

NEEDHAM HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES

March 16, 2017

Jennifer Howard called the meeting to order at 7:30 pm in the Highland Room, Needham Town Hall.

Committee members in attendance: Abdul Cader Asmal, Barry Ehrlich, Cynthia Ganung, Jennifer Howard Schroeder (chair), Amelia Klein, Lt. John Kraemer, Ashok Mehta, Bud Schram, and Matt Schroeder. *Committee members absent:* Kerry Hurwitch, Jo-Anne Coffey-McCormick, Marlene Schultz (vice-chair) *Guest:* Ken Farbstein

1. **MINUTES** of the February 16, 2017 meeting were unanimously approved.

2. **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

Ken Farbstein, a Needham resident and a public health advocate, presented the Nine Model Local Law Enforcement Policies and Rules, (adapted from materials in the ACLU's Freedom Cities initiative), to the Committee. The document outlines "model" state and local law enforcement policies and rules, which the ACLU believes will protect communities from "abuses of the Trump Administration." Mr. Farbstein proposed that the NHRC join him and Community leaders in the Town of Needham at a meeting with the Needham Police Chief, John Schlittler and other Community leaders to discuss the relevancy of the ACLU law enforcement policies and rules in the Town of Needham. Of particular concern were ICE abuses of civil and human rights related to refugees. Mr. Farbstein hoped that an outcome of the meeting would be a formal public statement regarding the Town's policy. He stressed that the meeting should be held in the "spirit of protection and respect." The meeting is to be scheduled in the next 2 weeks. Mr. Farbstein will contact the Committee with further details.

The Committee agreed to participate in a meeting but suggested that other Town officials, such as the Board of Selectmen, be represented along with the Police Department. In addition, a suggestion was made to include state and regional officials such as the County Sheriff and the local District Attorney.

3. **OLD BUSINESS**

Committee Members Update One position remains open on the Human Rights Committee. Committee members agreed to reach out to groups not currently represented on the NHRC, but which are specifically identified in the CHARGE to the Human Rights Committee (approved by Board of selectmen, August 12, 2008)

The Committee shall consist of 12 members. When practicable, the Committee should include representatives or designees of the Needham Police Department and the Needham School Department (ex-officio and non-voting), the Needham Commission on disabilities and the Needham Housing authority. Membership should also include a representative of

the local clergy. A senior citizen, a tenant of the Needham Housing authority, a realtor, and a Needham High School student.

Special efforts will be made to seek nominees from the Needham School Department (Superintendent's Office) and the Needham Housing Authority. Amelia will contact Penny Kirk, who is the Resident Services Coordinator for the NHA. Representation from specific groups would be beneficial in addressing current issues brought to the Committee.

The Committee was pleased to *welcome back Lt. John Kraemer*, who was away on medical leave.

Rep. Garlick's Coalition - Update Jen reported that a follow-up meeting will be rescheduled.

Follow-up Forum on Islam - Update The May 9 event sponsored by the NHRC and the Needham Public Library - UNDERSTANDING ISIS – is in the final stages of planning, thanks to the hard work of library staff, Abdul and Ashok. The flyer (designed by Kerry) will add some minor details such as the Library's logo and information about the Library forum program. A revised version of the flyer will be sent to the library for approval, and the Library will use it to create library publicity materials. Other publicity resources to be utilized are: Boston Globe (*Informer* column); Town Hall website, Calendar posting, Newsflash, and electronic sign stationed at the Recycle Center; NHRC Facebook site and Town Hall webpage, Needham Grass Roots website. A suggestion was made to search for a short, relevant YouTube video which can be posted on the NHRC webpage. The Committee agreed to light refreshments, such as water and coffee.

Witness to Justice Events - Update Barry and Cynthia reported that over 30 people participated in a Witness to Justice Coalition meeting 3/12/17, following the Empowerment Fair previously held in Needham, which explored ways that individuals can engage in defending and promoting social justice and human rights. At the fair 6 new volunteers agreed to be facilitators for the follow up meeting of the action groups. The 3/12/17 meeting focused on three themes:

- Bridging the Political Divide
- Advocacy
- Supporting Our Most Vulnerable Neighbors

30 volunteers agreed to be facilitators at the next meeting. A wrap-up meeting will be scheduled the first week in June. Signs in several languages (such as Spanish, English, Arabic and Russian) welcoming refugees are being posted in Needham. The message reads: "No matter where you are from, we're glad you're our neighbor." Cynthia will request that a sign be placed in Town Hall.

