Human Relations Commission  
Meeting Minutes  
November 20, 2019 5:00 p.m.

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

**Excused Absence:** Henry Fernandez

**Absence:**

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

**Call to Order:** Chairperson Carbonella called the meeting to order at 5:15 p.m. Nyaunu Stevens of NCCJ was in attendance via conference call. Betsy Morgan and Beverly Lawrence of the Racial Justice Coalition were also present.

**Public Session:** None.

**Regular Meeting:**

**Approval of Minutes:** Chairperson Carbonella asked for a motion to approve the Meeting Minutes of October 16, 2019. Commissioner Ruimerman motioned to approve the Meeting Minutes of October 16, 2019. Commissioner Thody seconded it. The chairperson called for a vote. The motion was properly carried.

**Old Business:**

Chairperson Carbonella called Nyaunu Stevens and placed her on speaker. He asked for a status update on the last two focus groups. Nyaunu Stevens said that the focus groups were really fantastic. They were well attended. The youth focus group was full, and it was the hardest one to facilitate because the youth have so much to say, and they were talking over each other. They had some concern over things that were happening in town, but their main focus was the school. She tried to get them to discuss issues in the community, but because they’re youth, their primary concern is school. She added that the adult focus group was also very well attended with people with diverse experiences. From all four focus groups, two main issues were prevalent.

One issue was leadership not being diverse. The youth said it about their school, and the adults said it about City Hall, specifically in the government offices. They said there is a lack of diversity and that it’s very hard for qualified people to break into positions there. The youth were emphatic that they have a much more positive feeling when they have teachers of color who look like them. They said they felt teachers understood their experiences more. There was a Muslim teacher who was there but then left the school. The youth were adamant about wanting more diverse teachers, and the adults
were adamant about seeing more diversity in the City leadership and knowing that job opportunities are available to everyone. These issues were brought up in all three of the adult focus groups.

The second issue that emerged was the need for a place for people of color to go such as a community center or a networking event where people of color can talk about issues and share resources. It was brought up that people of color aren’t informed about resources in the town and that it’s difficult for people of color to find out about resources. This issue was consistent across all four focus groups.

Chairperson Carbonella said he spoke to two people who attended the focus groups, and they were complimentary about how the space was held, how the conversation was run, and how the process worked. He then asked if anyone had any thoughts or questions based on what they just heard from Nyaunu Stevens.

Director Jackson added that some who attended the adult focus groups said that they were well run and very professionally done and that they’d like to see more of these types of sessions. They were appreciative of the invitation to participate and for the opportunity to attend. Commissioner Price said that she also heard positive feedback and that if people went on tangents, the conversation was put back in its place. She asked if there was going to be some type of report on the conversations so the commission members could assess the themes of all of them. Nyaunu Stevens answered that she could send a summary of the focus group. Director Jackson said that would be beneficial because Councilman Nocera has asked the commission members to be available at the January Common Council meeting so the council members can meet the commissioners and so the council can get an update on where they’re at in this process and what will be forthcoming. She advised Nyaunu Stevens and the commission members that the Common Council meeting will be Monday, January 6th, and the Questions to Directors session is at 6:00 p.m. Nyaunu Stevens agreed that someone from NCCJ will be present at that meeting. However, at the time, she couldn’t look at her calendar, so she doesn’t know if she can attend. She agreed that she would provide the commission with a summary of the focus groups before January 6th.

Commissioner Hart asked what percentage of the focus groups were people of color. Nyaunu Stevens answered that they were 100% people of color. Predominately, they were African American. There were a few who were black but not African American. There was one Muslim and a few Latinx people. Chairperson Carbonella asked about the breakdown of the gender. Nyaunu Stevens answered that she couldn’t recall specifically, but overall it was mostly women. Chairperson Carbonella asked about age, and Nyaunu Stevens answered that the age was very diverse. Commissioner Doyle asked if there were any themes of certain issues that came out of the focus groups. The commission explained to her that those topics were discussed at the beginning of the meeting, and Commissioner Doyle apologized for being late. Chairperson Carbonella asked Nyaunu Stevens to summarize the two issues for Commissioner Doyle’s benefit, which she did.

