

Town of Needham
Needham Unite Against Racism Initiative Working Group
Minutes for Monday, November 9, 2020
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/85983380414>

6:00 p.m. A meeting of the Needham Unite Against Racism Initiative working group was convened by chair Marianne Cooley. Ms. Cooley announced this open meeting is being conducted remotely consistent with Governor Baker's Executive Order of March 12, 2020 due to the current state of emergency from the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus. She noted all public gatherings have been suspended as advised and directed by the Commonwealth. And, as such, suspending the requirement of the open meeting law to have all meetings in a public, accessible, physical location while encouraging and allowing members of all public bodies to participate remotely. Ms. Cooley stated the meeting will not include public comment and the Needham Unite Against Racism Initiative working group and all attendees are convening by Zoom, as posted on the Town's website identifying how the public may join. All supporting documents used at this meeting are available on the Town's website www.needhamma.gov. Present were Marianne Cooley, Matthew Borrelli, Sue Neckes, Natasha Espada, Vivian Hsu, Ramin Abrishamian, Marcus Nelson, Olu Ajayi, Toyin Fayemi, Jen Howard Schroeder, Assistant Town Manager Katie King and Town Manager Kate Fitzpatrick.

Ms. Cooley said an email address has been created for NUARI at nuari@needhamma.gov for NUARI members and the public to submit feedback. Ms. Cooley said members have been considering different perspectives regarding priorities, in the context of setting future agenda items.

Katie King, ATM/Operations said a three-question survey was sent out to help the group set priorities. She said policing was the top issue, followed by schools, housing, diversity on Town boards and committees, interaction with local businesses, neighbor interaction, and lastly diversity of Town staff. She said responses included recommendations for a Town equity audit, Town-sponsored educational series, policies, and Town government initiatives to advance inclusivity and encourage diversity such as special days, educational events, etc. Also included was a lower ranking of schools, which Ms. King said is likely because the schools are already doing some DEI work. Ms. King said question 3 focused on each individual's top issue and asked for additional information detailing aspects to explore. She said questions and information gathered will be posted on the NUARI webpage.

Ms. Cooley commented that while policing is the top issue, she suggested it be revisited after the audit is completed. She said the policing issue could be brought back for discussion in early 2021, within the context of the on-going investigation. She asked for comment.

Ms. Espada asked about the mission of the on-going investigation and timetable. Ms. Fitzpatrick said the policing issue has more to do with an incident that happened in January 2020, noting there are two parts to the investigation: the events surrounding the incident and the investigator's assessment of whether there are policies and procedures in the Needham Police Department that should be updated or changed. She said information on the second part is due back in the next month or so, at which time the working group would be able to hear results and have further discussion.

Mr. Nelson acknowledged that while the results of the investigation are expected by the end of the year, he asked if access could be given to policy and procedure positions prior to that time. He asked what the group could do in the meantime, so that it is not waiting for information or wasting time.

Ms. Espada concurred, saying understanding the vision of the police department, the number of staff, and its policies would be good to review ahead of the audit assessment.

Ms. Neckes questioned the role of NUARI vs. the oversight that is built into the Town. She asked for ways in which the Select Board and Town Manager oversee the Police Department? She noted that she may not be the right person to sit down and look at their policies, without getting into the nitty gritty.

Mr. Abrishamian asked whether policing is the most important item vs. other issues that are just as important or more important. He commented that it is difficult to make a sensible decision without the report or information. He concurred with Ms. Neckes that he is not qualified to evaluate the policies and procedures of the Police Department.

Ms. Cooley said the survey and tonight's meeting are to listen to concerns and figure out where to focus attention. She noted a desire to tackle policing, but not all the information is available. Ms. Cooley said Police Chief Schlittler met with the Select Board and Town Manager on several occasions to discuss issues. She wondered if policing is the top issue for NUARI and, if so, it must understand what the Town is doing and/or has already done to look at best practices. She proposed setting time aside at NUARI meetings to have Chief Schlittler brief the group on best practices or changes in policy. Ms. Cooley also suggested members view prior discussions. Ms. Fitzpatrick commented on the FAQ's on the website and said she would send a link.

Ms. Hsu commented she is not sure NUARI should engage in parallel activities, for example if the police chief is looking at policies, working with the Town Manager/Select Board, or if the investigation is pending. She said it is important to allow those to run their course. Ms. Hsu said that does not mean NUARI should not be informed or have an understanding of where things currently stand with policing and schools. Ms. Hsu said it is important to prioritize goals.

