

Human Relations Commission  
Meeting Minutes  
May 15, 2019 5:00 p.m.

**Attendance:** Jeanette Blackwell, Justin Carbonella, Brandie Doyle, Ed Ford, Ava Hart, Precious Price, Debbie Ruimerman, Howard Thody, Evan Davis, Youth in Government Representative, and Faith Jackson, Director of Equal Opportunity and Diversity Management

**Excused Absence:**

**Absence:** Henry Fernandez and Ani Zakarian, Youth in Government Representative

**QUORUM:**            *Yes:*   X          *No:*       

**Call to Order:** Chairperson Carbonella called the meeting to order at 5:15 p.m. Betsy Morgan, Member of the Racial Justice Coalition was present. Nyaunu Stevens of NCCJ was present, as well.

**Public Session:** None.

**Regular Meeting:**

**Approval of Minutes:** Chairperson Carbonella asked for a motion to approve the Meeting Minutes of April 17, 2019. Commissioner Doyle motioned to approve the Meeting Minutes of April 17, 2019, and Commissioner Hart seconded it. The chairperson called for a vote. The motion was properly carried.

**Old Business:**

Chairperson Carbonella moved the discussion to a status update of the commission's project. He reminded the commission that they had the first of two anti-racism workshops at City Hall. He asked for those present who were at the workshop to share their thoughts. Director Jackson said that this week she met with Mayor Drew to touch base on the scope and get some feedback from him. The City is now preparing for the next anti-racism workshop. The attendees for this next one will be diverse, which is important for the workshop to be effective. They've invited people from the Russell Library, the Middlesex Chamber of Commerce, and the Board of Ed. Also, the mayor has asked that the captains and lieutenants from the police department attend, as well.

Nyaunu Stevens added that it is critical to have racial diversity in the room. Director Jackson agreed and said that she was working to make sure there was diversity in this next workshop. She added that the mayor was pleased with the approach, style, and delivery of the program. She thanked the employees for being willing to go on the journey. Nyaunu Stevens said there was some resistance in the room, and that may be because it was mandatory for the employees. However, by day two things were running much more smoothly.

Commissioner Hart asked about the racial makeup of the workshop. Nyaunu Stevens answered that the attendance was overwhelmingly white, which was not surprising. There were about five people of color in the room other than herself. There was further discussion of the resistance from the attendees.

However, Nyaunu Stevens added the evaluations were positive. Director Jackson reminded her that she had not given the evaluations to her. At the end of the first day, they do a check-in with the participants. And, they do a check-in at the end of the second day. She said that at the end of the first day, people said they didn't want to be there but were enjoying it. By the end of the second day, people said it was amazing.

Commissioner Doyle said that the attendees were asked to use one word for how they felt going into the workshop each day and how they felt leaving. She said many used the word anxious going in and going out, she heard people say inspired. However, what she found interesting was that people seemed much more positive coming into the second day.

Director Jackson added that the closing was very moving. There was further discussion on the reason for people feeling anxious. Nyaunu Stevens explained that white people are not used to talking about race. And, they may worry that the conversation may be framed to make them feel attacked. They also don't understand terms like white privilege. Much of it stems from a misunderstanding of what racism is and how the structure works. However, NCCJ has within its theoretical framework, pedagogy, and its delivery a way to break down that fear and anxiety.

Chairperson Carbonella added that in regards to this workshop and the work that will follow, it was a critical step to bring City leadership to the table and give them an experience where they can put future conversations in the proper context. If they had decided to have the community conversations first, the reception to others' experiences would have been different. He added that the history of governmental policy that oppressed some and raised up others was the type of information that even the most educated people don't know. This information does not get taught in schools. This workshop positioned them to do the next stages of this work. Director Jackson said that it was good to have some of the governing body in the workshop. Some participants had a much different perspective on the community. Commissioner Doyle said the training was very effective, and she could tell that some of the participants learned quite a bit.

Director Jackson mentioned the conference she attended, Dismantling Systematic Racism. The Racial Justice Coalition paid for her to attend, and she was grateful for the experience. It was well attended, which is a positive sign that people want to be a part of this initiative.

Chairperson Carbonella said he was particularly pleased to see City leadership come together to learn about a problem and how to fix it. It was really about professional development, bettering themselves, and bettering the community.

Commissioner Price added that the Racial Justice Coalition sent a number of youth to the Bridges Program through NCCJ. So, the work is going on with the youth as well as the adults. Director Jackson agreed that it's all coming together.

Nyaunu Steven said it was great that the commission was doing this, and she was impressed that they got the City leadership on board. She then spoke a bit on the Bridges Program and Anytown. She reminded them that Anytown is coming up, so if any high school students are interested, the application process is open at this time.

Director Jackson mentioned the status of having the second anti-racism workshop on a weekend or for four hours over four evenings. She advised the commission that the mayor wasn't in favor of that. She also spoke on the next step of conducting the focus groups and advised the commission that it would be beneficial for the members to be a part of the two-day workshop in order to be more effective in the focus groups.

