

Town of Needham
Needham Unite Against Racism Initiative Working Group
Minutes for March 8, 2021

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/89833277286>

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. 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. Also present was facilitator Lisa Smith-McQueenie.

Ms. Cooley asked for a motion to approve the minutes of January 4, 2021.

Motion: Ms. Cooley made a motion to approve the minutes of January 4, 2021. Mr. Borrelli seconded the motion. The motion was unanimously approved 10-0 by roll call vote.

Ms. Cooley informed the group that the Tidwell Report, expected to be available for discussion at the 3/15 NUARI meeting, would not be available until later. She polled the group to see if there was agreement to move this discussion to another meeting on Monday, March 22, 2021. The Chief of Police will attend that meeting. Another meeting would be added for March 29th. After discussion the group agreed.

Mr. Spencer asked what was holding up the report. Ms. Cooley replied that the Town has been working with Ms. Tidwell to ensure that the report provided a good set of recommendations for the Town. It is very close to being released. The internal investigation document will be released at the same time. The Select Board will be discussing this report before it will be discussed at NUARI.

Mr. Nelson asked if the group could submit questions for the Police Chief in advance of the next meeting? Ms. Cooley said that would be useful.

6:10 p.m. Ms. Rachel Glisper, HR Director for the Town and Dr. Alex Montes McNeil, Assistant Superintendent for the Needham Public Schools, presented the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) programs that the Town and Schools have been working on.

Ms. Glisper provided an overview of the Town's programs, such as:

1. Applicant Tracking System – Human Resources in implementing an applicant tracking system that will have features which allow the hiding/masking of personally identifiable information of candidates. This feature will prevent the unconscious bias that may be used while managers rate candidate applications. It will allow for job qualifications/experience to be used as the sole criteria while reviewing applications. The system also allows for the redaction of information.
2. METCO Summer Hiring – Human Resources will be working with the Park & Recreation Department as it gears up for hiring for the Pool and Summer Programs. Park & Recreation is partnering with the School METCO program to allow METCO students to work at the summer programs.
3. Roundtable Discussion Series – On March 22nd the first Diversity, Equity and Inclusion roundtable discussion will be held for any interested employees.
4. Employee Resource Group – “Stronger Together,” a collaboration with the School Department, was created for BIPOC employees to have a safe place to share experiences in Town and to discuss ways to drive change in the area of equity. The group meets once a month and is a sponsor of the Roundtable Series.

Dr. McNeil provided an overview of the School's DEI programs. She stated that when she started with the NPS just under three years ago, it was clear that a major focus of the work was diversifying staff and staff retention. This focus is included in the School Department's Portrait of a Needham Graduate and in the School's REAL Coalition.

1. A small group of staff of color was created, similar to the efforts underway by the Town. Ms. Glisper and Dr. McNeil discussed their efforts and decided that the two groups would be “Stronger Together” and hence the program took shape.
2. Over the past two years, the School Department has hired over 37 people of color. Dr. McNeil has been training staff about bias and the effect that desegregation and the history that occurred after that resulted in a loss of 37,000 jobs in the education profession.
3. Dr. Mc Neil said that she views staff/professional development in the vein of “What is a portrait of a Needham teacher?” She said that professional development should align with the district goals.

Ms. Cooley asked Ms. McNeil if the School's had retained all 37 of the staff hired? Ms. McNeil responded that some staff left for promotional reasons and they have left with a good impression of Needham.

Ms. Cooley asked Ms. Glisper if there was a diverse pool of employees in the Town of Needham. Ms. Glisper responded that there are no baseline numbers. But that the Town needs to do better; in particular, to increase diversity in higher level positions.

Mr. Nelson asked about the 37 staff hired in comparison to the total number hired during that period. Dr. McNeil responded that it is difficult to state because of incremental growth; however, she would like to see it expand further. Posting positions for longer periods of time to allow vacancies to be publicized on other networks is one strategy she is considering.

Ms. Cooley asked Dr. McNeil if exit interviews have been positive or a mix. Dr. McNeil responded for the most part, most staff leave for personal reasons.

