



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

JOSEPH A. CURTATONE
MAYOR

February 23, 2006, 6:45 p.m.
Tufts Administration Building, 167 Holland Street, Somerville
Meeting Minutes

Present: Nathan Lemmon, Mary Lu Mendonca, Kevin O'Malley, César Urrunaga, Yvette Verdieu
Absent: Herby Duverné, Susan Goldstein, Chris Hope, Mike Koehler, Kerry Venegas

Non-members present: Regina Bertholdo, Rev. Ben Echevarria, Bonnie Jones, Alex Pirie, Myriam Zuber

The meeting began at 6:45 with introductions.

1. Presentation: Human Rights Committees at mental health centers

Bonnie Jones, who works at the Somerville Mental Health Clinic, came to us on a recommendation from Melissa McWhinney. She asked the Commission for help in her search for volunteers to staff the Human Rights Committee that monitors human rights violations at local mental health agencies. Bonnie explained that committees like this one are mandated by the Department of Mental Health for all clinics receiving DMH grant money. Locally, there are three agencies (Cambridge Hospital, North Charles residential program, and Somerville Mental Health Clinic) operating under the supervision of one committee.

Bonnie explained that the human rights committee reviews complaints from clients served by the agencies. Each residence housing clients has a human rights officer on staff who is required to advocate for clients. Although many problems are settled through conversations at the in-house level, clients also may file complaints through the officer to be reviewed by the committee. Complaints then go to the DMH office in Boston before being reviewed and voted upon by the committee. Officers also report to committee meetings to give updates on how things are going at the sites.

The committee consists of a range of people from the community - consumers, lawyers, ministers, activists, and people with family members in system. The committee meets at least four times a year and members conduct occasional site visits. Members are required to commit to two years' service and (although this can be waived) wait one year between terms. The committee currently has four members, though there are five required for a quorum.

Bonnie asked the Commission members to consider joining the committee, and to refer her to others who might be interested. Kevin thought Yari Weaver might be interested. Mary Lu will put Bonnie in touch with him.

2. Martin Luther King Day

Mary Lu said that there had been a meeting several weeks ago with representatives of the Early Childhood Advisory Council and Multicultural Commission to self-evaluate on the MLK Day event. Martha Costa was the only HRC representative, so Mary Lu hoped we could have a discussion here with the commissioners. Discussion was tabled, however, because several people at the meeting had to leave early and needed a chance to speak.

3. Hate response

No Place For Hate

Myriam Zuber introduced herself as the new program coordinator of No Place For Hate (NPFH) with the Anti-Defamation League (ADL). Myriam spoke about the history the ADL and the formation of the NPFH program. ADL was originally founded to combat anti-semitism. In 1999, ADL partnered with the Mass. Municipal Association to form NPFH. Under the program, a city can be certified as a "No Place For Hate" community by completing three activities aimed at promoting diversity and tolerance. The city government must issue a proclamation stating its commitment to NPFH principles. This year's certification ceremony is slated for June 7, 2006. Myriam said that NPFH fosters coalitions between participating communities, encouraging them to share information and best practices. The Commission agreed that we will participate in the program.

Anti-Immigrant Activity

Mary Lu reminded the commission of our schedule of planned events and programs for 2006. At our November retreat, we decided to spend the Spring working to set up a rapid-response network to deal with hate incidents. Mary Lu said that there have been reports of a disturbing amount of anti-immigrant activity in local communities recently. Many people, including Regina and Alex, have contacted the HRC to request that we get involved, and Mary Lu invited them to attend the meeting and share their concerns with the commissioners.

Alex explained that this activity began several months ago in Framingham, when a rainbow sign (signifying tolerance and diversity) was stolen from a church and returned shot full of bullet holes. This was followed by an extremely contentious public debate over in-state tuition for non-citizen students. In Somerville, the Welcome Project received several hateful e-mails around this time. And when the Immigrant Service Providers group got a grant to study occupational hazards for immigrant workers, the names of people involved were circulated among anti-immigrant groups online.