Director Jackson added that she would like to send out a "what's next" survey to everyone who attended the workshops after the second one in June. Nyaunu Stevens said that was a great idea and feedback from attendees would be beneficial. Commissioner Price said she was reluctant to go that route because of the racial demographic of the group. There was further discussion of surveying the attendees. Director Jackson said it was important to keep people engaged through this process. Having some groundwork going into the focus groups is important. Commissioner Doyle recommended surveying those who attended in April sooner rather than waiting for the second workshop in June. On the suggestion of some commission members, Commissioner Doyle said she would develop the Survey Monkey, so people can fill it out online. Chairperson Carbonella agreed that it was important to continue the conversation. Commissioner Price said she felt that attendees may have no idea what the next steps should be. Director Jackson said some feedback is better than none. Commissioner Hart said they should trust the process and the training and understand that people are ingrained to do the right thing. Many times, they get talked out of it by others and the world around them, but they've been educated and informed through the workshop. The commission should trust they have a better understanding and could provide enlightened feedback. However, the commission still has to be intentional in this work. Commissioner Doyle stressed the importance of getting the feedback now while the workshop is still fresh. There was further discussion on the purpose of seeking feedback.

With regards to focus groups, Nyaunu Stevens clarified that the anti-racism workshop is not training the commission members to become facilitators for groups. The workshop is just starting them on the journey and laying the groundwork. However, the understanding is that after NCCJ is done with the work, the leaders who are still in Middletown should be able to continue the work, continue the conversation, and answer questions.

Commissioner Price said she suggested the commission attend the workshops so everyone is speaking the same language. There was further discussion on having the workshop on a weekend and the resulting complications that would cause. While more convenient for those who work during the day, having it on the weekend is not a feasible solution due to employees who are bound by union contract. Commissioner Thody asked for more clarification as to why the workshop could not be offered on the weekend. Director Jackson explained that the City has a contract with NCCJ on the scope of work that would be provided. A weekend session was not considered and therefore falls outside the contract.

Commissioner Thody asked if the commission had reached a decision regarding the survey. He also asked why it wasn't completed at the end of the workshop. Director Jackson explained that evaluations were completed at the end of the workshop. However, every participant was given a package to read and study later. In the package was a survey asking what's next. She said that after the two sessions are complete, she'd like to send out that survey to everyone who attended with some additional questions indicating the importance of their feedback. She added that this work needs someone who will continually drive it.

Commissioner Doyle asked if NCCJ would have any objection to distributing the contents of that package to those who could not attend the training, with the understanding that the information does not replace the experience. Nyaunu Stevens answered that once they distribute the handout, it really belongs to the person, and the person can choose to disseminate it if he or she wants to. However, some of the material in the package could be easily taken out of context or misunderstood without explanation. But, it would resonate for people who attended the session.

Director Jackson said the commission needs to find a way for everyone to be on the same page, even if the members can't attend the anti-racism workshop. Chairperson Carbonella agreed and said the commission should find a way to make that happen. Otherwise, they may be at a loss without having the experience. He added that the commission may need some additional training or preparation when it comes time to conduct the focus groups.

Chairperson Carbonella asked about the next communication that would go out to the attendees or the June session. He also said the commission could consider asking NCCJ to offer a third training for the commission members. Commissioner Doyle said that she would make the paper survey a digital one before the June meeting.

Chairperson Carbonella asked the commission if it would be comfortable having the discussion about focus groups in July. The commission agreed that if it was not prepared to discuss focus groups in June, July would be an acceptable time to start planning that. Commissioner Doyle asked the commission members to come to the next meeting with a good sense of their calendars, as the work following this will be the most demanding. The commission asked if it could review the evaluations and the surveys at the June meeting. Chairperson Carbonella said he thought that would be a good actionable item for June.

When the surveys are sent, the communication should give a clear deadline for completion so the commission could review them at its June meeting.

### **New Business:**

**Review:** Chairperson Carbonella discussed the location of the June meeting. He said that the traditional bi-monthly meetings are booked in room 208. However, when the commission decided to meet monthly, space was limited, so the other meetings are booked in the Common Council Chamber. He added that meeting in the chamber was difficult for the commission members to hear each other well, and the setup doesn't allow the members to look at each other. He said he could offer the conference room at the Youth Service Bureau.

**Motion:** Commissioner Ford motioned to have the June Human Relations Commission meeting at the Youth Services Bureau. Commissioner Hart seconded. The chairperson called for a vote. The motion properly carried.

**Review:** The commission reviewed the 2019 attendance.

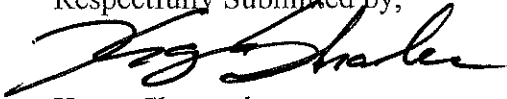
**Announcements:** The commission's next scheduled meeting will be June 19, 2019 at 5:00 p.m. at Middletown Youth Services Bureau Center, 372 Hunting Hill Ave. in the conference room.

Commissioner Price asked about the data that they had provided to NCCJ and asked if there would be a report the commission could read that would pull together all of that data. Nyaunu Stevens said she would follow up with others at NCCJ and get back to her with an answer.

The commission thanked Nyaunu Stevens of NCCJ for being present at the meeting.

**Adjournment:** Commissioner Ford motioned to adjourn the meeting. Commissioner Doyle seconded. The chairperson called for a vote. The motion was properly carried. The meeting was adjourned at 6:32 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted by,



Kasey Shoemaker,  
Administrative Sec. III