

City of Keene
New Hampshire

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Monday, June 1, 2026

5:00 PM

**Room 22,
Recreation Center**

Members Present:

Gregory Kleiner, Chair
Debra Bowie, Vice Chair
Rabbi Daniel Aronson
Marti Fiske
Gina Burke
David Morill
Jennifer Porschitz, Alternate
Dr. Mohammad Saleh, Alternate (5:04 PM)
Sofia Cunha-Vasconcelos, Alternate (5:05 PM)
Julie Odat, Alternate

Staff Present:

Alyssa Bender-Jesse, Youth Services
Manager / JCC Coordinator

Members Not Present:

Councilor Bettina Chadbourne
Dr. Dottie Morris
Thomas M. White, Alternate
Ritu Budakoti

1. Welcome and Call to Order

Chair Kleiner called the meeting to order at 5:00 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.

2. Approval of May 4, 2026 Meeting Minutes

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that she has a message from the City Clerk's Office: Even members who were not present at the previous meeting can vote on whether to approve the meeting minutes, if they have read the draft minutes in the agenda packet. She continued that it is not necessary to abstain from voting.

Ms. Fiske made a motion to approve the meeting minutes of May 4, 2026. Ms. Bowie seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

3. Finance Report

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that there is an asterisk next to the Pride donation from Badger Balm. She continued that the invoice has been submitted, but has not been updated on the actual Munis account to show that it is truly in the account. She put it in the finance report to show the HRC that it is coming.

Ms. Bender-Jesse continued that the only other thing to note is that she printed this out prior to getting the update on the Keene International Festival (KIF). She was informed that the KIF currently has \$6,000 in donations for this event, which does not include any other remaining balance or other funds that were already in the budget. They have spent \$933, and their current balance on hand is \$27,814.

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

Ms. Burke stated that fundraising is the MDEIB's biggest priority right now. She continued that funds are getting low. They have a couple of events coming up this summer, and flyers for those are on the table. Over the summer, they are doing a book club, three series over Zoom. They will continue discussion on "Homesick: Race and Exclusion in Rural New England" by Emily Walton, who spoke at the Keene Public Library a couple of months ago. There will be a historical marker unveiling with the Black Heritage Trail on August 15, with more information to come, and everyone is invited.

Ms. Burke continued that the MDEIB has not picked dates yet, but they are working on creating a neighborhood series. They have been working a lot with the US Chamber of Connection and the six points of connection, and they have been hearing more and more that people are really struggling with talking to their neighbors, especially when there is something unpleasant, like a barking dog or something that is happening. Instead of talking directly to their neighbor, because they have no relationship built, people are just calling the police and hoping the City or the State will do something about it. The MDEIB has been trying to activate neighborhoods with fun things like block parties and potlucks and getting people to unite, but it seems like they have to start at the beginning, helping people understand why it is important to know their neighbors. It is important from a safety standpoint, but also, to be able to bring up uncomfortable topics if they are having conflicts with their neighbors. Then, they hope to have thriving neighborhoods by having potlucks and block parties. The MDEIB is trying to address a community need, and it feels like an important part of their work that they were missing.

Rabbi Aronson asked Ms. Burke to say more about the MDEIB's fundraising and how the HRC might be able to support them. Ms. Burke replied that the MDEIB was funded by a few grants in the beginning, from the New Hampshire Endowment for Health, the Savings Bank of Walpole, and Mascoma Bank. She continued that the MDEIB hired her a year ago as Executive Director, and they have been slowly eliminating funds, but there was not a direct fundraising effort for about a year and a half. Now they are running out of money, and it is important to organize fundraising again. They have been making a lot of progress and building momentum. They have likely secured \$10,000 more from the NH Endowment for Health, but they need to diversify the funding for sure.

Rabbi Aronson asked what the MDEIB's budget is and how much they need to raise. Ms. Burke replied that she can get those specifics for the HRC.

Ms. Fiske gave Ms. Burke information about the grant station at the library, where people can look up grants and foundations and go directly to the applications, so long as they are using the library's wi-fi.

5. Acceptance of Committee Event Reports
A) Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

Rabbi Aronson stated that he and Ms. Odato had a conversation, and becoming the MLK Day chair is not something she can take on. He continued that thus, the HRC needs someone to take over as chair of the MLK Day event. He is happy to continue helping out with the Community Kitchen breakfast, if the group wants to keep doing that.

Ms. Odato stated that she and Rabbi Aronson had talked about making the event more youth-focused, but that effort needs to start now, for an event in January. She continued that she would be glad to help with that but just cannot pick up the whole thing. Discussion ensued about HRC members' availability for this work, and how they might be able to split it up, or who might be able to lead the group.