Mr. Borrelli said it is good to have all information centralized on the website. He said after the investigation is completed, discussion could be had about specific areas requiring clarification. Ms. Cooley suggested adding the link to the website for the last meetings when Chief Schlittler spoke with the Select Board. Ms. Fitzpatrick concurred, adding she will also send the presentation given by the school superintendent about the REAL Coalition to the working group. Ms. Espada commented the information on the website is substantial and should be reviewed by everyone, particularly under the FAQ section.

Ms. Howard said she wants to know the charge given to the person who is doing the investigation and considering policing policies. She commented on the investigator, policies that may violate laws, and whether the investigator could hear from the community regarding the impact of policies.

Ms. Cooley said the investigation does not include getting a pulse from the community. She suggested adding the link to the investigator's background on the website, as it may be helpful to members. Ms. Cooley said great care was taken in finding a credible person to take on the work. Ms. Fitzpatrick said the charge given to the investigator will be posted on the website.

Ms. Hsu commented it would make sense to read information regarding the Lived Experiences project, as those voices should be heard. She also suggested hearing from the Needham Housing Authority. Ms. Cooley said the Housing Authority has appeared before the Select Board, but not to discuss some of the housing discriminatory questions that get raised.

Ms. Fitzpatrick said housing would be a broader discussion. She said fair housing and large rental facilities are some aspects, noting there are some reports of Needham's housing status that are available on the website. Mr. Borrelli said 40B guidelines are being updated.

Ms. Cooley summarized there is a desire to figure out something with policing and whether there is something that can be done sooner rather than later. Ms. Cooley also suggested having the School Superintendent speak with NUARI at a future meeting.

Ms. Ajayi shared her concerns and asked to hear about tangible steps that are being taken to diversify staff at the high school, noting it is incredibly white. Ms. Neckes suggested Dan Gutekanst, Superintendent of Schools, Alexandra McNeil, Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources, and the REAL Coalition could present information to NUARI. She mentioned the REAL Coalition information is on the school's webpage, which should be provided to the group. Ms. Neckes said issues around curriculum are starting to be addressed, such a racial literacy programs at the elementary level.

Dr. Fayemi said that he agreed that the curriculum is lacking in both black history and diversity. Ms. Cooley said college students are interested in this issue and may be able to help boost curriculum development. Ms. Ajayi asked about types of training and requirements for racial literacy, particularly with adults at the high school. She said she had to explain many things to older people, which she said she should not have had to explain.

Ms. Espada said training should be available for everyone in Town. She cited unconscious bias training. She said everyone has unconscious biases, even people in the minority, and suggested a training session would be helpful.

Ms. Howard encouraged people to read the equity report from the schools, which has questions, answers, and identifies things that need to change or could be changed. She said it is a good model in how to start framing questions and identifying how things can be done.

Ms. Cooley suggested to Ms. Fitzpatrick it would be good to have an annotated bibliography on the Town's website to direct people where to look for information.

Ms. Cooley said housing is a much bigger issue, as there are many pieces to the discussion. She asked for input. Mr. Nelson commented on Chapter 40B housing, asking what about the goal in raising the percentage, the timetable, and language within the Chapter 40B policies. He said he feels some language in the policy is off-putting. He asked what process is being used for dismantling, rebuilding, and changing course? Ms. Cooley asked Ms. Fitzpatrick when the topic of 40B housing would be discussed by the Select Board.

Ms. Fitzpatrick said the topic is scheduled to be on the agenda in early December and would be the beginning of the public conversation by the Select Board. Ms. Cooley said the Town has met its functional goal of 10%, now must consider its aspirational goal and how it could happen. Mr. Borrelli commented on reaching the 10% affordable rental housing threshold, suggesting there should be more discussion on affordable housing home ownership.

Mr. Nelson concurred with Mr. Borrelli, saying lack of affordable ownership pushes people to rent. He commented on median income levels, home ownership in Needham, and people who are trying to live in town, but may be hindered. Ms. Cooley said all factors of Chapter 40B housing are up for discussion. Ms. Espada agreed with Mr. Nelson, mentioning socioeconomic diversity in Needham and how to achieve the goals and aspirations.

Ms. Neckes said there are two issues: socioeconomic and racial diversity. She questioned whether increasing affordable housing will really help the Town achieve racial diversity. She acknowledged there are several factors, commenting on an environment created in Needham that welcomes diversity and race, as well as

socioeconomic status. Mr. Nelson said there are many aspects to an overall welcoming environment.

Ms. Cooley said the issues are big and many things will be on a longer timeline, noting NUARI's priorities must first be developed. Ms. Hsu commented on existing racism in the community and how to address it with residents. Ms. Cooley concurred Needham will not be reinvented, and must work with "who we are," and how we can all be successful and make space for everyone. Ms. Espada added it also means making people feel like they belong in Needham. She said many people living in Needham do not feel as if they belong.