Ms. Cooley asked Ms. Glisper how we are measuring the Town's success. Ms. Glisper responded that many exit from the Town for promotional reasons. The new applicant tracking system will provide us with that data in the future. Stronger Together information is now included in new employee packets.

Ms. Espada asked how are people attending the Roundtable discussions. Ms. Glisper responded that all Town employees and School employees can attend and that it is voluntary, not mandatory.

Ms. Espada stated that she hopes the Town will have support for the METCO students this summer should they experience any discrimination.

Ms. Hsu, who has served on the Town's Personnel Board for 20 years offered a few observations: to be sure equity and parity are used in hiring, the Board reviews policies and procedures in the community and the Board holds managers feet to the fire when it comes to recruitment. She stated that Needham must compete with the private sector, State and other municipalities for senior level positions.

Ms. Neckes asked if there were barriers for using METCO students (e.g. Transportation). Ms. Glisper responded that transportation was on the top of the concern list – however Park & Recreation is offering alternative schedules commensurate with the train schedules and offering T passes. She stated that transportation is no longer at the top of the concern list. Ms. Glisper stated that training costs for these summer program jobs are reimbursable.

Ms. Neckes asked how DEI is part of the professional development for Town employees? Ms. Glisper responded that the Town continues to beef up the program and more training offerings are needed for staff.

Ms. Howard Schroeder asked about Stronger Together meetings, and without breaching confidentiality, was Ms. Glisper able to share concerns that could be worked on. Ms. Glisper responded that right now the group is just there to support each other and checking in on each other. The two subjects which have been brought up are recruitment and retention. Ms. Howard Schroeder asked if there were ways that the community could help. Ms. Glisper responded that Town

Manager Kate Fitzpatrick has been supportive with messaging that this subject is a priority and that Roundtable discussions for employees will help.

Ms. McNeil responded that having help to communicate high level position vacancies with outside channels is needed. They rely on communications and networking will be greatly appreciated. Mr. Borrelli asked if the Town's Public Information Officer could be of assistance distributing this information.

Mr. Spencer asked how far outside of the State does the Town recruit, rather than waiting for applicants to come to us rather than us going out to actively recruit. Ms. Glisper responded that there has been no barrier to location. She likes the idea of recruiting at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Using Zoom has provided an easy opportunity to recruit from more remote areas. Ms. McNeil responded that the School Department gets candidates from all areas. She has been reaching out to universities who have high enrollments of people of color using Handshake.

Ms. Cooley asked because we have not done a good job about collecting data on our employees, is it an issue to go back and ask for it. Ms. Glisper responded that the racial data information is asked for on applications, but not everyone answers it. She does not have accurate information on current staff.

The group thanked Ms. Glisper and Dr. McNeil for their very informative discussion.

7:10 p.m. Lisa Smith-McQueenie resumed discussion with the group on the Guiding Principles. Discussion continued combining the points of Guiding Principles 1 and 2. After some deliberating on wordsmithing the refining of the Guiding Principles was finished.

Intentional Practices was the remaining data to be discussed. Mr. Abrishamian explained why he added the 8th practice as it is in line with Race Amity Day. Ms. Cooley asked the group if they supported inclusion of this practice. All agreed.

Ms. Cooley asked the group if there were any comments about the list of Select Board appointed Board and Committee members which she distributed. She offered her observations that there were very few people of color on the list, there is a mixture of men and women, one committee was all women, three committees were all white men and some appointees have served for many years.

The need to increase the diversity of the applicant pool is a goal. This subject will be something the group will come back to.

Ms. Howard Schroeder asked if the group could speak to some of the items which have been given to the NUARI group for discussion. NUARI has been asking the

community to be engaged; they have, but we need to be responsive. Mr. Nelson added that he would like the EJV report added to the Tidwell Report for discussion.

Ms. Cooley responded that she wants to focus on the Tidwell Report first, then come back to EJV to give full attention.

8:02 p.m.

Motion: Mr. Borrelli made a motion to adjourn. Ms. Spencer seconded the motion. The motion was unanimously approved 10-0 by roll call vote.

Zoom recording of this meeting can be found on the Town's YouTube Channel at: youtube.com/townofneedhamma.