

Human Rights Commission Minutes

August 26, 2020 Meeting

This draft was APPROVED in the HRC Meeting on _____

Commissioners Present: Ali Adan, Rev. Roosevelt Baums, Sanjay Chhablani, Rabbi Dan Fellman, Barbara Johnson, Chol Majok, Dave Pasinski, John Rushing, Leonardo Sanchez, Tricia Wittkowski, Rosalie Young

Commissioners Excused: Mary Alice Smothers, Crystal Doody, Suzette Melendez

Commissioners Absent: Khadijo Abdulkadir, Liban Mohamed, Migdalia Morales, Al-amin Muhammad, Francis Parks

Community Members Present: Mikiel Anderson, Heather Bianchi, Mary Kuhn (Co.Legislator)

County Staff Present: Barrie Gewanter & Montanette Murphy

1. Meeting began at 5:35 PM with introduction of Commissioners & Guest Linda Brown Robinson President of the Onondaga County/Syracuse Branch of the NAACP. Linda discussed the history of the NAACP, duties and current projects/focus committees. Highlights of her talk included the following:

- The national organization was founded in 1909 and has 220 adult & youth chapters. It engages in non-partisan advocacy and litigation. It sometimes works behind the scenes, but takes a long term view. It may not always be visible during more short term responses.
- Local branches have rules and reporting requirements that they must follow. There are local branches in Auburn, Oneida County, Rome, Broome County and Rochester.
- The NAACP has 14 national standing committees, but all may not be represented in a local branch. These include: Armed Forces & Veterans, Communications/PR&Media/Education, Freedom Fund, Housing, Criminal Justice, Legal Redress, Membership, Political Action, Economic Development, Religious, Health, Women, Youth.
- Issues the local Branch is working on include: safe return to school, tracking COVID19 in jails, voter registration and civic engagement, economic development related to I-81, banking, transportation & trade unions. The most pressing areas of local racial discrimination and inequity are in housing, healthcare, and police reform. Robinson welcomes organizational partnerships and volunteers to work on these issues.
- The Freedom Fund Award Dinner was rescheduled to 10/24/2020 due to COVID and will be conducted jointly with the Rome and Auburn branches. Awards will be given to recognize individual achievement, and efforts of businesses, unions, non-profits, in the education and legal professions, for philanthropy and for diversity work.

2. Draft minutes from the July 29th, 2020 meeting were reviewed. Minutes were approved.

3. Mr. Anderson and Ms. Bianchi introduced themselves. Ms. Bianchi currently works for Cornell Cooperative Extension doing youth education in local schools and parks.

4. Chair Dan Fellman & Co-Chair Sanjay Chhablani led discussion about two significant upcoming projects:

a. Holding a public hearing to learn about disparate impacts of the pandemic, anticipated for October. Representatives of human services and community organizations will be asked to speak to the experiences of their clients, especially in relation to food, technology, and housing, to create a record and inform decision makers. Rev. Baum agreed to take a lead role on logistics and publicity, and to create questions to frame and

focus the event. Ali Adan will produce a flyer and Chol Majok will do outreach to organizations. Barrie Gewanter has started an outreach list. Dave Pasinski and Sanjay Chhablani are willing to assist as needed, but all Commissioners are expected to work on the event. There will be no speaker at the Sept. meeting to allow for more focus on this event.

b. Producing an Annual Report by the end of Dec. 2020. This will include information about intake, cases, outreach, the public hearing, speakers & collaborative efforts. The report will document what the HRC has done, alert constituents about what the HRC has learned about the state of human rights in the local community and make related recommendations. Tasks will be divided between Commission members, but Committee Chairs may be asked to take lead roles. Rev. Baums will coordinate the production of the annual report with Rosalie Young as Co-Chair. Chol Majok will help with distribution.

5. Commission Chair Dan Fellman reported that Barrie and Suzette Melendez successfully moderated a discussion with residents of the Town of Dewitt focused on the experiences of People of Color in the town. Another discussion in the Village of East Syracuse is slated for September 1, 2020 at 6:30 pm in a pavilion in Ellis Field Park. Ali Adan, Dave Pasinski and Barrie will moderate. Fellman also reported that the County Executive is asking that data be gathered on the attendance of Commission members. The Executive Committee will pursue outreach for attendance.

6. Human Rights Director Barrie Gewanter reported the following: In regards to the complaint from an apartment complex tenant, the HRC and NAACP will send written correspondence to the property company who refused to meet. The complainant accused of stealing from a big box store put in a compliant form to the corporate office, but a 3rd party reviewer dismissed it. The complainant wants to speak directly to management face to face in the store. Barrie assisted members of the Deaf community in logistics for a protest on behalf of Deaf New Americans who say they have been unable to get effective communication in hospital settings. Barrie also provided access to voter registration forms at a recent BLM rally outside Syracuse City Hall. Barrie met with Brian Schultz, the new CEO at CENTRO. Mr. Schultz is open to interaction and collaboration with the HRC. He will be placed on the speaker list. Barrie reported that Onondaga Votes will be holding a virtual zoom panel discussion focused on youth and voting.

7. Committee Updates:

- Rosalie Young and Ali Adan reported that the Voter & Civic Education Committee took factsheets in several languages about COVID19 and the Census to various organizations who work with refugees.
- Leo Sanchez and John Rushing reported that the Criminal Justice Committee will be reaching out to the Undersheriff to request a virtual meeting. They urged Committee members to read about the governor's request for police reforms and submit questions for the Sheriff's Office to Leo and John. This will be followed with requests to meet with suburban police chiefs to talk about their redesign plans. Leo will send out a brief synopsis of the Syracuse Mayor's reform proposals to the Committee.

8. Old Business: None. Under New Business, Barbara Johnson reported that the Onondaga Nation has had no COVID19 infections.

9. Meeting adjourned at 7:05 PM & Members moved into committee meetings until approx. 7:30pm

Respectfully submitted,
Tricia A. Wittkowski, Commission Secretary
with Assistance from Barrie Gewanter