

**Town of Needham**  
**Needham Unite Against Racism Initiative Working Group**  
**Minutes for January 11, 2021**

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

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. 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](http://www.needhamma.gov). Present were Matt Borrelli, Vivian Hsu, Sue Neckes, Natasha Espada, Ramin Abrishamian, Marcus Nelson, Jen Howard Schroeder, Jay Spencer, Toyin Fayemi, Town Manager Kate Fitzpatrick, and Assistant Town Manager Katie King.

Ms. Cooley asked for a motion to approve the minutes of December 21, 2020.

**Motion: Mr. Nelson made a motion to approve the minutes of December 21, 2020. Mr. Abrishamian seconded the motion. The motion was unanimously approved 8-0 by roll call vote.**

Ms. Cooley introduced Police Chief John Schlittler to go over his philosophy in Needham and to talk about the work his department is doing. Chief Schlittler spoke to the group about his background and how police officers in his life growing up influenced him starting out in the field. He says they are always looking for ways to better themselves. He said officers are always looking out for their safety and may have a robotic way of approaching a vehicle when it is stopped. This practice is all done in the interest of safety, but the profession as a whole hasn't been great at explaining why they do what they do. Ultimately, they are trying to protect themselves. He said he would like to find a way to figure out how the community feels and find a way to get their message out. Ms. Cooley appreciated him saying that maybe he and his staff haven't stepped back to think about how the interaction is perceived and that they are thinking about safety. Chief Schlittler said that when they respond to calls, they have a general idea of what they are facing. There is no playbook, they aren't always right and sometimes it's not a situation they can plan for. They rely on training and they try to react based upon their training.

Ms. Cooley asked Chief Schlittler to tell the group about fundamental training. Chief Schlittler told the group there are two types of training. The recruit academy training which is a 26-week long program and then an internal 12-week field training program. During the field training program, a recruit is assigned to three different officers. They review Standard Operating Procedures and then they are

shadowed by plain clothes officers so they can get a feel for what it is like in the field. If needed they can be remediated out and go back and try again. There is a mandated 40 hours of professional development by the State. Needham also offers additional trainings including: in-house annual use of force training which is a classroom session; firearms training twice a year; use of force and de-escalation training; defensive tactics one or two times a year; force on force training/active shooter training; and taser training.

Mr. Nelson asked how the new State reform will impact Needham. Chief Schlittler said there is a period where the new bill will need to be dissected and they will need to figure out what needs to be done. There are a lot of changes with regards to training, and post-certification which will certify or decertify police officers. The Mass. Police Chiefs Association has been asking for a certification process for many years. The biggest impact of the law will be to training and the changes to policies. Everyone across the board will have to follow the same policies so that will be more consistent. When asked about diversity in the Police Department, he noted that hiring in Needham is governed by the Civil Service system, and the Department must use the lists provided for hiring. Civil Service follows a particular formula and the jobs have to be offered in the following order: Veterans, Disabled Veterans that live in Town, family members of police officers that have been killed in the line of duty, and then Needham residents. The Town has asked for minority lists, or Spanish speaking lists but they have been denied. Unfortunately, the Department is bound by the Civil Service system and it does not really provide a diverse group of candidates.

Chief Schlittler also talked about data gathering, such as recording all traffic stop information, including issued violations and verbal warnings. He said that he reviews all the data regularly to see if there is an issue and areas that need to be worked on. Ms. Hsu asked about the training simulation system and whether any of the scenarios analyze and address individual not just biases or racial profiling tendencies but also unconscious biases. Chief Schlittler said there are over 5,000 scenarios. Ms. Hsu asked who is in a position of assessing those responses to the scenarios and if they need additional trainings. Chief Schlittler said they look for deficiencies and they look at it from all angles. Mr. Spencer said they are always in a situation where decisions must be made. There are many cases where people believe that white privilege plays a part in those decisions. He asked how do you overcome that, and what type of training officers need to be better at handling those instances particularly with people of color? Chief Schlittler responded that they can always do better with training. They rely on the community or the Town to let them know what is going on. He said the Department wants to build trust within the community. They are trying to find consistency and to respond to all the situations in the same manner. It doesn't always happen though and there are various environmental factors too. The officers aren't perfect and are human beings too. Probably one of the hardest parts is that people perceive things differently. Ms. Cooley commented that sometimes the discussion of treating equally is still not equitable. We don't know exactly what that means in transactions/interactions with

community members of color but thinks we can learn something even by engaging with them with how things are perceived. Mr. Nelson agreed that having interactions with the community is key.

Chief Schlittler said being part of a community was important to him. The department has two School Resource Officers, foot patrols around the schools, and housing authority, they are part of the Domestic Violence Action Committee and the Human Rights Committee, and work with Seniors and Veterans in Town. They also play a large role in the Coalition for Suicide Prevention and they do a lot of work around mental health. All of the officers train on mental health and first aid. Building trust, legitimacy, and communication are some of the best things we can do to try and bridge that gap. It is a work in progress, and he hopes to make a difference. They can always be better and are always looking for ways to improve.

Mr. Abrishamian asked if there are any organized deliberate attempts to interact and to connect with the community of color that live or work in Needham? He said not as an individual group but said again that people of color are part of a lot of organized groups in Town. Dr. Fayemi said he empathizes with Chief Schlittler. He says it is tough to take yourself out of the equation and see what is going on around the world and how people respond to people of color. He encouraged the Department to look at things differently and to try not to feel like everyone is pointing at them. Chief Schlittler says they sometimes do feel like everyone is against them, and that there are plenty of times where people come up to the officers and don't have nice things to say to them.