Mr. Abrishamian commented on the census, noting roughly 1,000 people in Needham (3% of residents) identify themselves as African American. He suggested reaching out to them to understand the challenges they may be facing. Ms. Cooley said it is a great question and worthy of reaching out. Mr. Nelson said if there is even just one person who feels like they don't belong in Needham, then obviously there is a problem. He said we know there are things that are happening, noting the Lived Experiences project is already reaching out to people.

Dr. Fayemi suggested events for black people and people of color, open to everyone in the community. He said outreach and education is key, but many people do not want to hear about the issues. Ms. Cooley said Dr. Fayemi's idea is great, noting the Chinese community in Needham could be used as a model. Ms. Ajayi said multiculturalism is a big part in how people feel accepted, and it is also away for people to truly understand what other cultures are all about. Mr. Borrelli said the ideas are great. He relayed a personal story of diversity.

Ms. Espada said she is a member of Latinas for Needham, saying she is not sure people know the group exists. She shared a graph titled "Needham Population by Race." She said if there is more inclusivity, the numbers would not feel as stark.

Mr. Nelson said other groups would be willing to help fund events, such as the Rotary Club. He commented minority-focused events may make the majority feel uncomfortable, but everyone should feel it, embrace it, and understand the challenges. He said it is necessary and will only help Needham come together.

Ms. Hsu commented on open and honest conversation, and the goal of combating racism as it exists, noting there are people who will not be interested in participating. She commented on establishing affinity groups where people feel comfortable to talk, share, and educate other people. She spoke about Boston's city-wide Dialogue Project started by Mayor Tom Menino, in which she was a facilitator on racial and ethnic diversity. She suggested a similar opportunity happen in Needham. Ms. Cooley said it is an interesting idea to keep on the table. Ms. Cooley said four years ago, after the last election, the Town was very engaged with many applications being submitted for Town boards and committees. She said she is hopeful for the same type of engagement this year, noting the openings on

Town boards and committees have been published within the last month. She asked that they be posted again.

Mr. Nelson commented on the diversity of the Select Board. He wondered if a Select Board position could be created for a person of color who has a different point of view or experience. He said he understands the position should not be called a “special appointment,” saying it should be earned. Ms. Fitzpatrick said to her knowledge there has never been a person of color on the Select Board. Ms. Cooley said she is the ninth woman elected to serve on the Select Board.

Ms. Neckes said the School Committee is well represented by women, but not by people of color. Ms. Espada commented she is the first woman architect and first minority group member to serve on the Permanent Public Building Committee. She said minorities should be represented on Town boards and committees, and that realistic goals should be set to find qualified people to fill positions, who can be mentored and who can succeed. Ms. Cooley said reaching out and encouraging people is an important part of filling the different roles. Discussion ensued on potential mentoring opportunities in filling board and committee seats, as well as how to become a Town Meeting Member.

Ms. Howard asked if the Lived Experiences project leaders could present to NUARI their findings and how they got people to open and trust them with their stories, sometimes at great personal risk. She commented there must be protocol for people to speak with Town leaders about incidents that may have happened. Ms. Cooley said the Lived Experiences report is on the Town website and their presentation to the Select Board will be linked for people to view, to be followed by discussion within NUARI. Ms. Cooley suggested the possibility of an “ombuds” role to help learn about the challenges in order to do a better job.

Mr. Borrelli said, at this time, there is enough information to make decisions without having full presentations. He noted things could change in the future, but for the moment there is a lot of work to be done. Mr. Nelson concurred with Ms. Howard’s comments of having the Lived Experiences project leaders present their approach.

Ms. Cooley said she, Mr. Borrelli, Ms. Fitzpatrick, and Ms. King met with Lisa Smith McQueenie, who has been engaged to work with NUARI to articulate its vision for the Town over the short and long term. She said it is important to have a vision to guide the work.

Mr. Abrishamian reminded members that Sunday, November 15, 2020 is the date for the ninth annual Needham Diversity Summit. He encouraged people to attend the meeting by Zoom. Discussion ensued on an equity audit. Ms. Cooley suggested making it an agenda item for discussion. Ms. Cooley commented on what to expect at upcoming NUARI meetings.

Mr. Nelson shared a letter he received from someone in Newton concerning Christopher Columbus, Indigenous Peoples Day, and the hurt caused by continued celebration on Columbus Day.

7:30 p.m.

Motion by Mr. Borrelli that the meeting be adjourned.

Second: Ms. Hsu. Unanimously approved 10-0 by roll call vote.

A list of all documents used at this Needham Unite Against Racism Initiative Working Group meeting are available at:

<http://www.needhamma.gov/Archive.aspx?AMID=99&Type=&ADID=>