Alex said that the Mass. Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy (MIRA) Coalition is working with other groups to put together a 502(c)(4) group called the Coalition for New American Voters, which will build immigrant voting power and target legislators on immigration-related issues. Alex thought that trouble is generally brewing again, and that there needs to be better monitoring of hate incidents. He worried that NPFH might encourage the city to hush up incidents, and noted that one attack on a former HRC investigator was never reported as a hate crime for that reason.

Myriam agreed that there is a lot of anti-immigrant activity and told the Commission that rumors have been circulating about persons disguised as law enforcement officers stopping undocumented immigrants and threatening them. She thought that ADL could work with groups such as the Brazilian Immigrant Center to ensure better communication about these incidents.

Regina described a recent meeting at the Brazilian Immigrant Center in Allston-Brighton, which Mary Lu and Myriam also attended. Two lawyers from Greater Boston Legal Services gave a presentation on immigrants' rights when dealing with law enforcement. Regina thought that a panel like that one is needed in Somerville, and others agreed. A discussion ensued about what such an event might look like. Several people thought we should host an educational forum on immigration policy. Others thought we should work bring in local law enforcement. Some thought we should include lawyers and ensure that the audience members feel free to ask questions.

Regina pointed out that many SCALE students would be interested; we should consider their schedule when organizing any event. Parents of public school children are another good pool of people.

Mary Lu said that there is already an event being organized by and for the Latino community on March 12. Regina noted that the Allston meeting was geared at Brazilians specifically. Kevin noted that there is a separation between the Spanish-speaking Latino and Brazilian communities in Somerville. Alex said that the Brazilians are the biggest ethnic group in the city, and noted that the Nepali and Chinese populations are growing rapidly.

Kevin wondered how the HRC could get involved when it seems as though different groups are already dealing with this issue within their own communities. Others at the meeting pointed out that action by the HRC would help to build our reputation and generate trust and good working relationships with the people affected by these issues. Kevin asked whether we should have one large event or several different ones aimed at individual groups. Regina said that people from different communities face many of the same issues, and recommended that we call one meeting for everyone. Someone noted that SCALE organizes a meeting on immigration issues every couple of years.

Kevin thought that having lawyers available would guarantee an audience. He said that people always show up for free legal advice.

Myriam thought that any HRC program should have two components: first, to educate people about their rights, and secondly, to gather and share information. She encouraged us to organize with ADL and other groups so that we can track incidents and strategize together about how to respond. Kevin agreed that we need a meeting where we can both give and receive information.

César thought that people would not be comfortable sharing information with the HRC since we are part of the city government. He thinks there is a perception that we are unable or unavailable to provide help. Ben agreed and thought that people would not come to an event sponsored by the city. Kevin said that he didn't care whose name would be used to promote the event as long as it happens. We can cosponsor something with different organizations and still work behind the scenes to put it together.

Alex suggested that we use the March 12 meeting as a model or pilot for our plans to have a forum or meeting on this topic. He felt the HRC should initiate forums like this one and continue to do so regardless of attendance. When we organize and publicize our work, he said, we gradually inform

people over time that the city cares about these issues. Alex said that he had spoken with Franklin Dalembert, who agreed that the HRC needs to reestablish our identity by becoming as active as we have been in the past. Alex pointed out that his organizations get a lot accomplished by getting out and spending time in the community – going to events, going to churches, talking to people, leafleting, etc. Regina emphasized that we need to build trust among these communities.

Yvette saw a need for all groups we have been speaking about to come together and have a discussion. Alex agreed that there has been a vacuum of this kind of collaboration. César noted that when we are in better communication with other organizations, they can direct people to us to file complaints.

César agreed with Alex that we should evaluate the success of the March 12 event and see how people respond to it. Kevin thought we could put on a large event by mid-June.

Alex recalled similar events put on in the past. In 1998 the HRC under Noreen Burke's direction put on a workshop about immigration issues. Most of the attendees were service professionals who worked with immigrants, rather than the immigrants themselves. At another event, Alex and Franklin had someone from MIRA come to give updates in immigration law.

