

City of Keene
New Hampshire

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Monday, September 14, 2026

5:00 PM

**Room 22,
Recreation Center**

Members Present:

Debra Bowie, Vice Chair
Marti Fiske
Gina Burke
David Morill
Jennifer Porschitz, Alternate
Julie Odat
Thomas M. White, Alternate
Rabbi Daniel Aronson

Staff Present:

Alyssa Bender-Jesse, Youth Services Manager /
JCC Coordinator

Members Not Present:

Dr. Mohammad Saleh, Alternate
Sofia Cunha-Vasconcelos, Alternate
Ritu Budakoti
Councilor Bettina Chadbourne
Gregory Kleiner, Chair

1. Call to Order

Vice Chair Bowie called the meeting to order at 5:00 PM. She 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."*

2. Approval of July 6, 2026 Meeting Minutes

Rabbi Aronson made a motion to approve the meeting minutes of July 6, 2026. Mr. Morrill seconded.

Ms. Fiske noted corrections:

Line 29 - change *"the Committee received an email"* to *"she received an email."*

Line 32 – the sentence that begins *"Community conversation is scheduled from..."* should say, *"MDEIB is a partner with the Community Conversation, which is scheduled from..."*

Line 35 – strike “*and housing*” at the end of the line. It should say “*community building*” instead of “*community and housing*.”

Line 102-103 – it should read, “...*so people can read them in September and October. The finale’s date is now set for the first Saturday...*”

The motion to approve the meeting minutes as amended passed by unanimous vote.

3. Finance Report

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that the Finance Report is as up to date as it can be. She continued that they unfortunately found some discrepancies between the budget she has been creating and the Munis account that holds all of the funds, so the Finance Department is working on that. Some funds that were supposed to be a donation for the HRC somehow got charged as an expense, so they are moving things around. She put two Finance Reports in the agenda packet because she was not at the last meeting. Also, between then and now the City entered a new fiscal year, which also means the HRC has switched into a new amount of funding the City is giving them. The City allowed the HRC to start receiving \$5,000. She cannot promise that will continue every year, but that will be the amount the HRC continues requesting. Last year, the HRC received \$2,000, so they thought the new amount would fall somewhere between \$2,000 and \$5,000. When they were outlining the new HRC budget, they were not prepared for the full \$5,000. It is amazing to get \$5,000. She met with Vice Chair Bowie and Chair Kleiner to go over how they would like to break up the new, larger budget.

Ms. Bender-Jesse continued that the rollover balance is a little less than what the HRC typically has. Typically, it is around \$3,000. The only difference to keep in mind is that they had the extra expenses from Black History Month that they were not expecting since there was a miscommunication on the budget about that. Also, there were some changes, due to the fire that unfortunately happened at 21 Bar and Grill. Mr. Morrill needed to be reimbursed because he had to buy supplies on his own to relocate some of the artwork to a new location.

Ms. Bender-Jesse continued that regarding the breakdown for the new fiscal year, they went over the idea of allocating \$800 instead of \$500 for each HRC event, including Black History Month. The HRC also had conversations about having funds for the Keene International Festival (KIF), since they do help with it. When they were all discussing the budget, they brought up the idea of creating a “Miscellaneous” line item. At this moment, and during the previous few years, the KIF has not needed any extra funds from the HRC. The KIF has had a healthy balance on hand. However, that might not always be the case. Having a “Miscellaneous” line item in the budget would be beneficial for the HRC to make decisions moving forward, if the KIF comes forward needing funding, or maybe the MDEIB would need funding. The HRC could have \$1,000 allocated to provide to community resources and organizations that the HRC would be co-sponsoring events with.

Ms. Fiske replied that she thinks it is great to have the Miscellaneous line item, because some events have recently been more expensive than they had been in the past, like Juneteenth and Martin Luther King, Jr. Day.

Ms. Bender-Jesse agreed. She continued that the HRC will need to come up with a rule or process for how to use the Miscellaneous funds. If an outside agency requests funds from the HRC or for the HRC to co-sponsor, that would be something for the HRC to vote on each time it comes up. But if it is, say, the KIF or an HRC event needing more than the \$800 to cover it, she recommends the HRC come up with some type of protocol for determining who is able to get what, if it needs to be dealt with in between the monthly meetings.

Rabbi Aronson replied that the HRC does not have a procedure for doing business between the monthly meetings. He continued that that might not even be a possibility, due to the rules about quorum. Maybe they need an ad hoc committee to put protocols in place for co-sponsorships. Ms. Odatto agreed.

