

NEEDHAM HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE MEETING

Minutes

January 21, 2021

Tina Burgos, acting chair, called the meeting to order at 7:30 PM virtually on Zoom.

Committee members in attendance: Tina Burgos, Cynthia Ganung, Jen Howard, Kerry Hurwitch, Amelia Klein, Ashok Mehta, Marcus Nelson, Bud Schram, Marlene Schultz, Julie Venables

High School liaisons: Jared Pizzuto, Sophia Dedek

Town of Needham liaison: Katie King, Assistant Town Manager

Police liaison: Lt. Belinda Carroll

Tina began the meeting by reciting the required protocol for remotely conducted open meetings. The following agenda items were presented and discussed during the meeting.

Minutes of November 19, 2020 were edited and approved (with one abstention).

Public Participation Two members of the public attended the meeting. One of the participants, Rinaz Mala, introduced herself and shared her background (she is a Muslim Kurd) and her experiences living in Syria prior to her immigration to the U.S. Rinaz recently became a citizen. She is a resident of Needham and is an advocate for human rights. She expressed gratitude for the new immigration policy that would allow Muslims like herself to enter the United States.

Old Business

NHRC - Complaint Process

The Committee reviewed its recommendation to the Select Board to oversee a complaint process program in the Needham community. The Committee cannot move forward until the Select Board further clarifies the charge and responsibilities of the NHRC. Marlene shared that many human rights committees have this role. The NHRC was assigned this role in the past by the Select Board. 1997 documents (e.g., *Outreach and Complaint Resolution Program: Rules of Procedure*, and *Outreach and Complaint Resolution Program*) provide guidelines developed by the Needham Select Board at that time. The Committee is unaware of why the program was taken away from the NHRC. Research about complaint programs could provide models for the Town of Needham. Julie volunteered to help with contacting resources and collecting data. Katie offered to review relevant information in the Resilience & Response Network document. (The document was created as a result of a Town wide workshop examining the community's response to hate speech and other acts of discrimination.) Marlene suggested the Committee invite a guest speaker who could inform the Town about various models and processes. Moe and other Select Board members would be invited to the meeting. Tina will speak with Moe Handel about setting up a meeting.

NUARI Working Group Meetings

Jen and Marcus shared that the on-going public meetings have focused on the creation of a vision and a mission statement for the Town. This has been a tedious and slow process. The statements will provide a framework for all Town departments, and "ensure that all residents of Needham are safe and free from racism, discrimination and hate". Jen and Marcus strongly encouraged members of the community to attend the next open NUARI meeting on Jan. 25 where public comments will be shared. A concern was that some residents may not feel "safe" sharing their views or experiences. A Question and Answer

format was suggested by Kerry. Katie will look into this format. Kerry offered to assist if needed.

Lived Experiences Project - follow up on next steps

Amelia contacted Anna Giraldo-Kerr about ways that the NHRC could support the project. Tina volunteered to help with setting up a website. Jared and Sophia agreed to support initiatives at the high school. The Committee has not received feedback from Anna as yet. Many plans have been put on hold because of the pandemic.

New Business

Program to discuss policing

The Committee discussed plans for a NHRC educational event which would focus on policing. The topic is timely because of the policing reform bill recently passed by the State. The Committee proposed that the Needham Police Dept. (in consultation with Chief Schlittler) be a co-sponsor of the event. A two-part series of the event was explored:

- Denise Garlick would discuss elements of the new legislation in the first presentation (March), with a brief overview from a legislative perspective. Jen will contact Denise to see if she is interested.
- A second, follow-up presentation is given by the Needham Police Department to inform the Community about how the NPD has interpreted and adapted to the new policies, and the impact on the community (possibly April). Belinda suggested a PowerPoint format as part of the presentation.

Belinda Carroll will give a report to the NHRC at its March meeting about how far along the department is in the implementation process. Belinda suggested that the follow-up to Denise's presentation be in two parts because of the length of time it will take to implement the policies, with the first part of the presentation in April and the second at a later date.

Needham High School student response to 1/6/2021 political violence

Sophia and Jared shared their experiences at NHS in the aftermath of the Jan. 6 storming of the United States Capitol Building. Jared shared that open discussions were held throughout the day. NHS students were encouraged to share their feelings and reactions to the political violence. Jared indicated that many students felt the conversations were productive and allowed students to speak freely. Sophia indicated that all classes held discussions and focused on why such an event would happen and the history behind it. Sophia and Jared were appreciative that the conversations continued over the course of two weeks and that students felt supported by faculty and administrators.

Reports

Select Board

Katie stated that the Town is working on a second draft of the Response Network - based on feedback from workshop attendees. She will send information to workshop participants and attendees in February.

Town Issues

Belinda indicated that there were no new issues.