Follow-up Meeting with Needham Parent Group Jen and Amelia participated in a second fact-gathering meeting with Needham parents regarding concerns

related to cultural proficiency in the Needham Public Schools. Included were parents who formed the parent group *Advocates for Equity in Needham Public Schools*. The group is questioning a school policy of assigning African American and interracial students to clusters/classrooms using race as a factor. Several activities have taken place since NHRC members last met with the parents.

- A lawyer for the Parent Group presented the group's concerns to the Needham School Committee at its public meeting on Jan. 17, 2017.
- In response to requests made by the Parent Group, the Superintendent announced in his school blog Feb. 23, 2017 that 1) the practice will be stopped; 2) a March administrative meeting has been scheduled for all District administrators to continue ongoing discussions around culturally proficient practices in the NP schools, and 3) the Administration has begun to investigate the possibility of inviting into the District an outside consultant who can assist the District to review its policies, programs, and practices.
- The Parent Group corresponded with the State of Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. In its last correspondence, the Department indicated that the Parents' case is not under their jurisdiction.

The Parent Group is considering a follow-up meeting with the Superintendent, and may request that the NHRC be present at the meeting. This raised the question of what the role of the NHRC should be in this situation. Suggestions were to 1) be observers, not participate in discussion, and report back to the Committee, 2) advise and assist all parties (i.e., offer suggestions for ways the situation could be rectified through specific actions), and 3) be a resource to the group if they seek our guidance.

Clarification of clause in CHARGE to the NHRC The Committee reviewed the following Charge as it related to the Parent Group situation previously described:

Provide advice and assistance to the Town Manager, Chief of Police, and/or other Town offices in response to issues that challenge the human and/or civil rights of any individual or group in our Town (Community Response)

Jen will invite Marianne Cooley to our next meeting to help clarify the extent and range of our responsibility in responding to the Parent Group conflict.

Request to Co-sponsor IINE Refugee Storytelling Event – Update The Committee agreed to be *acknowledged* as a “supporting organization” for the Suitcase Stories event on June 22, 2017, hosted by IINE – the International Institute of New England - and TripAdvisor. The event honors refugees and immigrants in Massachusetts. Amelia serves on the Planning committee for the Needham event. The Planning Committee is seeking individuals who may be potential “storytellers” at the June 22 event. “Storytellers” will include (1) an immigrant or refugee living in the area, and (2) persons who have had a personal

experience with refugees that they would like to share. Volunteers are needed to welcome guests at the TripAdvisor headquarters.

4. NEW BUSINESS

Book Club Discussion Groups – World of Wellesley Event Jennifer extended an invitation to all members of the Committee to participate in a *Community Read Event* by organizing/facilitating small discussion groups in the Town of Needham. The Needham discussion groups will then join other groups at the Wellesley Community Center on April 11 to discuss the book: Born on Third Base by author Chuck Collins. Three members have indicated an interest in participating. The event is in conjunction with World of Wellesley.

5. REPORTS

March 9 - Human Trafficking Event The event *Human Trafficking “Hidden in Plain Sight”* had a good turnout at Powers Hall, with about 70 people in attendance on a cold winter night. The Committee would like to thank Abdul and Marlene for their many efforts in organizing this successful event. Thanks to Kerry for creating an attractive flyer for the next NHRC event on May 9, which was distributed to attendees.

Needham Schools Matt reported about a successful event at the High School. An Own Your Peace/Own Your Piece assembly was held in which several students shared personal, touching, and inspiring experiences with the student body. The goal of the assembly is to foster respect and awareness. Some examples of student stories were about: losing a parent, being assimilated as an immigrant, and depression. Students also participated in a “make a T-shirt” event in which they expressed their feelings and experiences in their T-shirt designs. Matt also reported on a poll/survey students are developing with the assistance of NHS principal, Mr. Sicotte. Students and teachers will submit questions to encourage response from the student body. Finally, Matt is making efforts to connect to the NHS International Amnesty Club and will promote the NHRC events with them.

Town Issues Lt. Kraemer indicated there were no issues to report.

Meeting adjourned at 9:10 pm. *Respectfully submitted, Amelia Klein (Recorder)*

NEXT MEETING: **Thursday, April 27 (4th Thurs.) 7:30 pm, Highland Room,
Town Hall (Recorder Needed)**