

Town of Needham
Needham Unite Against Racism Initiative Working Group
Minutes for April 12, 2021

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

6:00 PM 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 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, Ramin Abrishamian, Matt Borrelli, Natasha Espada, Toyin Fayemi, Vivian Hsu, Sue Neckes, Marcus Nelson, Jen Howard Schroeder, Town Manager Kate Fitzpatrick, Assistant Town Manager Katie King, and Support Services Manager Sandy Cincotta.

Ms. Cooley asked for a motion to approve the minutes of January 25, 2021.

Motion: Mr. Borrelli made a motion to approve the minutes of the January 25, 2021 meeting. Ms. Neckes seconded them motion. The motion was unanimously approved 9-0 by roll call vote.

Ms. Cooley noted that Mary Lammi from Needham Public Schools was not available to attend tonight's meeting, so hopes to be available for the next meeting of the committee.

6:03 PM Ms. Cooley opened the Public Listening Session on the Interim Report to Town Meeting with an overview of the work of the committee, highlighting comments through an on-screen presentation. The Select Board has adopted the vision and guiding principles developed by the committee. NUARI is not a permanent Town committee, but a group of residents brought together to provide advice to the Select Board. The committee is charged with articulating a recommended vision for racial equity and guiding principles that will inform future actions; establishing protocols and practices for getting community feedback, with specific focus on engaging Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), and others who have been marginalized due to their race or ethnicity; setting up communication structures to ensure sustainability and accountability of the Initiative; discussing and promoting

other recommendations that have been submitted to Select Board; and making recommendation to Select Board about future action.

After adoption by the Select Board, the vision and guiding principles have been sent to other Town boards and organizations. Both have been adopted and endorsed by the League of Women Voters and Green Needham. The Diversity and Inclusion Committee of the Needham-Newton Chamber have recommended adoption. The Clergy Association will review at their next meeting. A resolution will be before Town Meeting in May, 2021, and the interim report to Town Meeting is in draft form and under discussion at tonight's public listening session. On the next bi-annual Town resident survey, a question will be added to gauge residents' perceptions of how welcoming and inclusive the Needham community is.

Noting that most current board members are white, with limited female members, it is recommended that the Town make intentional efforts and identify creative ideas for community outreach to diversify the candidate pool for all appointed boards and committees. The Town should identify strategies and partners to encourage diverse candidates to run for elected office and take steps to measure efforts and progress on efforts to make boards and committees more diverse.

The Town should work with stakeholders to develop a discrimination complaint process and provide forums where individuals feel comfortable discussing their concerns related to diversity, equity, and/or inclusion. The Town should identify opportunities and partners to provide educational opportunities and community dialogues on the history of racism in America and other topics on equity. The Town should partner with stakeholders to create a framework for how community members can effectively engage in conversations around race, diversity, equity, and inclusion, to build relationships and a stronger understanding of different perspectives and lived experiences. The Town should identify opportunities and partnerships to promote cultural events and celebrations to be welcoming and inclusive; explore ways to increase, encourage and assist minority-owned businesses; work with stakeholders to provide education to local businesses about the negative experiences of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) individuals and ways to improve; identify and engage partners in this work, including faith community, business community, hospitals, colleges, civic and community organizations, and neighboring municipalities.

The Town should create pathways for racially and economically diverse neighbors to buy and rent homes in Needham; set new goals related to affordable housing as the Town has met the 10% threshold; evaluate and prioritize policies and programs for encouraging the development of housing for individuals and families across all affordability levels; identify and address any barriers to fair housing.

Ms. Cooley noted that much discussion has centered on policing in Needham, and the Police Chief has attended two meetings, to date. Police reforms will be implemented in Massachusetts in July 2021. The Police Department should meet regularly with stakeholder groups to build mutual trust and respect; the Town

should sponsor a series of conversations between the public and police officers, and the Police Department should educate the public on the role of police officers through programs such as a Citizen Academy. The Police Department should emphasize training on mental health issues, threshold inquiries, de-escalation techniques and impact of implicit bias on policing. The Town should prioritize leaving Civil Service to gain more flexibility on hiring and promotions that better reflect the broader community. With the upcoming implementation of the new police reform law, the department should adopt all local components, and review Use of Force Policy for revisions, with a strong emphasis on de-escalation. The Police Department should regularly report and make publicly available key enforcement data, broken down by race, gender and residency, to identify potential disparities and monitor trends over time. The Town should support funding for regional collaboration with Needham, Dedham and Riverside Community Care.

Ms. Cooley noted that the School Department has had the REAL Coalition in place for a number of years, so it is important that REAL and NUARI collaborate and coordinate strategies. The School Department should support the development of curriculum and programs that further promote diversity, equity, and inclusion at all grade levels; and continue to use the Portrait of a Needham Graduate Strategic Framework to guide decision making. The Town and School Department should identify what community-based equity work is needed to better support the school district; explore opportunities for ongoing community engagement, including Voices in Unity, a regular convening of equity-focused groups in Needham hosted by the School Department; and identify opportunities for collaboration and communication with private and parochial schools.

