

**Annual Town Report  
FY 2016**

**HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE**



*Abdul Cader Asmal (Clergy Association)*  
*JoAnne Coffey-McCormick*  
*Barry Ehrlich*  
*Cynthia Ganung (Clergy Association,  
IJTF, Diversity Initiative)*  
*Kerry Hurwitch*  
*Amelia Klein (Co-Chair FY16,  
Diversity Initiative)*

*John Kraemer (liaison – NPD)*  
*Ashok Mehta*  
*Bud Schram*  
*Jennifer Howard Schroeder - Chair*  
*Matt Schroeder (NHS)*  
*Marlene Schultz - Vice-Chair  
(Co-Chair FY16)*



**MISSION**

The Town of Needham's Human Rights Committee strives to reaffirm the worth and dignity of every human being. The diversity of the Needham Community is embraced and celebrated through the following NHRC activities:

- Education: Advocate appreciation for and respect for diversity
- Community Outreach: Organize community events to constructively promote diversity and tolerance
- Community Response: Respond to issues that challenge the human rights of any individual or group in the Needham Community

## NHRC LOGO

The NHRC logo design, which is universally recognized, combines the shape of a hand with that of a bird (dove). It was created by an international committee for the promotion and protection of human rights.

## MEMBERSHIP

Official members of the Needham Human Rights Committee are Needham residents who volunteer to serve on the Committee. They are appointed by the Board of Selectmen.

*The Committee shall consist of 12 members. When practicable, the Committee should include representatives or designees of the Needham Police Department and the Needham Public School Department (ex officio and non-voting), the Needham Commission on Disabilities, and the Needham Housing Authority. Membership should also include a representative of the local clergy, a senior citizen, a tenant of the Needham Housing Authority, a realtor, and a Needham High School student. [Charge, Human Rights Committee, Approved Aug. 12, 2008]*

## MEETINGS

Human Rights Committee meetings are usually held the *third Thursday* of each month at Needham Town Hall, Highland Room, 7:30-9:00 pm. Meetings are open to the public and all meeting dates and agendas are posted on the Town website. On occasion, guest speakers are invited by the Committee to share their expertise in the area of human rights. Guest speakers play an important role as resources for planning future NHRC events. The Committee welcomes all Needham residents who are interested in human rights to attend a meeting and to learn about the work of the Committee.

## SPONSORED COMMUNITY EVENTS

Organizing community events and educational forums related to human rights plays a major role in the work of the NHRC. Following are highlights for the Fiscal Year 2016.

### *Needham 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Diversity Summit – October 17, 2015 Pollard Middle School*



The Needham Diversity Summit brings together community leaders, friends, neighbors and students to explore, foster, strengthen and celebrate Needham's diversity - of socioeconomic status, race, sexual orientation, gender (including identity and expression), religion, ethnic identity, ability and age. The Summit attempts to empower groups that may otherwise feel unable or that lack the confidence to share their experiences and voices, and to provide a safe and inviting

space for audiences to listen and respond. The NHRC was a co-sponsor of the day-long event. NHRC members served on the Diversity Summit Planning Committee and attended and hosted

the Diversity Summit. NHRC members also led workshop sessions, an integral part of the Diversity Summit program.

### ***Martin Luther King Jr. Day Celebration - January 18, 2016 Needham High School***



This annual community event celebrates the legacy and the life and achievement of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The central focus of the MLK Day is children. Most of the performances are by or for children of all ages. An annual highlight is a combined choir of children from diverse Needham communities and groups. Middle school students conducted a ceremony of lighting candles in honor of those who have inspired them. Other program highlights included a keynote speaker, storytelling activities for children, a

dance ensemble presentation, and a student art display. NHRC was a co-sponsor of the celebration. Committee members served on the MLK Day Planning Committee, organized and provided refreshments, attended and hosted the event. Additional sponsors were The Clergy Association, the Needham School Department and its METCO Program, and the Needham Diversity Committee. (Photo courtesy Needham Diversity Initiative, Inc.)

### ***A Conversation with Our Muslim Neighbors - February 4, 2016 Center at the Heights***

The flyer is for an event titled "A Conversation with our Muslim Neighbors About Islam". At the top, it says "The Needham Human Rights Committee invites you to:". Below this are three blue speech bubbles containing questions: "How do we get accurate information about Islam?", "What do Muslims believe?", and "What should we do in Needham?". The event details include the date "Thursday, February 4, 2016, 7:30 - 9:00 pm" and the location "The Center at the Heights, 300 Hillside Ave. Needham, MA". It also lists panelists: Shareeda Hussein, Abdel Rahman Mohammed, Abdul Cader Asmal, and Amira Quraishi, along with a moderator, Rabbi Jay Perlman. A contact email is provided at the bottom: needham.hrc@gmail.com.

Residents of Needham had a firsthand opportunity to meet and interact with Muslim panelists from different cultural, economic and professional backgrounds. The distinguished guest speakers provided a comprehensive look at Islam (a handout was provided that compared and contrasted the beliefs of orthodox Islam and radical Islamic cults), and discussed anti-Muslim statements and beliefs that generate fear and misconceptions about Islam. The event was described as *an excellent opportunity for interfaith,*

*intercultural learning and exchange* by attendees. The evening agenda highlighted questions voiced by members of the audience with responses from the panelists. An ensuing conversation took place after the event on the NHRC Town Hall webpage, where numerous questions and answers were posted. The NHRC is planning follow-up educational forums with input from the Needham Community.