Rabbi Aronson stated that the HRC should be on the record as giving thanks to the City Council for the increase in funding. Vice Chair Bowie replied that she will draft a letter and share it with the HRC if anyone wants to edit it. She agrees that they should show their appreciation.

Mr. Morrill asked if money the HRC does not spend rolls over into the next year's budget. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that it does roll over. She continued that "rollover balance" is in the revenue category of the Finance Report. How the HRC has done it in previous years has always been that whatever remains at the end of the year just rolls over. The HRC members are the ones who have separated the money into different events, but in reality, it is just one account. Thus, the HRC has the full rollover balance of \$2,969.01. From last year's allocated funds, the HRC had \$8.00 left in the Native American Heritage line item, and \$48.47 left in the Pride line item. The \$25.00 from opening night of the Pride event has not been deposited yet. She asked if Mr. Morrill wants it deposited into the new fiscal year's Pride account, as a donation that will increase the remaining Pride budget by \$25.00. She was hoping to include that \$25.00, which was received in the previous fiscal year but has not yet been deposited, with whatever donations the HRC receives from the upcoming Pride Fest so that it is one donation acceptance request going to the City Council. That would avoid having to make a separate request to the City Council to accept that one donation of \$25.00. Mr. Morrill replied that that is fine.

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

Ms. Burke stated that in August, the MDEIB had the unveiling of the historical marker for Dr. Johnson. She continued that the people in attendance included descendants of Dr. Johnson. The stone the marker is on is actually from the Sadoques Family house on Elm St. that had to be taken down, which is a nice connection. The marker is great and she encourages people to go check it out on Washington St.

Ms. Burke continued that the MDEIB will be at Pride Fest this weekend. The MDEIB will host a Courageous Conversations workshop on September 26, 2026, at the library from 10:00 AM to 12:00 PM. It will help people learn how to have difficult conversations about, for example, politics or a neighbor's barking dog. The facilitator, who has great credentials, will use real life examples the MDEIB keeps hearing about. She will get flyers to Ms. Bender-Jesse to share with everyone.

Ms. Burke continued that in October, the MDEIB will partner with the Monadnock International Film Festival (MONIFF) on the following films:

- “And Again I Dream,” October 2, 2026, at 3:45 PM, at The Showroom
- “Adam’s Apple,” October 4, 2026, at 5:00 PM, at The Showroom

She added:

- October 15, 2026, at 5:00 PM, at Stonewall Farm, a benefit concert with David Nachmanoff

5. Committee Event Reports

a. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

Rabbi Aronson stated that there are no changes to the report that is in the agenda packet. He continued that a few months ago, he had the idea of having the Civic Leaders Breakfast be focused around the Chamber of Connection. He asked if Ms. Burke wants to take that and run with it. Ms. Burke replied yes, she had offered to take that over; she is happy to help.

b. Black History Month

c. Juneteenth

d. Pride Event

Mr. Morrill stated that Keene Pride is putting on their Pride Festival on Sunday. The HRC’s Pride group will table there, as they have in the past. He has a signup sheet for volunteers, if any HRC members are available. Ms. Bender-Jesse added that they would be glad to have HRC volunteer for any time they can; it does not have to be the block times listed on the sheet.

Mr. Morrill stated that the Pride group will start planning for next year’s event. He will still be the chair of the HRC’s Pride subcommittee, but he will be now co-chair of the Art Crawl Planning Committee, with Kestrel Peavy of Keene Pride.

e. Keene International Festival

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that the KIF is September 26, 2026, starting at 11:00 AM at the Rec Center, and she encourages people to check it out. She continued that this type of event is especially needed right now, and people are really encouraged to attend, because they have been hearing about people being fearful to participate and they need support. She asked the HRC to help spread the word and post the flyers.

f. Native American Heritage

Ms. Fiske stated that she has copies of the book for everyone, Woven Through the Sweetgrass. She continued that she would appreciate people hanging flyers on whichever bulletin boards they have access to. Besides the community reading groups, they have started distributing the book to

social services clubs, like Kiwanis and Rotary Clubs. Anyone with ideas on other organizations to distribute them to can let her know. That seems to work better than just passing copies out at the library. Brief discussion ensued as HRC members suggested groups and locations.

Ms. Fiske stated that as far as the Community Conversation goes, they had their first organizational meeting for the follow-up event on Friday. She continued that they have a date set in November, because they needed to reserve a time. It will be at the YMCA's gymnasium, and they are waiting for the YMCA to confirm that the dates will work. Someone from the YMCA will create and distribute an electronic flyer. She will give the HRC more information when she has it.

