

Town of Needham
Needham Unite Against Racism Initiative Working Group
Minutes for January 25, 2021

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL3PRZZjHC3yE0eZ-rrW5RDdybU0e1R91L>

6:00 p.m. This 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 Matt Borrelli, Vivian Hsu, Sue Neckes, Natasha Espada, Marcus Nelson, Jen Howard Schroeder, Jay Spencer, Toyin Fayemi, Ramin Abrishamian, and Town Manager Kate Fitzpatrick and Assistant Town Manager Katie King.

Ms. Cooley introduced each member of the working group. Ms. Cooley noted that the working group originally planned to meet twice a month starting in November 2020 but has met more frequently. The working group has only received one email and eight submissions on the survey so far and are hoping to receive more feedback in this meeting and in the next few days. Ms. Cooley said the goal for tonight's public meeting is to hear the feedback from the public so that everyone who wishes to tell the working group something can be heard. They are also sharing the vision statement and guiding principles that the group has worked on and drafted. With tonight's feedback, the working group will discuss and tweak the statement until it is ready for the Select Board to consider and adopt a vision for the Town. With their acceptance, NUARI will also ask the Board to forward the vision to other Town boards and committees for adoption. The working group hopes the vision and guiding principles will become foundational to the work of the Town.

Ms. Cooley covered the general guidelines for speaking such as raising hands and limiting speaking to three minutes. Ms. King showed a slide deck covering the history of NUARI, members and staff, the charge, dates of the meetings held so far, information about Lisa Smith-McQueenie who was the Vision Setting Facilitator, the facilitation process to date and next steps, and guiding principles for future action.

John Kirk was the first speaker, but his connection made it difficult to understand. He asked about the leadership of the committee.

Cathy Freedberg asked Ms. Cooley to display the vision statement again. Ms. Cooley recommended that people also visit the NUARI website where the statement is posted.

Noah Mertz said that he believes Mr. Kirk's question was about how the leadership was established and if there were any way to potentially look into a rotating leadership? He also wanted to thank the committee for all it has been doing.

Nicole Argo commended the committee for all the hard work they have done so far. She raised issues with measurement of the objectives. She also asked about the process for making this happen, who is going to coordinate the implementation, who is monitoring and reporting on it, and who will have the power and funding to do that work?

Smriti Rao, thanked the committee for the hard work they have done and wanted to follow up on Ms. Argo's point on metrics and principles for future action. Does NUARI want to be the body that picks those metrics or be the body that has the power to push the authorities who have access to that data to develop those metrics and report them back to NUARI?

Ms. Cooley agreed that measurement is an important part and having objectives will be key going forward.

Marcus Hughes said that understanding the full American history is important and he is interested in expanding civics education in our schools. He also raised the issue of police stops and the importance of showing metrics. He thanked the committee for all they are doing.

Rebecca Waber agreed with several of the previous comments on the topic of oversight and envisions a dashboard that is easy to read and transparent when these metrics are developed.

Ms. Cooley replied to one of the comments about the process for making all of this happen. The working group does not have a complete answer to that but identifying a process to institutionalize the work of the group is one of the items in the charge that was given to the working group and is something that we do expect to have a recommendation on before their work is complete.

Joe Leghorn said he was disappointed by the lack of acknowledgement of the mistakes and the wrongs in America for the past 400 years of racial injustice. He agreed with the comments of more civics education in the schools.

Jo-Anne Ochalla questioned about the wording of the vision statement which did not include visitors to Needham like people who work or shop in Needham. She agreed with Mr. Leghorn's comment about the importance of acknowledging what has happened in the past and where we are right now. She had a question about the

citizens petition and NUARI position on that.

Ms. Cooley spoke about the citizens petition and said the issues that were identified in the petition are the issues that have informed, in part, the agenda.

Noah Mertz spoke about the meeting with the police chief and said it was chilling to him that the police hadn't really considered the way they interacted with people, the way they experienced it.

Mary Lammi thanked the committee for all the work they have done in a short time. As someone working in the schools, she said they feel supported by the efforts of this committee and the engagement from the Town through the committee. Ms. Lammi echoed Mr. Hughes' comments about civic education in the schools and hoped that there would be more work in that area. She also commented on the last bullet of the guiding principles and felt the word popularize was out of place.

Wrapping up the public hearing section of the meeting, Ms. Cooley stated that people had submitted forms with some specific language suggestions and specific points the working group should consider and that they would look at and discuss at their next meeting. She welcomed anyone to submit forms with feedback. She closed this section with quotes from Amanda Gorman's *The Hill We Climb*. Ms. Cooley thanked everyone for their feedback and welcomed them to stay and listen to the committee as they discussed an article that Mr. Nelson has shared with the group as well as the schedule for the next couple of months leading to the Town Meeting in May.

Ms. Cooley asked Mr. Nelson to lead the discussion of the white fragility article. Mr. Nelson spoke about the reasons he shared the article with the committee and asked if anyone had read it and had any questions. Ms. Cooley commented that she had not heard of "racial stamina" phrase before. Mr. Spencer said this article is a conversation starter on white fragility. Ms. Cooley spoke about how to incorporate the different phrases such as white fragility into conversations. Mr. Borrelli added that this group has been lucky to be able to have open and honest conversations without labels. Mr. Nelson spoke about how uncomfortable these terms are but the town as a whole needs to understand how relevant and ingrained they are into the way that we have been founded and governed. We must bring them to light and not continue to tiptoe around them. We need to eradicate some that have been here for so long.