Commissioner Ford asked if the youth brought up any concerns about their opportunities in the school as students of color. Nyaunu Stevens answered that they absolutely brought up those concerns. They feel that they are punished disproportionately to white students and that the punishment is harsher. They feel that white students engage in behaviors that are clearly outside of the code of conduct, and even when teachers and administrators know about it, they don’t do anything and there aren’t consequences. There’s definitely a feeling that they are not given the same sort of support and that they are viewed as problematic. Chairperson Carbonella asked if the use of SROs (Student Resource
Officers) come up at all. Nyaunu Stevens responded that that topic did come up with the youth group. The youth talked about it in the school, and the adults talked about the police within the community.

Commissioner Ruimerman thanked Nyaunu Stevens for facilitating the focus groups in such a way that they could receive such useful information. Nyaunu Stevens responded that people are feeling seen and honored that their opinions were requested. The adults are very pleased to see this work happening, but some of the adults were concerned that there would be no follow-through. She stressed to them that this work was important to the commission and the City and that a lot of time and money has been invested in it. She explained that this is a good faith initiative. She also told participants about the training that was already conducted and that community conversations were being planned.

Commissioner Doyle asked if they should follow up with the participants of the focus groups and invite them to the community conversations. Nyaunu Stevens reminded the commission that they promised the focus groups anonymity. Director Jackson advised that when they are ready to send out invitations to the community conversations, they can be included but not in a way that singles them out. They can make it clear that it’s a community activity and that they are being invited just like everyone else. Nyaunu Stevens agreed with that approach.

Commissioner Price said that she believed in a previous meeting they were discussing what they wanted the community conversations to look like, and she believed one of the options was for the focus group participants to return and discuss the earlier themes and for others to be invited to listen in and not necessarily participate. Director Jackson clarified that she has the ability to reach out to them to include them in the invitation but that the invitation would go out to the broader community. She clarified that they started with City Hall with the training. Then, they moved onto the focus groups to gather preliminary information, and now they were going out to the larger community. Depending on the level of attendance, they would break the group into smaller discussion groups and get their input on what has been gathered or get more information. That’s how they’re going to develop the strategic plan. Also, they need to get the stakeholders involved.

Director Jackson went on to speak on an exercise she attended with Nellie Mae Donna Marino. Nellie Mae was started in 2017. They had a group from Hartford which included youth and adults. They talked about all the changes they’ve seen come about since the institution of the community conversations.

Commissioner Doyle said she wanted to commend Nyaunu Stevens on her work because she is already seeing changes, more specifically at the library. Director Jackson said she wanted to also compliment the Chief of Police because he wasn’t pleased with how recruitment was going and wanted to make improvements. She met with the chief and they came up with a plan going forward. Recently, three African Americans were sworn in to the Police Department, and that was historic: two males and one female. She added that the overall percentage of diversity has moved from 8% to almost 15%, and that’s very positive, though there is still a lot of work to do. She explained that they are working on it. Department heads are aware of the importance of their role in hiring diversity. She explained that she sets the goals and indicates where there is underrepresentation. Human Resources is in charge of recruitment and making sure the applicant pool is diverse. The department head interviews and then makes a recommendation to the mayor, who has the final approval in appointment of employees.
Commissioner Price said she was very pleased with the currently elected Common Council. She said that people are saying this is the most diverse council they’ve ever seen. Director Jackson said the Board of Ed is also diverse. The town is saying they want change, and they’re helping to facilitate that change. Chairperson Carbonella said it’s great to celebrate those changes, but there’s due diligence to sustain those changes. Change can be transformative and be historic, but systems of oppression can push back really hard. Commissioner Price added that representation in a system doesn’t actually change the system. Sometimes that representation is a token or fits right into the system of oppression. It’s more important to change the system, not just the representation.

