

NEEDHAM HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE

Minutes

March 18, 2021

7:30-9:00 pm Zoom Meeting

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83431295838>

Recorder: Jennifer Howard

In attendance: Ashok Mehta, Tina Burgos, Sophia Dedek, Jared Pizzuto, Julie Venables, Amelia Klein, Marlene Schultz, Kerry Hurwitch, Cynthia Ganung, Marcus Nelson, Jen Howard Schroeder

Police Liaison: Lt. Belinda Carroll

Town Liaison : Katie King

Chair read and reviewed zoom instructions/guidelines.

- Approval of Minutes: February 25, 2021
Minutes unanimously approved.
- Public participation
No public participation
- **Urgent Request for Co-Sponsorship:**

Amelia: Co-sponsorship opportunity related to Vigil being planned in Town in response to killings in Georgia, in support of our neighbors of Asian descent. As soon as we make a decision, Amelia has to let NDI know whether we are going to co-sponsor for publicity purposes. The Vigil will happen Saturday, March 20th at 2pm, on the Town Common. The goal is to both mourn the losses in Georgia and acknowledge the significant rise in hate crimes committed against the Asian American and Pacific Islander communities.

Amelia made a Motion that NHRC be a co-sponsor a Town Vigil on Saturday, March 20 at 2pm on the Town Common with the Needham Diversity Initiative and Needham Interfaith Clergy Association, Equal Justice Needham, At MY Neighbors Table, North Hill, SEPAC, Needham High School Asian Student Union, Indian Community of Needham, Chinese Friends of Needham, and Progressive Needham.

Unanimously approved.

Ashok sent two possible additional newsletters, India New England and Lokvani, to publicize the event to more Indian families in MA.

Katie King asked if there is any desire to have Town participation, speakers, etc.? Amelia will circle back with Katie.

Cynthia noted this is an example of something in line with what NHRC does and we should keep this in mind.

Ashok wanted to know why all NHRC members were not contacted about the planning of the event? Not Town sponsored. There is no formal network yet.

Katie pointed out there is no response network yet. NHRC could discuss how they communicate amongst themselves going ahead.

Cynthia pointed out she was able to contact the Clergy last night as the planning was unfolding. But it is not clear how we can do this and comply with open meeting laws.

Amelia, still a work in progress. Plans still being made at this moment.

Tina says this is a good segway to our next agenda items setting priorities.

- **NHRC Priorities**

- Discrimination Complaint Process
- Response Network
 - Needham Resilience and Response Network Plan
- Community Engagement and Education
- Anything else?

Tina asks, are these the right priorities? We need to decide on what we want to do and bring it to the Select Board for feedback.

Ashok is fine with these priorities, but wants independence to make statements for example. Right now, we have to go to the Select Board for permission first. Addressing the bottleneck is a big issue for us.

Tina spoke with a couple members of the Select Board; the Select Board wants to see from us concrete priorities so that we can on-board them with what we want to do. The onus is partly on us to give them as much information as we can and stay on top of the communication. We should meet with them and specifically discuss what we want to accomplish.

Discrimination Complaint Process & Rapid Response Network:

Amelia suggested starting with the presentation from Arlington. She had a conversation Select Board member Dan Matthews about that model and he was interested in thinking about what this could look like in Needham.

Cynthia says in order to achieve these priorities we need more independence and communication—something like a preamble. The conditions that would permit us to do the activities set out.

Marlene says Arlington has regular meetings with their Select Board at least a few members on the Select Board can see the value of having a more independent HRC. Time is ripe for us to move forward.

Regarding the Rapid Response plans, Select Board is asking to have the Rapid Response Network to sit under NDI, not NHRC, therefore not sure if it should be a NHRC priority. NHRC will have

representation on the Rapid Response Network, but not be leading.

Katie King pointed out that the draft for Rapid Response Network came from a committee recommendation. The Select Board as a group has not approved or debated the draft format at this point. The draft was sent out for feedback. This is draft 2 that incorporated feedback from the workshop participants. Feedback supported community owned network with Town engagement. The draft went to NDI first to get their approval of it so that they were on board before going further. Katie expressed she hoped NHRC would keep it as a priority since it is still in progress of developing.

Marlene clarified that she thinks it should still be an important part of NHRC work.

Cynthia reported that NDI discussion still had a lot of questions. NHRC hands should not be tied, should be more independent like Arlington. Rapid Response Network and hearing complaints are closely tied. In Arlington, the Rapid Response Network and complaint process are both under Arlington Human Rights Commission. Not to criticize what has been done, but could be the ideal place to hold both responsibilities.

Marlene says there is no place in town where complaints are being heard. If NHRC feels it has the bandwidth to take on complaints, that should be a focus that could later incorporate Rapid Response Network. Someone went to NDI with a request for resources instead of NHRC.

Amelia reports we can site at least one case where NHRC did help resolve a complaint a few years ago when parents came to express concerns about discrimination happening in the middle school.

Jen gave examples when NHRC was a conduit to resolving complaints successful such as with the parents of the middle school students; but also, times it was not successful such as when we were approached for support on the state referendum to protect Transgender individuals from discrimination.

Julie joined when we were having a difficult time moving independently. Makes sense for the complaint process to fall under NHRC.

Tina is optimistic that if communication is our biggest obstacle, we can do it.

Cynthia noted it is a very time-consuming commitment; we need to be ready to act. This would be a number one priority.

Marlene: we used to meet with Vice Chair of Select Board each year that when they are appointing members people need to know this is a “working committee” need people to do the work. Everyone has to agree that they have the time and commitment to do this work.

Katie: widely accepted that the gap of what this process should like but lots of support for NHRC taking this role.

