than people in other parts of the world. The bill says that in big cities like New York or ones in CA, people are not following the existing law, they are following Sharia law. He was asked to find a group of people to defend against that. They were able to spread the word, and within a week, they had about 300 online testimonials against the bill. Someone from the MDEIB participated. He presented testimony in person. What really made the difference was the faith community. He thanks Rabbi Aronson for sending his testimony. All 12 of the faith leaders protested the bill, which he wrote a subsequent letter to the chair about. The bill had been proposed by five people, including the chair, and to save face, they tabled it. This shows that although there is a component of people trying to spread hate, NH has the ability to push back in a united way and stop it.

Mr. White stated that he appreciates what Rabbi Aronson and Dr. Saleh shared, and the work that they do. He continued that all of this work really matters. There are more people fighting for change than people spreading hate, so they cannot ever give up.

Ms. Fiske stated that Sheriff Eli Rivera put on a workshop for law enforcement personnel, using lessons from the history of the Nazi regime to encourage law enforcement personnel to consider at what point they would be pushing back if there were requests for their service for actions that were not only against the law, but unethical. She continued that it was a very good, half day program, and well attended. It was about three weeks ago. Mr. White stated that after the first Trump election, he called the then Police Chief and asked if he would be deporting for ICE. The Police Chief came to his office within the hour, and that is how the initial coffee group started. After the second Trump election, the LGBTQ community held an event at Hannah Grimes, which he attended. At the time, he worked for the Cohen Center. He learned that trans people who are in that group are terrified of the Police. He immediately spent an hour talking with the Police Chief, who said that community policing matters to the KPD, and he encouraged him to reach out and build those bridges. When he sat with Sheriff Rivera's group, he asked the Officers why they became police officers. He did not receive stereotypical, macho replies. Everyone said, to protect people, to serve the community, to be a guardian. It is important to be reminded of that. This is a good community.

Ms. Budakoti stated that she has an idea to present. She continued that in her recent interactions with some community members, working in different organizations, they have talked about the workforce in the Monadnock region and the people they are getting from Brazil and other places. They want to know who these people from Brazil and elsewhere can connect with, where they can find their community, and how others can support them. She believes they were asking her because of her involvement with the KIF. Thus, she has been talking with people in the community, especially young people, and bouncing off ideas. She thinks there is a need for, if it does not already exist, a system or platform where people who do not know Keene can find out where to find things like housing, community, and things of interest. They need to know what Keene has to offer, for them to decide to come here and work here or move their families here. This would help the local employers who are trying to find workers, too. This is what she is proposing today. She was thinking it could be a table at the KIF, a way of connecting people. For example, a child from Peru saw another child from Peru and said, *"It's the same dress! We're from the same place!"* Those connections are very powerful. She wants to encourage these connections on a bigger level.

Dr. Morris asked if this is something they could take to the Workforce Development group to talk about. Ms. Burke replied yes, the first thing that came to her mind was the Greater Monadnock Collaborative, because they talk about this a lot – employers need more workforce. She continued that she thinks the Collaborative is looking for the same thing Ms. Budakoti is talking about. They would be a huge resource. And yes, the MDEIB's Workforce Development committee can be helpful. They are working on a connection with the US Chamber of Connection initiative, which is a national organization. Dr. Morris stated that several years ago, the MDEIB started a group on Saturdays for families with adopted kids. She spoke about how it was at KSC and some of the college students worked with the kids while the parents met, and how great it was, although it only lasted a few months because the woman who was the driving force behind it passed away. She continued that she would be willing to work with someone on this. She could get the college students to come, but she is not a parent, so the other person would need to be a parent with those connections. She spoke about how useful, meaningful, and fun these connections were.

Ms. Budakoti thanked Dr. Morris, and spoke about how she was thinking about something for people before they have even moved to the Monadnock area, as they are trying to make the decision to move here. She continued that people who contact her are seeking information on housing, resources, and whether the community is multicultural and inclusive.

**7. Adjourn – Next Meeting June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2026 at 5:00 PM**

There being no further business, Chair Kleiner adjourned the meeting at 5:44 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,  
Britta Reida, Minute Taker

Reviewed and edited by,  
Alyssa Bender-Jesse, Youth Services Manager  
Carrah Fisk-Hennessey, Parks and Recreation Director