The commission moved its discussion to the community conversations and asked Nyaunu Stevens to explain to them the logistics of the conversations. She explained that the community conversations are similar in theory to the focus groups in that they are an opportunity for people who otherwise may not have a chance to have a voice to speak. It’s important to enter the community conversation with the understanding that racism exists and is a problem in Middletown and discuss what can be done about it. She recommended sharing with those in the conversation what has already been done, such as the trainings with the town leadership and the focus groups, as well as the findings. They would then ask the group about proposed solutions or what they would like to see happen.

Commissioner Price asked if the community conversations are just for people of color or if it was open to all. Nyaunu Stevens said that was a good question and that she’d like to consult with Cynthia Martin on that. She said she feels like the conversation should have all types of people there. Director Jackson agreed. Beverly Lawrence said that if all are welcome in the conversation, people of color will not attend. She said there will be harm in that room. She repeated that people of color won’t feel comfortable. Director Jackson said that if they invite only people of color, they’re getting back to having silos. To succeed in breaking down barriers, white people need to hear these issues. They need to hear what people of color are saying, and they need to express their opinions, as well. They cannot keep working separately. At some point, people of color and white people need to work together. Beverly Lawrence reiterated that people of color will not feel safe in that room. Commissioner Price said what bothers her is that they went to people of color to understand the problems, but they’re going to white people for solutions. She said that white people should not be the ones to come up with the solutions because they’re not closest to the problem.

Commissioner Doyle suggested having one of the two community conversations be for people who attended the focus groups and other people of color to present the initial findings and get confirmation that they’re interpreting them correctly. The second community conversation could be open to everyone and be less about soliciting input and also carefully moderated. The second one would not be an opportunity for white people to deny the problem but a presentation of the findings with an explanation that these findings were confirmed in an earlier conversation with a broader number of people of color. The second conversation could revolve around awareness building and education. Director Jackson clarified that essentially, the first conversation would be about solutions and recommendations from a group of people of color. The second one would be about presenting the solutions and building awareness. Commissioner Doyle said she agreed with that summation but wanted to add that any feedback should be carefully moderated so people don’t have an opportunity to invalidate the findings.

Chairperson Carbonella said there’s continuing value in centering marginalized voices. He said that they are still in a fact-finding stage and still collecting the experiences of people of color and shouldn’t
be seeking input from white people, yet. He said that a more appropriate time to include white people would be when the final report is complete.

Commissioner Doyle said her concern is that they have not secured funding for the next phase of this work. She would not want to collect this data and not have the ability to conduct any awareness building. They should be able to roll out their findings under this existing contract because there is no guarantee of another phase of the project. Chairperson Carbonella agreed that there is a level of uncertainty after March 31st. However, he has faith in Councilman Nocera's leadership and his ability to assist in getting the work funded after this contract. Also, two of the commissioners are now council members. He added that there’s potential that the Racial Justice Coalition can acquire some grant funding. As far as how the report gets shared, he’d love it if NCCJ could help with that process; however, the Human Relations Commission and the Racial Justice Coalition could probably do that if need be. His hope is that they will continue to operate under the most optimal pretense as possible moving forward and course correct after the fact. Operating from a deficit-minded or safe space could subjugate the process because they’re nervous about what the future may look like. Director Jackson added that the January update to the Common Council should give them sufficient foundation to justify moving forward. Also, the community conversations will occur before March 31st. She advised that she met with the mayor, and he wants to be involved in how the community conversations are structured, so she would like to get some information to give him a more thorough update on this work. That way, he can steer the work how he sees fit through this last phase. She added that he will be copied on the minutes and invited to the December meeting.

Chairperson Carbonella said he was pleased that the mayor wants to be involved in this work. He added that he feels there will be a time and a place for all voices. However, he cautioned that mixed affinity groups conversing about race can get messy very quickly. Commissioner Price added that what happens is discomfort comes out. Director Jackson agreed that there’s always a state of denial. Also, there’s an anxiousness to fix the problem. The positive aspect of this process is that they’re coming to the conversation with recommendations already, not just a list of problems. They will already have a foundation on which to build. Chairperson Carbonella added that he hoped there would be an opportunity for commission members to be present but in a silent role to observe and support.