Needham High School – CCOR video

Jared reported that he contacted Beth Pinals and interested students in Courageous Conversations on Race group. There has not been any follow-up because of other student commitments. Sophia indicated that it is a difficult time to make plans because of the changing school venues and daily schedules due to Covid-19. Plans are on hold and will be reviewed in the future.

Needham Schools

Jen gave an overview of REAL activities. She is the NHRC representative to the group. The entire REAL committee will meet one more time this year. A goal is to work on a community engagement initiative – information on website which focuses on diversity, equity and inclusion issues is a resource for teachers. The purpose is to build a knowledge base for staff and schools. A racial literacy curriculum was launched in the elementary school and will move up to the middle schools. Two groups in Town are involved in community engagement: *Voices in Unity* (created to bring together representatives from the different social justice groups in town) and *Stronger Together* (an employee resource and support group for people of color). These are examples of initiatives taken by Town officials to change the culture within schools and the community on matters of race and racial justice. Marlene added that the *Voices in Unity* hosts are encouraging more members of the Community to participate in future meetings. The next meeting is scheduled for Feb. 16 at 6:00 pm. Marlene will send out an invitation to the Committee.

Bud asked whether Dan would be joining the Committee meetings as in the past, prior to the pandemic. His participation gave the Committee valuable information about what was happening from the administration's point of view. Amelia shared that Dan's blog is very informative and would provide information that is of interest to the Committee. Jen will invite Dan to the next meeting on zoom.

Needham Resilience Network Workshop

Marlene provided an update on the work of the NRN planning committee. The comprehensive document developed during workshops is being reviewed by Katie and the Town. Their recommendations will be taken to the planning committee. Marlene will keep us informed.

Needham Interfaith Trans Day of Remembrance Vigil

Cynthia reported that the Nov. 11 event sponsored by NHRC, NDI, EJP, Progressive Needham, participating members of the Needham Interfaith Clergy, and OUT MetroWest was successful and an effective way to reach out to the community. She emphasized the importance of the NHRC to be a sponsor of such an event. The vigil was a time to solemnly remember Trans and gender non-conforming people who were killed in hate crimes this past year. Cynthia commented it was a powerful experience, and Marlene agreed. The event was prerecorded and can be seen at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7cTTyY7_zlE&feature=youtu.be

At My Neighbor's Table Event: What Would Our Communities Look Like If We Valued Essential Workers?

Marlene, who chairs the AMNT planning committee, shared that the Dec. 13, 2020 event was well received by viewers. The event focused on academic as well as practical/personal aspects of the challenges essential workers face during the pandemic crisis. Facilitating small group conversations in a virtual setting was a challenge but did not affect the engagement of participants in meaningful dialogue. As with other AMNT events, the topic was relevant and timely and of interest not only to Needham residents but those attending from other communities. The group that has been involved in the planning of AMNT events, led by Marlene, will meet to discuss formalizing the group in terms of logistical and organizational factors. The AMNT series has been a popular event since its beginning, and has inspired the Town of Wellesley to replicate an event on housing issues.

Needham Martin Luther King Day program

Amelia and Cynthia serve on the board of the Needham Diversity Initiative and were involved in planning the event. NHRC is an on-going sponsor of the celebration. Based on feedback, Amelia reported that the Jan. 1, 2021 program was rated one of the best by many of the 350 + participants. This was the first time that the MLK Day Celebration was presented virtually. Overall, the 1 ½ hour program was well suited for the zoom venue and can be viewed in its entirety at: <https://youtu.be/Nw54pTcgZt> Technical difficulties were experienced in the original zoom version. Kerry offered suggestions for future video presentations on zoom based on her experiences running webinars.

Announcements

Diversity and Discussion Book Club

January 27 - An American Marriage: A Novel by Tayari Jones, Discussion Facilitated by Gretchen Cook Anderson and guest Tayari Jones Registration: <https://needhamma.assabetinteractive.com/calendar/diversity-and-discussion-book-club-an-american-marriage-by-tayari-jones/>

The State of Race Webinar

January 28 - The State of Race: The Housing Gap at 7:30pm
Registration: <https://www.wgbh.org/the-state-of-race>

Member-Suggested Readings

- His Truth Is Marching On: John Lewis and the Power of Hope by Jon Meacham (Bud)
- A Fool's Errand: Creating the National Museum of African American History and Culture in the Age of Bush, Obama, and Trump by Lonnie G. Bunch III (Bud)
- Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents by Isabel Wilkerson (Marlene & Marcus)

Future NHRC Meeting Dates and Recorders

Feb. 25 - Cynthia
Mar. 18 – Kerry (?)
Apr. 15 - Bud
May 20 - Ashok
Jun. 17 - Marcus

Respectfully submitted, Amelia Klein (recorder)