*Global Refugee Crisis, Voices from Massachusetts – June 1, 2016 Center at the Heights*



NHRC co-sponsored a community forum together with the Immigration Justice Task Force. Guest speaker Merissa Khurma worked with various economic development projects in Jordan focusing on fiscal reform, and workforce development and the Syrian refugee crisis. Ms. Khurma spoke about the refugee crisis, international community response, future challenges, and community opportunities. Joining the guest speaker were two women whose families were resettled in the Boston area. They shared their experiences as refugees living in camps in Syria (a picture of the camp is shown on screen). Information about ways to assist the resettlement of refugees and immigrants in the Boston area was highlighted. One initiative from the Needham Community involved a collection campaign for household items in order to equip refugee family apartments. The NHRC is a member of the Needham Refugee Resettlement Partnership.

### **COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS**

In pursuing its mission, the NHRC seeks opportunities to collaborate - and develop on-going relationships - with groups in the Needham Community. Following are examples of ways the NHRC has made efforts to reach out to both official and non-official Town Committees and organizations.

- **NEEDHAM HOUSING AUTHORITY** Members of the NHRC have had on-going conversations with the Executive Director and the Resident Services Coordinator to discuss common interests and means of support. The Committee's goal was to learn about the needs of residents living in NHA units, and how well residents of Needham public housing are integrated into the Community. The Committee continues to seek candidates who are residents of the Needham Housing Authority to serve on the NHRC, and has collaborated with NHA officials in promoting resident representation on the Committee.
- **MEDIA SOURCES** The NHRC has developed close links with local media sources. Direct contact with editors and journalists has helped the Committee promote its events

and generate interest in human rights. Committee members have attended information sessions organized by the Needham Times and have had opportunities to meet the staff, learn how and when to send press releases and calendar listings, and how to “pitch” a story for their organization. The Needham Times has been supportive of the mission of the NHRC and has highlighted its work in major articles and guest columns. The Hometown Weekly has consistently responded to press releases and published lead articles about Committee events in a timely fashion.

- **NEEDHAM PUBLIC SCHOOLS** Members of the Committee have met with the Superintendent and Needham Public School officials to discuss ways to collaborate and to share resources. The NHRC is committed to developing on-going relationships with school personnel and students. Their input is critical in the planning of educational forums which address the challenges faced by youth in our community. The NHRC provides opportunities for NHS students to take on leadership roles as members of the Committee, and to take initiative in providing student participation and input in the planning of events. The Needham High School representative who serves on the Committee provides an important link to faculty and student groups.
- **NEEDHAM COUNCIL ON AGING** The co-chairs of the NHRC have met with the Executive Director of the Council on Aging to plan events at the Center at the Heights which accommodate the needs of older adults. The Director has been supportive in helping the Committee reserve dates and space at the Center to host key events. The Center staff members have generously given their time and energy in organizing and facilitating event activities. Two events were held at the Center at the Heights this past year (*A Conversation with Our Muslim Neighbors* - February 4, 2016 and *Global Refugee Crisis, Voices from Massachusetts* – June 1, 2016).
- **NEEDHAM DIVERSITY INITIATIVE, Inc.** The Needham Diversity Initiative is a grass-roots, community organization of individuals who live, work or study in Needham. Many are educators and have been involved with diversity training in the past (e.g., via their profession or membership in Needham’s Human Rights Committee, Needham Clergy Association, or Immigration Justice Task Force). The NDI organizes on-going events, workshops, and community forums which provide opportunities for residents of Needham to learn about the diverse populations within their community, to examine diversity issues, and to build diverse coalitions. Two members of the NHRC serve on the Board of the Needham Diversity Initiative. The NHRC has been an annual co-sponsor of the Needham Diversity Summit and the Martin Luther King Day Celebration.
- **NEEDHAM CLERGY ASSOCIATION** Two members of the NHRC are active members of the Needham Clergy Association. Both groups have shared information about their work with members of their respective organizations, and have supported and attended public events organized by each group. One example of an event attended by NHRC members was a Needham Interfaith Community Vigil in Response to the Tragedy in Orlando, held on June 19, 2016.



- **NEEDHAM IMMIGRATION JUSTICE TASK FORCE** One member of the NHRC is a member of the Immigration Justice Task Force and has been an important link to the group. The NHRC has supported the activities of the IJTF and has attended and co-sponsored events they have organized. The work of the IJTF is relevant to the work of the Committee: both groups are advocates for human rights. The IJTF has been an important source of information about current issues and actions taken in relation to immigration policies, many that involve residents and employees in the Town of Needham.
- **NEEDHAM REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT PARTNERSHIP** Several Needham faith-based and community organizations have formed a consortium to 1) inform Needham residents about the global and national refugee resettlement crisis, 2) explore ways to create community partnerships to help transition immigrants in the Boston area, and 3) consider the possibility of becoming partners in the *Resettle Together – Partners in Local Refugee Resettlement program*. The International Institute of New England (IINE) is one of three resettlement agencies in Massachusetts that provides many opportunities for surrounding partnering communities (such as Needham) to support the resettlement process through advocacy, pre-arrival support, social events, and working directly with clients. Two members of the NHRC serve on a steering committee for the consortium project.

#### **HUMAN RIGHTS RESOURCE GROUPS**

The NHRC has kept informed about human rights issues by connecting to regional organizations and groups who serve as resources to the Committee. These resources enhance the work of the Committee in planning educational forums, and in responding to issues that challenge the human rights of any individual or group in the Needham Community.

- **MASSACHUSETTS ASSOCIATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND RELATIONS COMMISSIONS (MAHRC)** The Massachusetts Association of Human Rights and Relations Commissions is an organization of municipal and local agencies responsible for promoting human and civil rights and harmonious relationships among diverse groups at a local level. The mission of MAHRC is to provide local and statewide leadership in the areas of human rights and intergroup relationships. MAHRC accomplishes this charge by promoting networking initiatives, developing educational strategies and model programs; and serving as a resource for new and existing human rights and relations commissions.