Mary Lu encouraged all commissioners to attend the March 12 event. She thought that we should also have our brochure translated into Spanish before then to distribute it at the event. Mary Lu will check with Kerry to see if she has made any progress, and then send whatever we have to César for final translation. Mary Lu is almost finished with the Portuguese translation. Mary Lu will e-mail Yvette the brochure text so she can ask a friend to do the Haitian Creole translation.

Alex told the Commission about a project he worked on with Tufts students to create a "Somerville Language Bank". The project is still in its pilot stage. Non-profit agencies in Somerville would access the bank by uploading documents online, sending them off to be translated into different languages by Tufts students, and get back the completed versions within a week. Mary Lu will look into the possibility of using this and contact Alex if there are any problems. Regina told the Commission that the city has been using coordinating languages with different colors when translating publications. Portuguese should be printed on yellow, Spanish on salmon, Haitian on blue, and English on green or pink.

Mary Lu reminded the commission that our hate response plan included setting up a network to respond to incidents on an ongoing basis. She was concerned that staging one big event would not result in a sustainable program. César pointed out that the event would provide an opportunity to start networking with other organizations, which would be an important first step in setting up ongoing collaborative programs. Kevin thought we could make this into an annual event.

Regina felt that in addition to planning this event, we still need to have a follow-up to our October meeting on hate response. Mary Lu agreed.

César suggested that he say a few words about the commission at the March 12 event. This could demonstrate that we have Spanish-speaking members and signal our approachability to the communities in attendance. Mary Lu will put him in touch with the organizers.

Kevin wanted us to take concrete steps to get this moving. Mary Lu suggested that we could compile a list of agencies to work with and assign commissioners to liaison with particular groups.

The discussion returned to the profiling of immigrants by law enforcement. Yvette described an incident that happened to her a couple of years ago. While driving through Somerville early in the morning with her hair wrapped in a scarf, she was pulled over for no reason by an officer who asked where she was going. Regina reported that there were three Brazilian men arrested recently and later deported because they were out of status. Yvette said that she has heard of similar occurrences in the Haitian community. César said that he had heard of a lot of people being detained and deported for immigration violations after September 11th.

Mary Lu said that she has begun meeting with police chief Bradley with the goal of bringing human rights issues to his attention. She could ask him about the extent of involvement between local police and immigration authorities. Regina wanted us to find out whether Somerville police are stopping people to ask for documentation. She wondered whether police are aware of the reports of the unidentified law enforcement officials in East Boston and in other places. Regina and others also thought we should ask police whether they have a policy about how to deal with people who produce foreign licenses when stopped for traffic violations. Mary Lu will speak with Bradley and report back.

4. Administrative

Leaves/Absences

A number of Commission members – Chris Hope, Mike Koehler, and Kerry Venegas – are unable to make the monthly meetings for the remainder of the school year. Mary Lu explained that our governing ordinance permits commissioners to have up to six excused and three unexcused absences per calendar year. Kevin proposed that we excuse the absences of the three commission members through June. The Commission unanimously approved.

New Commissioner

The Commission unanimously voted to endorse candidate Ben Echevarria. Mary Lu will submit his letter of application and resume to the mayor and set up a meeting.

Liaisons

Susan was not present to report on whether she has made progress with the School Committee. Mary Lu thought we should have an alderman liaison member. Nate will talk with Tom Taylor.

5. CORI reform

César introduced the subject of pre-employment Criminal Offender Record Information checks. He reported that many human rights advocates feel that CORI check requirements unjustly discriminate against offenders who have served their time. César said that a number of organizations are working to reform policy at the state and local levels. Other cities (Cambridge, Boston, towns in western Massachusetts) have passed non-binding resolutions supporting CORI reform. The Commission agreed that we should take similar action. César will get copies of resolutions from other cities and report back at our next meeting.

Next meeting: March 16 – Yvette's birthday!