Ms. Espada said that the status quo is not productive to creating a more racially integrated Needham. Change requires disruption which allows for opportunity. People are afraid of change and what they may lose. The Town needs to be educated as to what that means and unless it is brought up, it is never going to change. Mr. Borrelli agreed that there needs to be change and said his concern is that some labeling may be unhelpful. Mr. Borrelli spoke of the prejudice his family endured starting with his grandparents who came over from Italy at the turn of the century,

that Italians were mocked. He can't speak to what black people went through but can about what his uncles and other family members did growing up in Needham and how it has changed. Labeling can divide people and the community.

Ms. Howard thanked Mr. Nelson for the article. She felt that everyone should be able to speak freely and use the words that they want whether it is uncomfortable or not. People should be able to put those words out there to challenge people to think differently. Even the people on this Town committee can show what the risk these terms mean to them as residents and neighbors.

Mr. Abrishamian believes that these terms should be used because they are so eloquent and convey so much meaning but do it in such a way that is in the context of a transformation and education.

Ms. Hsu echoed what everyone has said. Language is very important, not only as to the vocabulary, the actual words but the definitions, the contexts, and the tone. Are we using too strong language or not strong enough? She suggested that the working group put out some sort of guidance about what they mean and are talking about. It is very important to invoke those concepts of education, not just about history and civics, but also educating about what we mean by the terms and the words that we use.

Dr. Fayemi wanted to make it known that they are talking about black versus white racism. No other group has been oppressed by this country like African Americans have been.

Ms. Neckes asked if the article could be posted to the website. She also asked if we could use the term white fragility in the documents and to what the working group is trying to bring to the community.

Dr. Fayemi talked about a model going forward. He said that the Germans are very up front about their history and have educated themselves and have made changes and reparations and don't feel necessarily responsible for the past. He believes that this is why education is so critical.

Ms. Hsu mentioned that people are fragile and uncomfortable talking about race. We should be mindful going forward of the kinds of difficult conversations and there should be grace, respect, sharing, appreciation for differences and understanding of people's opinions. White fragility is an important concept to think about and important in the conversations that we are having.

Ms. Neckes spoke about leading with policies and practices. She feels like you must institutionalize the change before you can bring along all the attitudes that go with that.

Ms. Hsu thought the metrics and data is very important and is about accountability.

It is not the whole answer but should be talked about. Ms. Cooley agreed.

Mr. Spencer suggested that a set of questions be sent to the participants ahead of the next meeting about what the committee is doing and what policies the Town has so they can follow the process as opposed to the committee telling them what to do. Ms. Cooley agreed and thought it would be good practice and liked the idea of having questions up front. Mr. Borrelli agreed with Mr. Spencer's and Ms. Hsu comments.

Ms. Espada suggested having a repository of these books available for people to read and feel more comfortable in these meetings. Ms. Cooley mentioned that Town Manager Kate Fitzpatrick at the beginning of this committee started a list of resources but if anyone has something not on the list, please let Ms. Fitzpatrick know so she can add it.

Mr. Abrishamian informed the group that needhamdiversity.org has a page devoted to resource materials, books, articles, and videos that are of educational nature which will be expanded soon.

Ms. Cooley summed up the evening about what they have learned. One is that for the working group to have productive, rich, robust, and thoughtful conversations, it takes longer than originally thought. The group will have more meetings and longer meetings than originally planned. We originally thought we would give a report at Town Meeting in May and be finished, but she said she doesn't think the group can make a recommendation for how to institutionalize things by then. Ms. Cooley suggested that the committee think about or consider making a second year commitment so that the other major organizations within the town like housing, police, education, hiring, the critical areas that have been identified can be considered and we can make some recommendations as it relates to accountability and metrics and institutionalization of the practices and the areas of improvement. Ms. Cooley asked for comments.

Mr. Spencer thought it seemed like a long time but is happy to continue. Ms. Espada agreed but felt we should at least have a plan of action by this May's Annual Town Meeting. She too would be happy to stay on for another year. Ms. Cooley said that she is hoping to have that plan ready for this Town Meeting. Ms. Neckes wanted to know what group or committee would be an accountable body and what can we hold the schools, the planning board, the police, etc. accountable for? Ms. Cooley answered that NUARI is not a standing committee. That each group would be held accountable, for example: The Real Coalition to the School Committee or the elected officials to the voters.

Next, Ms. Cooley talked about the schedule. On February 8th the Police Chief was scheduled to attend to talk about the Tidwell report, but it will not be available yet so that visit will be postponed. The February 8th meeting will be used to finalize the vision statement, the guiding principles, and the intentional practices so the

working group can make a recommendation at the next Select Board meeting. The February 22nd is devoted to zoning and housing policies. Ms. Cooley suggested that we think of specific policy questions ahead of time. On March 8th, Rachel Glisper, Director of Human Resource and Alex Montes McNeil, Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources are scheduled to speak about Town staffing and hiring. Ms. Cooley asked Ms. Fitzpatrick about the Tidwell report. Ms. Fitzpatrick said that she expects the report to be available in the next two weeks. Ms. Cooley suggested an extra Monday meeting in March just for the report.

Ms. Cooley recognized that Ms. Lisa Smith-McQueenie has been listening and will also be getting the various feedback that the committee is getting so she can help tweak the statements.

8:02 p.m.

Motion by Mr. Nelson that the Needham Unite Against Racism Initiative meeting be adjourned. Second: Mr. Borrelli. Unanimously approved 10-0 by roll call vote.

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

<https://www.needhamma.gov/4942/Needham-Unite-Against-Racism-Initiative>