Amelia: we have a model from the archives of the NHRC. We should look again and decide how to split up the duties. For example, managing the NHRC email, may be one member’s entire job. We should begin by looking at what was happening in the past (1990s).

Marlene: important role and to have a well-developed process for taking complaints. This would say a lot about our Town. We should have a subcommittee to start doing the work that can then bring it back to the whole committee for feedback.

Kerry: This is all great but we are still stuck with the position of having the Select Board be a stop gap if we still have to go through the Select Board for approval for everything. There has to be a clear way for the NHRC to do what they think is right.

Tina: That is a conversation to be had. Tina is meeting with the Select Board and wants another member to join so the NHRC perspective can be shared. 12-18 month goals. Select Board is trying to figure out how to make this work within existing bureaucracy, but do care about this.

Cynthia: Like the idea of a subcommittee to work on this. Arlington, very central role of police department sharing information as a way of grounding as a town.

Marlene: The Chief of Arlington Police worked very closely with the HRC. We would have to develop a stronger partnership and channel of communication with the NPD.

Community Engagement:

Tina: how is this as a priority?

Jen: I think this is an important priority, creating opportunities for communications and dialog between community members and leaders.

Marlene: do we need to take a vote on this as a priority?

Tina: Seems we have consensus about these priorities.

Katie: The disconnect –it would be very helpful for NHRC to provide specific suggestions/work plan for doing the community engagement. Concrete forum or process to set up? Or a particular issue we want to focus on. This would make the work more concrete and productive. Please don't wait for formal structure to give feedback that people are feeling shut out.

Jen: Members of Equal Justice Needham have expressed frustration that they have done research and reports on important issues like housing and policing, sent them to the Select Board, NUARI, NHRC but heard nothing.

Kerry: These community members have very specific questions. Everyone should watch the recording of the event put on tonight by EJA about policing in Needham.

Katie: Getting specific is helpful and she will follow up.

Cynthia: 2 years ago, we helped plan the community forum about the schools—the REAL Coalition came to NHRC for help with the community engagement part. There was the presentation, but not the dialogue. But it is another example of partnership. We did have the opportunity to talk with Dr. Gutekanst to give feedback about how the community felt about how the event went.

Amelia: People need to talk to each other. Zoom is hard to exchange ideas. Not really a comfortable dialogue. Maybe we need to be creative---like At My Neighbor's Table. Community leaders were at the table, non-threatening, but provocative. Another example is the NDI Summit, the break out sessions where we had hypothetical situations that participants could explore. NHRC could facilitate this.

Tina agreed that is a great point. Who will be on a subcommittee so we can plan to meet with the Select Board? Marlene, Julie, and Tina volunteered to be on this subcommittee and will meet with the Select Board.

Katie has been doing research about complaints against Town employee.

Tina will be in touch with Marlene and Julie about next steps for the subcommittee.

Tina will seek to meet with the Select Board after we have a more definitive idea.

Katie offered that the Select Board Chairs meeting is holding space for NHRC on 3/25, 8:30 on zoom. Moe Handel (Chair) and Matt Borrelli (Vice Chair) will be there. Marlene and Tina will attend.

Tina: on the community education piece, we should have something to bring to the Select Board. Maybe a model like At My Neighbor's Table.

Focus on relationship building and listening.

Amelia talked about using a case study to discuss, facilitated by NHRC and then Select Board D member at one of the first NDI Summits. It was very engaging and good for relationship building. Could be co-facilitated by NHRC and members of different Town departments. The facilitators were trained to lead those discussions.

- Timeframe
 - 3 - 6 months
 - 6 - 12 months
 - 12 - 18 months
- Next Steps
 - Select Board
- Reports
 - Select Board (Katie)
 - Tina shared the statement from Select Board and NPD regarding the killings in Georgia. Cynthia reported the planners of the vigil would like to invite the Select Board and Katie will extend the invitation to the Select Board.
 - Town Issues (Belinda)
 - Still waiting for state to implement some aspects of the new law. NPD is actively working on it. Maybe by May be ready to have discussions and bring Chief to NHRC.

- Needham High School (Jared & Sophia)
 - Very happy to see Principal Sicotte's statement about the Georgia killings. There is some concern that the response is not the same as like the BLM demonstrations. Marlene reported that the Vigil is including the student voices. Courageous Communications is starting their conversations with 9th graders next week. They will talk about these killings as well at those talks.
- Needham Schools - REAL Coalition (Jen)
 - No update.
- Indigenous People's Day Initiative (Amelia)
 - Students going to the School Committee in May to present. Wellesley SELECT BOARD did approve changing the name recently.

NHRC Leadership:

- Amelia: Chair of the NHRC going forward?
- Marlene would like to nominate Tina to Chair the NHRC. Tina is willing to do this. Cynthia seconded the motion to nominate Tina to Chair the NHRC.
 - This motion unanimously passed! Tina will serve for the remainder of the 2020-2021 year as well as next year 2021-2022.
 - We will discuss possible co-chairs and committee assignments at the April meeting.

Announcements:

- Confronting Racial Injustice Panel Series: visit <http://masshist.org/confronting-racial-injustice> for monthly programming and registration details
- March 21, 2021; 5:30pm - 7:30pm - At My Neighbor's Table: *Divided Schools: How Segregation Hurts Our Children*
 - We will discuss the high levels of K-12 segregation in our communities and the detrimental impacts to children
 - Speakers: Liam KeRapid Response Network, MA State Director, Democrats for Education Reform, Needham resident; Rep. Chyna Tyler (D) 7th Suffolk District
- Future NHRC Meeting Dates and Recorders
 - Apr. 15 - Bud
 - May 20 - Ashok
 - Jun. 17 - Marcus