6. New Business

a. Voting: New Event Chairs

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that she is glad to hear Ms. Burke will be taking over with MLK Jr. Day. Rabbi Aronson replied that Ms. Burke will just be taking on the breakfast part of the event. There is the breakfast and then an event of some sort. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that it will be up to whoever is the chair to decide what to put on.

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that in years prior, the HRC had not had an allocated budget for Black History Month, because it was something where if something came up, they had an event to put on. Others can correct her if she is wrong, but previously, MLK Jr. Day was the big event for that season. Typically, Black History Month was a film or partnership with another organization, such as Keene State College (KSC), through Dr. Dottie Morris. That is something to keep in mind if the HRC wants to move forward with Black History Month as its own event, which it is in the budget. Alternatively, the HRC could decide not to have a set chair for Black History Month and see if something comes up, or they could have a chair to oversee the year and then reassess.

Rabbi Aronson asked who would be leading a Black History Month program at KSC. Vice Chair Bowie replied that is a little tricky right now.

Vice Chair Bowie asked what people thought about having a chair and co-chair for events. It would give newer people a chance to get familiar with things. She continued that she will try at KSC, but it is tricky. Rabbi Aronson asked if she means tricky to identify a person who would do that kind of program. Ms. Odatto asked if she means it would be tricky to identify funding. Vice Chair Bowie replied that there is no funding at KSC for this, but she meant, it is tricky because diversity, equity, and inclusion are "not very acceptable" at KSC right now or in the legislature. But she can run it by someone.

Ms. Burke stated that the MDEIB could maybe partner with someone. Vice Chair Bowie replied that maybe they could partner with KSC and see if it could work. Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that over her years as Staff Liaison for the HRC, she has seen that events tend to be bigger and stronger when there is collaboration happening. She continued that it is always beneficial to have the MDEIB as part of the HRC, and it has been amazing to see the collaboration within the community. It brings so many more people together.

Ms. Porschitz stated that she will work with Ms. Burke on that. She continued that as a new person, she likes the idea of co-chairing. Ms. Bender-Jesse asked if they are thinking that Ms. Burke will chair MLK Jr. Day and Ms. Burke and Ms. Porschitz will co-chair Black History Month. Ms. Burke and Ms. Porschitz agreed. Vice Chair Bowie added that she will see if there is something they can arrange with KSC, and she will work with Ms. Burke and Ms. Porschitz as a Committee member.

Ms. Odato stated that she thinks if they are looking at the Chamber of Connection, and the MDEIB is doing their Community Conversations, they are doing something to bring the community together and work on community building.

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that they should keep in mind, especially for MLK Jr. Day, because typically the breakfast itself has been through invitations to leaders, that if there is nothing extra, no community people are coming to it. They could do something closer to the morning session. They could always book rooms at the Rec Center. The gym and multi-purpose room are large. Ms. Fiske added that there would be space at the library, too.

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that the other event that needs a chair is Native American Heritage. Ms. Fiske stated that they could wait until the November meeting to choose a chair. She continued that the topic should be organized by April or May. Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that they can hold off and return to this topic another time to see who else wants to join.

Vice Chair Bowie stated that it would be helpful to know, when thinking about the event working groups moving forward, what has been done previously, and to get some recommendations and ideas from chairs who are stepping down. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that she could show people flyers and receipts from previous years.

Vice Chair Bowie asked if anyone else had ideas for how to make this flow a little better. Ms. Fiske replied that it is difficult when HRC members who have been chairing the working groups have terms that are coming to an end. Vice Chair Bowie replied that that is why they need co-chairs. She continued that when she lived in Connecticut, she was president of the local chapter of the League of Women Voters. When she attended a state training, the first thing the trainer said to everyone was, "*Look for your replacement.*" That is important to do right from the beginning. To her, that "replacement" could be a co-chair whose HDC term lasts longer. Discussion continued about how each working group needs to be chaired by an HDC member, but it would be great to get more people from the community involved with the working groups.

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that the HRC will soon have a new member, once the City Council is back in session and officially confirms it. She continued that in the meantime, he has been invited to the meetings and is receiving the emails.

7. Adjournment

There being no further business, Vice Chair Bowie adjourned the meeting at 5:42 PM.

HRC Meeting Minutes
September 14, 2026

ADOPTED

Respectfully submitted by,
Britta Reida, Minute Taker

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