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that she will send out an email this week to the HRC members to encourage everyone to think about this and consider chairing the working group or connecting with another HRC member to do it together. She continued that as a reminder, HRC members can email each other individually, as long as they do not have an email chain that includes five or more HRC members, because that creates a quorum. The HRC has made fantastic momentum in the last few years with their events, and she wants to see it keep going.

B) Black History Month

HRC members noted that Black History Month needs a new chair or co-chairs, now that Dr. Morris is no longer an HRC member.

C) Juneteenth

Ms. Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that the event is two weeks out. She continued that the Juneteenth working group is still actively fundraising, but they are getting to their number. Since this is their fifth or sixth year, they have consistent supporters, which is wonderful. Instead of their traditional concert in Central Square, they will have a concert outside of the Rec Center. There will be food, tabling, three artists for the concert, films, and a children's event. It will be a great time, and she encourages everyone to attend.

Discussion ensued, and HRC members suggested/spoke in favor of the HRC tabling at the event. In response to a question, Ms. Cunha-Vasconcelos clarified that tables are for event sponsors, the Library, and others, but probably not political organizations, since it is a City-sponsored event.

Dr. Saleh stated that he would like clarification from the City about whether political organizations are allowed to table, because in some other cities, there is no such restriction for who can table. Ms. Bender-Jesse asked if Dr. Saleh or others have certain groups in mind. Dr. Saleh and others gave examples of Keene political groups that might be interested. Ms. Bender-Jesse spoke about how if that were the case, the committee would need to reach out to all other political affiliation organizations in Keene to offer tabling, so it is fair across the board.

Ms. Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that she will correct herself. She continued that she is looking at her list of who will be tabling, and sees that it is exclusively those who have supported the event financially. Examples include the YMCA, the Savings Bank of Walpole, and the Library. Dr. Saleh asked what the level of sponsorship is. He continued that the standard is often that only the sponsors get to table. Discussion continued, and Ms. Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that she is nervous about having this discussion and does not want the Juneteenth event to turn into a battleground for political parties. That is not the intention behind the event.

Dr. Saleh stated that he understands, but for context, Juneteenth is similar in spirit to the Pride event. Ms. Cunha-Vasconcelos replied yes, in the sense that these events are intended to be opportunities for education, which is the basis for the purpose of the HRC. It is celebration and education.

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that Juneteenth is two weeks out. She continued that this is a very busy season in the City, because it is the end of the fiscal year and for other reasons, and although she will try and get an answer to the question of whether political organizations are allowed to table at the HRC's events, she does not think she will be able to get an answer that quickly. Even if she got an answer before the event, she would need to have that discussion with the whole HRC, and they will not have a meeting before Juneteenth. Moving forward, she will get the answer, and the HRC can have a conversation about it for other events. Dr. Saleh replied that he understands they might have to wait until next year's Juneteenth event, but it would be good to have clarity and a policy.

Dr. Saleh stated that he was surprised that the Pride Festival required every table to donate a certain financial amount. Ms. Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that that was sponsored by Keene Pride, not by the City, so there is a different standard. Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that she will get the information and put the topic on the next meeting's agenda so the HRC can discuss it. Dr. Saleh stated that for the record, he wants to present the alternate point of view that considering opposing points of view might be a moment of collision, or it might be an opportunity for people to come together, as it happens in the Cheshire County Fair. The Republicans and Democrats have their booths next to each other, and that is the only time people actually get to interact, instead of thinking of each other as completely different species. Mr. Morrill replied that the fair is a neutral space, though. Dr. Saleh replied that he believes the City can be an accommodating force by opening up this space and bringing people together.

Rabbi Aronson asked if the Juneteenth working group has reached out to the Monadnock Interfaith Project (MIP) for sponsorship for Juneteenth. Ms. Fiske replied yes, and they said they do not have any budget to support sponsorships. Rabbi Aronson replied that is true, but if the MIP could send a message to the clergy team, many clergy members have discretionary funds,

and if they were asked to contribute to a fund through MIP, they could make that happen. Ms. Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that she will bring that up with the working group.

Ms. Bender-Jesse asked the Juneteenth group to include her in their planning emails, regarding setup and the changes here and there. She continued that she will attend one of the last few planning meetings to make sure that if she needs to find people to help, she knows to ask ahead of time, instead of the day before.

D) Pride Event

Mr. Morrill stated that the Pride group's last meeting before the art crawl is Thursday, if Ms. Bender-Jesse wants to attend. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that she is not available at that time, but she has been in the loop for the Pride group's emails, which is good. She continued that the group should let her know if they need anything physically from her.

