



Cambridge Human Rights Commission
Thursday, July 2, 2020
Zoom Virtual Public Meeting
Michael Kourabas: Co-Chair

Present: Co-Chairs Michael Kourabas and Yasmin Padamsee Forbes, Commissioners Joshua Stadlan, Katie Stack, Olinda Marshall, Kaileigh Callender, Brandon Morgan, Sabrina Selk, Police Deputy Superintendent Robert Lowe, CHRC Staff: Executive Director Nancy Schlacter and Project Coordinator Crystal Rosa

Absent: Commissioners Mercedes Evans, Bonita Cox and Kuong Ly

Documents Used:

- March 5, 2020 Minutes

1. Call to Order

Co-Chair Kourabas called the meeting to order at 6:05 p.m.

2. Public Comment

No public was participating in the live virtual meeting. No one was recording the meeting.

3. Review and approval of March 2020 Minutes

The Commission reviewed the minutes from the March 5th meeting and addressed edits to be made. Commissioner Selk moved to approve the minutes with edits made, seconded by Commissioner Callender.

4. Executive Director's Report

ED Schlacter updated the members of the Commission on cases. Since the March meeting, no new cases have been opened, due to the current vacancy in the Attorney Investigator (AI) position. There are three cases pending, for which investigation/mediation will resume once the new AI starts. One of the cases involves a claim of discrimination in housing based on the person's disability. The other two cases involve claims of discrimination in a place of public accommodation based on race. A fourth case was transferred to the Department of Housing and Urban Development. It involves a claim of discrimination in housing based on race and national origin. ED Schlacter informed the Commission that a few contacts were made with possible complainants during the COVID-19 shutdown and those were referred to the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination.

5. March Meeting Follow up:

Check-in on Commissioner’s experiences during the COVID-19 shutdown

Members of the Commission shared personal reflections about their time, concerns, and the stress of adapting to the sudden changes during the first few months of the pandemic.

Follow-up from any virtual conferences, workshops or forums about civil rights topics

- CHRC staff attended a fair housing civil rights webinar of academic and medical professionals speaking about the inequalities COVID-19 has laid bare related to race. The virtual panel reflected on the race-specific conditions of Covid-19 and its impacts regarding housing, food insecurity, and frontline workers.
- CHRC also attended a webinar from Suffolk University Law School’s Housing Discrimination Testing Program that discussed their findings from a two-year study regarding discrimination in Metro-Boston based on race and housing vouchers. The study created 4 distinct groups of testers, black and white people, with and without housing vouchers. Each tester took note of everything that was said and done to them. Testers did not always understand or see how a certain reaction had meaning, but when the information was compared by the analysts, parallels could be drawn. The testing program expected to find evidence discrimination but was shocked at the percentages. The evidence can be used in disparate impact cases in MA going forward.
- Commissioner Stack informed the Commission that WBUR hosts Virtual Town halls weekly. There were two particularly relevant to the conversation on racial inequities revealed by COVID (<https://www.wbur.org/news/2020/06/05/wbur-town-hall-the-racial-inequities-revealed-by-covid-19-coronavirus>) and “George Floyd, an American reckoning.” (<https://www.wbur.org/news/2020/06/02/wbur-town-hall-george-floyd-an-american-reckoning>).

6. New Business

Discussion on the death of George Floyd and public response

- Commissioner Padamsee Forbes asked if the Commission can work on a group response and put the statement on the website? Commissioner Padamsee Forbes offered to lead a working group of five or fewer members and share the work for approval at the next commission meeting.
- Commissioner Stadlan asked if the Commission can promote public comment as a way residents can feel welcome to share their thoughts and concerns. Commissioner Stadlan urged the Commission to think about how to bring more voices to the City and this commission?
- Commissioner Selk asked what would the Commission do with these public comments? Commissioner Selk explained that when people share at public comment, they are seeking some change. Commissioner Selk asked if the Commission can promise that change? What is its authority here?
- A member of the Commission reminded the Commission that it can make recommendations, comment on Human Rights issues in the city, and comment

specifically on budgets. Acknowledging that at the moment, it might not be as timely, but it is listed in the ordinance.

- ED Schlacter reminded the Commission that any of the members can speak at City Council meetings as a Commissioner but not for the collective unless a quorum of the group vote about what is said. ED Schlacter gave the example of, “I’m a CHRC Commissioner, but I am speaking on my own behalf. We’ve been talking about X, I’m concerned about Y…” City Council has the authority concerning policy and meets more frequently than the Commission. To meet the eligibility for public comment, the comment must relate to something on the agenda. Now that many of the meetings are virtual, residents can also submit comments in written form.
- Co-Chair Kourabas and Commissioner Callender will help Co-Chair Padamsee Forbes as the working group.
- Co-Chair Kourabas has been involved in conversations with anti-racist efforts in the school system. Co-Chair Kourabas has connected to Cambridge Families of Color and “a supportive group of white folks.” The group has been asked to put together resources about what people can do to report instances of discrimination in the community.