Ms. Cooley asked if he expects that the new de-certification process will help when there are police who are bad cops? If a police officer were to get decertified, they will not be able to go anywhere else. The big issue initially is how it will get rolled out. He isn't sure what it will truly look like yet. Ms. Cooley said that the data from the police is recorded regularly and will be put up on the website. Ms. Fitzpatrick said there is a plan to aggregate the data together and put out more formalized reports. Ms. Cooley thanked Chief Schlittler and said the more conversations like this the better and this will help us as a Town to move forward. She also commented that the School Resource Officers were valuable at the schools.

Ms. Cooley then welcomed back Lisa Smith-McQueenie who joined the meeting for the fourth visioning session. She also noted that Jen Howard and Natasha Espada were able to join the meeting too. Ms. Smith-McQueenie started off saying that there are some suggestions she would have given to Chief Schlittler, and he may have covered them earlier in the meeting. She appreciated his comments about trust and legitimacy but that should also be coupled with authenticity. First of all, what personal legacy might he want to articulate regarding diversity, equity and inclusion, and social justice? As a leader it is important for him to set a standard for his officers and for the community. Second, how would the example of policing at the Capitol be addressed among the Needham police force? Are there other

examples or opportunities for teaching and learning that might help Needham police understand the relationships and inter-relationships among police and civilians and in particular civilians of color? She also said there was mention of the community being comfortable with the Police, but she would flip it and say how comfortable are they with the community because it is a two-way street.

Ms. Smith-McQueenie then shared the Visioning session slides. Ms. Cooley, Mr Abrishamian, Mr Spencer, and Ms. Hsu voiced positive sentiments about the draft language and including the five bullets with the vision statement.

Mr. Abrishamian said he likes the statement and five bullets, but he feels something is missing. Racial bias comes from inside individuals. To eliminate it, involves some process of personal change that comes through education. Ms. Howard agreed that the personal commitment is a critical piece. She said she is still wondering if some of the terms are things that need to be spelled out in the bullets, so people understand what they are talking about. Mr. Borrelli said that because the statement is coming from the Town, he thinks our hands are tied to a certain extent. It is a nice umbrella and states the vision we have.

Ms. Smith-McQueenie then moved on to the Guiding Principles that should inform this work. The group viewed nine different statements and gave their input. Ms. Howard said what is missing is a call for developing tools for accountability and some clearly delineated place for when and how people can bring their concerns. She said it is important to create spaces where people can share their experiences and they can feel listened to. She said that we need to spend time thinking about how to do outreach, as the ways we have done things in the past have not been successful.

Ms. Hsu said that the Guiding Principles should be for future actions and that a shorter list of principles will resonate with people more. The group spent some time word-smithing the different options. Dr. Fayemi feels using the words “white supremacy” in one of the statements is too much. Maybe something more along the lines of “Black lives have been subjected to white dominance and culture.” He thinks using the wording white supremacy will turn people off. Mr. Borrelli asked if there are better ways of saying things that bring people together and not make people think that it doesn’t speak to them. Ms. Smith-McQueenie said that until we recognize what makes us uncomfortable, we won’t be able to heal.

Mr. Abrishamian said we should be explicit that we cannot move forward without acknowledging history. Ms. Neckes said it’s not just the history, it is happening as we sit here and speak. She finds the term white privilege is something we should reckon with and not find any more offensive than the racism that exists. She doesn’t find that term so off-putting that we can’t work with it given that it is a reality. Ms. Cooley said that there are people who still don’t see themselves in white privilege. Ms. Neckes said that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t confront it. Ms. Cooley said that she likes Dr. Fayemi’s wording around the dominance of white culture, wondering

if we can use explicit language while still inviting people in. Ms. Espada said that the majority doesn't really understand that they are the majority, and that they don't understand the privilege that they have. People do not understand they have biases, so an education piece is what is needed to figure out how to move forward.

Ms. Smith-McQueenie said the group needs to decide what they are going to encourage Needham residents to do. Mr. Borrelli said he thinks it is premature to be telling residents what to do at this point. Ms. Hsu wondered if they should fold the encouragement statements into the goals and objectives? Ms. Cooley said that she likes the explicit list, and the one that jumps out to her is the one that says, "Diversify employment, contracting, and general association." She thinks it would be great to have a list like this. Ms. Smith-McQueenie asked if the group would like to present these statements now or at a later date. Mr. Spencer said they should have the vision statement, guiding principles, and questions they need to ask themselves to further the conversation on diversity. Mr. Borrelli urged the group to be cautious as this is coming from the Town. He said he is not sure "Needham Residents are encouraged to" is really the right wording. He suggests changing it to say "supports" instead of "encouraged". He also wondered if this piece was critical at this time. Ms. Hsu said maybe we need to get feedback on the vision statement first before we finalize the guiding principles or the list about encouraging/supporting the community. Mr. Spencer said that maybe all three should be distributed and for context say it is a working draft. Then people can provide feedback. Ms. Hsu said to just make it clear these statements are things we are thinking about and that they are not final. Ms. Cooley said she thinks the group is pretty comfortable presenting the vision and the basic ideas with the guiding principles and encouragement statements. Ms. Cooley said the next meeting will be a public hearing on January 25, 2021 where the community will be given a chance to give their opinion on the information, we have put out thus far. Ms. Cooley said the group's purpose at the next meeting will be to listen. After the meeting, the group will come back together to discuss the feedback. Ms. Hsu said it would be helpful to hear from the public but wants to be clear what they are presenting is not the final product.

8:40 p.m.

**Motion by Mr. Borrelli that the Needham Unite Against Racism Initiative working group meeting be adjourned. Second: Mr. Spencer. 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>