Mr. Morrill stated that the art crawl starts June 12, with an opening event at Brewbakers at 6:30 PM. He continued that there will be a musical performance, a speaker, and spoken word poetry. The art crawl has eight venues and twelve artists. It is exciting. It will be open until June 27, and that day is the closing ceremony and dance party at Madame Sherri's. He gave information about the raffle prizes. He encourages everyone to come, and to share the event and posts on social media, especially Facebook.

Mr. Morrill asked about the donation from Badger Balm. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that she has not physically seen it, because it went through an invoice. It goes directly to the Finance Department, not to her. She emailed the Finance Department to see if they accepted it but has not heard back yet. Mr. Morrill replied that the money from Badger will be used to pay the performers. He continued that if it does not arrive by the time they need to write the checks, they hope they can get the money fronted from the HRC and then put the money back. He asked if that needs to be a motion, and how to word it. Ms. Bender-Jesse gave suggested language.

Ms. Bowie made a motion for the HRC to approve the Pride Event group's request to use a portion of the HRC's balance on hand to pay the host of the closing ceremony and the DJ at the dance party. Ms. Fiske seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

E) Keene International Festival

Chair Kleiner stated that the KIF is still looking for more members to help with planning. He continued that if anyone is interested, they can reach out to Ms. Bender-Jesse or Hunter Kirschner. Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that she can give Mr. Kirschner's email address to anyone who needs it.

Ms. Bowie asked if there is a list of what kind of help the KIF needs. She continued that she will email him and ask. For events in general, it would be helpful to have a list of the roles or tasks the planning group is looking for help with. Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that probably the KIF would welcome people's help the day of the event, since it is such a large event. Chair Kleiner stated

that what he wrote down, from what Mr. Kirschner said, is performers, food vendors, arts and crafts, support the day of, and wrangling volunteers, and there is probably much more.

F) Native American Heritage

Ms. Fiske stated that next year when her term on the HRC is up, the Native American Heritage group will need a new chair. She continued that she is actively seeking her own replacement, because it is a position that has been traditionally held by a member of the Library staff. Regarding the person she hopes will join the HRC in her place, she told them they did not have to volunteer for a working group in their first year.

Ms. Fiske stated that an update since she submitted the written report is that she unfortunately missed the deadline for applying for funding from the Homestead Thrift Store. She continued that they mailed her the application and it arrived two days before the deadline, and she did not have enough time to complete and submit it. She just got the application from the Putnam Foundation less than an hour ago and it is due in two days. She hopes she can pull that off, and believes she can. She has not yet heard from More Than a Thrift Store or the Savings Bank of Walpole. Some funds are available from the Trustees of the Library, and she will be setting aside something from the end of the year funds, so she hopes to purchase at least 100 copies of the book. She has sent out requests to two businesses. She sends out a few a week. She will be gone for most of June, so she is trying to do as much as she can now.

Ms. Fiske continued that she emailed with Joyce Heywood. The update is that the Sadoques family home is being torn down, which she is quite disappointed about. They are doing what they can to bring a historical marker onto the site, because that can be done at the road level rather than on the property itself. The house was apparently in too fragile a condition to make the move without some major investments on top of the actual cost of the move itself, so the owner decided not to pursue funding, even though the Historical Society was ready to, because it became too much for the owner to take on.

Ms. Fiske continued that regarding the Community Conversation, the YMCA is going to organize childcare. They got \$800 to spend on food and childcare. They do not have anything else to do with this right now. The HRC will hear more about it in August. She will not be at the August HRC meeting, but she will send the information via email.

6. New Business

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that typically, summer is a slower time for her in her job, but now it has become excessively busy. She continued that she is constantly in and out of the office, so if the HRC wants to table at an event, she asks that they let her know as much in advance as possible, and for the HRC to secure their own volunteers first. If they need her to email the whole HRC and tell people to reply to one HRC member, she can do that, because that is the easiest way to do it. Unfortunately, she cannot be the person tabling at every event. Her schedule does not allow for it. She tries to have about 50 brochures printed and ready to go at all times for the HRC, for them to pick up from her office, but if they need more, she asks that they let her know as much in

advance as possible so she can get them printed. She likely will not be able to do it on the day of. The same is true for flyers.

Discussion ensued. Ms. Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if HRC members are allowed to print out something themselves, if Ms. Bender-Jesse emails them the file. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that it is allowed, yes, but she can do it for the HRC as long as they give her notice.

7. Adjourn – Next Meeting July 6, 2026 at 5:00 PM

There being no further business, Chair Kleiner adjourned the meeting at 5:43 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Britta Reida, Minute Taker

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