

NEEDHAM HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE
MINUTES OF OCTOBER 26, 2023 MEETING
Needham Town Hall, Great Plain Room
7:30-9:30

In attendance: Kerry Hurwitch, Keith La Face, Cynthia Ganung, Amelia Klein, Tina Burgos, Jen Howard Schroeder, Finn McKeon, Liz Lee (School Committee liaison), Belinda Carroll, (Needham Police Liaison), Katie King (Town of Needham).

Public comment:

Needham resident David Sherman attended to request the NHRC consider passing a resolution related to the atrocities committed by Hamas on the Israeli people. Mr. Sherman provided a draft resolution he wished the NHRC consider.

Welcome to Keith La Face:

The NHRC welcomed its newest member, Keith La Face. Keith described his interest in NHRC work and eagerness to bring his experience and expertise in technology to NHRC efforts.

Approval of minutes from September 2023 meeting:

The committee approved the September 2023 meeting minutes unanimously.

Needham Harvest Fair Recap:

Kerry, Jen and Finn represented NHRC at the Voices in Unity table at the fall Harvest Fair. NHRC shared the table with many other groups in town such as the Needham Diversity Initiative, Immigration Justice Task Force, Needham Resilience Network, and the Needham Public Library. Overall, a good event. Next year it would be good to have more room to spread out.

Needham Diversity Summit:

This year's summit will take place Sunday, November 5, 2023 from 1pm -5pm. The theme is Bridging and Belonging: Local Stories and a Roadmap for Change. NHRC is a sponsor of the event. There will be a panel presentation followed by small group discussion. Each small group will have the same three questions to consider. NHRC members are asked to attend, to market and facilitate a small group if interested. If interested in facilitating, alert Amelia by tomorrow because there will be a special training for facilitators. Masks will be required to keep the event accessible to as many people as possible. There will be display tables set up and NHRC can put out some brochures.

Working Groups:

Community conversations: Katie, Cynthia, and Amelia met to brainstorm. They concluded it is important to determine identify specific goals for the events/effort. While the desire to plan these conversations stem from what happened at a couple of the Needham elementary schools last spring, the effort is not about “helping the schools” but in convening community wide conversations about how to fight racism. Working group thinking about what the framework is and what outcomes are sought, particularly for the schools and the Chinese Friends of Needham.

A discussion ensued around the diversity/equity work being done at Needham Public Schools. Everyone does better when we take care of the needs of all students. Desire to publicize what the schools are doing and bring families who may not be thinking of these concerns into the conversation. NHRC will connect with the REAL Coalition to discuss community engagement.

Policy: Tina, Marlene, and Jen are planning to meet soon to start developing a focus for this working group. The group will not be advocating for “policy change” per se because that is outside the scope of possibility. However, the group will convene a diverse group including members of the Chinese Friends of Needham to explore how current policies and procedures are communicated taking into account diverse cultural perspectives. The goal is to support those in the community who may be silently suffering from bias and hate incidents in Town, including at the schools.

Important question: what barriers exist for victims of bias and hate incidents to having their voices, experiences, complaints heard? Language? Culture? How do we make people feel more comfortable reporting and having the important conversations about what is happening and what its impact is? Identifying who in the school system are people most comfortable talking with.

A more accurate name for this group is “policy communication and implementation” working group. The September NHRC discussion with Dr. Gutekanst and Mary Lammi of Needham Public Schools provided a lot of information and also opportunity to interact; this helps build trust. One idea to identify people to engage in further discussion is accessing the participation/invitation list for last year’s Multicultural Festival.

Discrimination Complaint Process:

Discussion tabled to the November meeting.

Discussion about a call made to NHRC about a recent act of racism in a local school:

Tina described a call she received from a parent regarding an incident where a student experienced teasing by other students. The parent reported the school did not treat the incident as a “racial incident” even though the parent believed the behavior was rooted in race. The

family would like to see training about hate speech, slurs, and terms for the school community. Tina explained NHRC has not heard anything from the school about the incident and it seems as though the process is still playing out.

Tina asked NHRC members to consider whether this complaint falls within NHRC purview and if so, how would it proceed? If the answer is yes, the NHRC would take the complaint through the process. If no, then NHRC consideration would end.

It was suggested NHRC should wait for the process at the school to reach its conclusions first because NHRC does know what has been done.

Tina agreed to be in touch again with the family to find out more about the response. The NHRC will revisit this matter at the next meeting.

Meeting adjourned at 9:10.

Respectfully submitted,

Jennifer Howard Schroeder

Next meeting: Thursday, November 16, 2023.