In regard to hiring, both the Town and School Department should identify and implement strategies for hiring, supporting and retaining diverse staff at every level; measure their efforts on recruiting and retaining BIPOC individuals annually; provide professional development opportunities; and analyze the pilot year of the METCO/Park and Recreation summer jobs partnership.

After Town Meeting, NUARI will turn its focus to establishing protocols and practices, with a specific focus on engaging Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), and others who have been marginalized due to their race or ethnicity; and set up communication structures to ensure the sustainability and accountability of the initiative.

Ms. Cooley opened the meeting up to public comment and welcomed Noah Mertz. Mr. Mertz asked to restate some of his comments on the guiding principles and stated that there needs to be a better understanding of the NUARI scope which he believes is missing from the guiding principles. He suggested that possibly the Needham Human Rights Committee could be re-empowered to take on the current role of NUARI. He noted that this meeting was being held the night prior to the Town elections and that it was possibly that there could be more diversity on the Select Board based on the outcome of the election.

Anna Giraldo-Kerr sent an e-mail to the committee with her comments, and gave a brief outline at the meeting. She stated that it seemed premature for there to be recommendations for action prior to input and engagement from the community. Ms. Giraldo-Kerr noted that members need to clarify the different views prior to recommendations being created. She also stated that the vision statement could never be accomplished, noting that it was misleading to state that racial bias could be ended as it can only be mitigated and managed.

John Kirk read the conclusion from the Tidwell report and stated that Mr. Henry had never received an official apology from the Town and wondered if NUARI was considering issuing an apology. Ms. Cooley stated that the Select Board had stated an apology at one of their meetings, but Mr. Kirk stated that Mr. Henry did not personally receive the apology. Ms. Cooley said that the draft Tidwell Report and final version were all made public to the community. The final report was updated to include the Select Board's request to Mr. Henry's lawyer.

Joe Leghorn applauded the committee on their work to-date and stated that it is an effort that needs to be sustained, and not dropped as often has happened with prior efforts. He requested that the Select Board commit to the long-term goal and have more in-person conversations, so people get to know each other.

Mr. Mertz asked to discuss tomorrow's local election. He was concerned that the diverse candidates were not receiving endorsements. Ms. Cooley noted that it was not unusual, and that she herself and not publicly endorse any candidate for Select Board but was ready to embrace the two elected members, whether new to the board or returning.

As there were no additional public comments, Ms. Cooley stated that input was still welcome, by e-mail to the committee or by speaking to any member of the committee.

The committee reviewed the comments from the public listening session. Ms. Espada wondered if the word "should" was correct on the recommendations without more public input. Ms. Hsu agreed, noting that directives weren't issued, but a framework has been provided. Ms. Cooley said that the recommendations were still tentative and confusing to those who thought the work of NUARI is complete. Mr. Abrishamian commented on the need for the Town to systemize the recommendations and providing a budget so that the work continues beyond the existence of NUARI.

Ms. Fitzpatrick said that information is being mailed to Town Meeting members within the next two weeks to allow them time to prepare before the start of Town Meeting. Mr. Borrelli agreed that more public input is needed.

Resident Ross Donald asked to speak to the committee. He asked how he would be impacted by any actions as a resident of Needham Housing Authority. Ms. Cooley stated that NUARI is not a policy making board, so Needham Housing Authority would need to provide input.

Ms. Howard-Schroeder has attended a session with Professor Gary Bailey has facilitated another group's listening sessions. She suggested getting input from professionals who can recommend strategies for getting the needed community input. Ms. Cooley has heard suggestions of a comment board in front of Town Hall, and there was committee consensus that there needs to be multiple avenues other than participation in a Zoom meeting. Ms. Hsu stated that NUARI is focused on the vision so that it might not be the correct committee to receive the feedback, but Ms. Howard-Schroeder said that feedback was needed on the work of NUARI. Ms. Hsu stated that Town Meeting members needed to be accountable to reach out to their constituents, and Ms. Cooley said that outreach to Town committees and organizations has already begun.

At their recent meeting, the Finance Committee asked Ms. Cooley why the full text of the vision statement and guiding principles was not included in the Town Meeting warrant. Ms. Cooley explained that Town Meeting was being asked to vote to support or not support and would not be making motions to change the working presented by NUARI. As tomorrow is election day, Ms. Cooley wished all the best to the members of the committee who are on the ballot.

7:20 PM **Motion: Mr. Borrelli made a motion that the Needham Unite Against Racism Initiative working group meeting be adjourned. Second: Mr. Nelson. The motion was approved unanimously 9-0 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/NUARI---Needham-Unite-Against-Racism-Ini>