Discussion on “Defund Police” movement

- ED Schlacter explained that she added the item to the agenda to provide the Commission a space to discuss the issue. This is an issue and statement right now that people feel strongly about on all sides.
- Co-Chair Kourabas summarized some of the discussion points in the city. One idea was to re-direct the proposed budget increases that came in front of City Council recently. Another was to get a full accounting of all the equipment the police use – a technique for demilitarization, but also came up at City Council meeting, a discussion over whether the police have a tank or not and if this was a good use of funds. Another order on studying and exploring alternative community safety mechanisms. Those things have all come before the City Council and are at various stages of consideration right now.
- CPD Deputy Superintendent Lowe was asked to speak on the matter. Dep. Supt. Lowe encouraged the Commission to keep open minds. Dep. Supt. Lowe acknowledged that policing in this country was rooted in capturing runaway slaves. Dep. Supt. Lowe stated that CPD is open to listening to what the community wants concerning the police department. The community needs to think strategically. A lot of what the nation is calling for Cambridge has incorporated already over the last ten years. A lot of CPD’s community policing efforts are national models. Dep. Supt. Lowe stated that communities ask a lot from police officers when it comes to responding to calls for service. There need to be good options in place for someone having a mental health crisis at 3 a.m. How do we dispatch professional staff to these types of calls? Dep. Supt. Lowe clarified some of the confusion around CPD’s possession of military equipment. Dep. Supt. Lowe explained that Cambridge has a rescue vehicle that does look like a military vehicle, but it is not a tank nor military equipment. Dep. Supt. Lowe acknowledged how people might look at it and mistake it for such. When asked

how the police department budget is constructed, Dep. Supt Lowe explained that the Police Commissioner makes the decisions on those issues. One of the projects the Police Commissioner has been working on is the Office of Procedural Justice. The office is going to monitor in real-time the interactions officers have with residents, particularly minority groups. There is not a direct line from the community to set these objectives. Dep. Supt. Lowe noted that the police department takes input from the community on a day-to-day basis through their jobs and it makes a difference.

- Dep. Supt. Lowe asked the Commission: How do you see policing moving forward in terms of services to our community? Do you see police as no longer having a role when responding to certain calls? Or is it a co-response?
- Commissioner Marshall responded that the community needs to have a serious conversation about infrastructure and funding. Commissioner Marshall stated that it makes sense to have mental health professionals primarily deal with those with mental health issues, but the country has defunded mental health over the years, and now we do not have the infrastructure to have providers readily available. The police have had to fill that gap. Commissioner Marshall asked: if the community defunds the police because we want more mental health services, will that happen? Does the city or the community have the systems in place to make that happen? Commissioner Marshall suggested reframing the discussion about defunding the police, to increase funding for mental health services, more staff, and more training, including additional funding to schools.
- Co-Chair Kourbas stated the need to have a nuanced conversation, one that accounts for needs that look different in different cities.
- Commissioner Morgan stated that the death of George Floyd was a breach of trust between those who need to be protected and those who should be protecting and serving. Commissioner Morgan stated that we need to build bridges so we can have a positive discussion around these issues. Commissioner Morgan stated that grew up in a community where police were not necessarily the people to look to for help. He can empathize with the young people he works with now. Commissioner Morgan stated that people need to be reminded that we are all members of this community and that we all have a voice to provide to the dialogue.
- Commissioner Selk stated that these are complicated issues and reminded the Commission that each member has different platforms and different objectives. Commissioner Selk noted that the members may not want the same things or come from the same places or all be in agreement. Each member is coming from a different viewpoint and perspective.

The disparate impact of COVID closures on POC

- Evictions moratorium and impact on our community? ED Schlacter stated that CHRC was informed ahead of time that there would be members of the public today to potentially comment on this, but none were online for the virtual meeting. ED Schlacter believes that this will be an issue, especially for renters. It will be a bigger policy question than can be solved locally. Something to keep an eye on.

7. Outreach

HUD Partnership Grant

Currently, the printed housing discrimination brochures are available in English, Spanish, Haitian Creole and Portuguese. There were errors in some of the other translations, which is why they have not yet been printed (Arabic, Somali, Bengali, Chinese, Amharic). Project Coordinator Rosa is working with the designers and translators to make sure everything is corrected, in order to get those additional language versions ready for printing. Program Coordinator Rosa is also working with the designers to reformat the various language for the web, with a similar design, made easier to scroll on mobile devices.

The second part of the project is to provide additional translations for the discrimination intake form, which is currently available in English, Haitian Creole and Spanish. The intake form has been translated into Arabic, Somali, Bengali, Chinese, Amharic. Part of the grant money will be used to translate the intake form back to English for staff use, if anyone fills out the form in their native language.

The final part of the project is to create a CHRC outreach presentation in video format in American Sign Language.

Status update: The first two parts are nearly complete.

- Commissioner Stadlan suggested outreach materials be located at grocery stores or COVID testing sites. ED Schlacter reminded that handing things out right now probably will not be successful as people are worried about contracting the virus. Commissioner Stadlan suggested a poster with information on how to complain against discrimination.

Immigrant Services Liaison

Tagesech Wabeto, the Immigrant Services Liaison for the Commission on Immigrant Rights and Citizenship (CIRC), reaches out throughout Cambridge and works closely with the Amharic speaking community. She shares resources with the Community Engagement Team (CET) Outreach Workers, who are leaders in their language communities. CET is still holding meetings virtually and exchanging information about resources.

8. Future Planning

- ED Schlacter stated that the Commission may not be able to get representatives from the School Department in September or the fall, but she will ask.
- Commissioner Stadlan stated that he can share his research into case files on recurrent issues/locations for housing complaints.
- ED Schlacter stated that she will check to see if Cliff Cook is available in the Fall.

Commissioner Padamsee Forbes moved to adjourn the meeting at 7:50 p.m., seconded by Commissioner Morgan.

Next Commission meeting will be on Thursday, September 3, 2020, in the Large Conference Room on the 2nd Floor of 51 Inman at 6:00 p.m., or Virtually on Zoom, depending on the status of the City's pandemic reopening policy.