Commissioner Thody asked how the black community can learn to trust the white community. How can they have that trust unless they sit at the same table? He added that he feels strongly that the commission members should be present at the community conversations but be silent. Commissioner Price said there’s always a place for collective dialogue, but this feels like the space for affinity. She said that this is the first time they are listening and collecting information and experiences from people of color, and she doesn’t want to convolute that in any way. White people always have their say about everything. Let people of color have this time. There is absolutely room to close that gap, but this is not the project for that. It would be more appropriate for that to occur at the Racial Justice Coalition. Commissioner Thody said they have to come to the table together, and Commissioner Price reiterated that this is not the project for that.

Director Jackson said she agreed that the first community conversation should involve a broader group of people of color to provide the recommendation of what needs to be done to fix some of these issues. They laid them out; now, they need to hear how it can fixed. That will be part of the strategic plan.
Chairperson Carbonella added that he has had the same reaction as Commissioner Thody when Commissioner Price mentioned the work being done in affinity groups on the Racial Justice Coalition. He said he had a visceral reaction and wanted to be at the table. He said he then learned that it’s not about him. He added that what he’s hearing is “can’t we have this space right now?” The need that white people have to fix things right now should be trumped by the fact that people of color have had to wait decades to get these opportunities. They can provide partnership by sitting it out. Beverly Lawrence added that when white people get involved in this work, they take it over. Commissioner Price used the example of the MLK initiative and said the last meeting she attended was an issue. That initiative came out of the black community. White people joined it, and now it’s nothing like what black people wanted.

Commissioner Blackwell said this conversation reminds her of work that DCF is doing. DCF is embarking on the Family First Prevention Service Act. They had a representative come to meet with all the leaders at the agency and all of the partners statewide about how the agency is evolving because of this legislation. The Family First Prevention Service Act puts priority on children staying in their homes in their communities because they’re better off. The representative spoke on the fact that in the past, the agency felt it had to rescue the children, and this meeting tonight is similar because people are feeling as though they want to rescue people of color. People of color don’t need to be rescued. They need a platform and a voice. At some point, they should bring everyone else along to develop solutions, but at this time it’s necessary for people of color in this town to have a voice and to have a place where they can express themselves without feeling like someone is coming along to rescue them.

Commissioner Doyle suggested as a way to satisfy both sides at the tail end of the process, they could bring in members of the Human Relations Commission to hear feedback about the process. They can use that time with the commission however they see fit, such as providing recommendations. The commission could agree to be totally silent unless specifically asked. The commission’s role at this point could be to listen.

Director Jackson brought the discussion back to logistics. She asked who would be invited to the community conversations. Commissioner Doyle answered that they would invite everyone who attended the focus groups and other people of color. Director Jackson suggested that to widen the scope, they should invite churches attended by people of color. However, they were already invited to the focus groups. She asked how they could encourage more participation. She suggested that the invitation mention that members of the church have already attended the focus groups. Commissioner Blackwell suggested adopting a church. She volunteered to speak about the community conversations at Cross Street AME Zion and ask Pastor Harvill to put it on the church’s agenda.

Chairperson Carbonella asked Nyaunu Stevens how many people should participate in the community conversations. She answered that community conversations should be around 30 people. Commissioner Doyle said if the first conversation is brainstorming and the second is more solidifying recommendations, there could be overlap of the attendees. There was discussion of having it at a church, but the commission agreed that it should take place at a neutral location, like the library.

There was discussion on the invitation process. Director Jackson said the invitation should clearly state that people need to call the Office of Equal Opportunity and Diversity Management to RSVP by a certain date. While they’re opening up the conversation to 30, the space is still limited to that.
Chairperson Carbonella asked if the first conversation should have only the people who participated in
the focus groups. Director Jackson said both conversations should be a mixed group of participants.
The people who already attended a focus group will likely speak up first, and that will encourage new
people to speak, which will allow for new ideas.

Commissioner Price clarified that both community conversations are for only people of color. The
commission agreed. The commission discussed location, and Director Jackson said the chamber at City
Hall would be a good spot because it’s central and has parking. The commission also suggested the
DeKoven House, and the YMCA. Chairperson Carbonella reiterated that they would invite those who
were invited to the focus groups and do some intentional outreach to organizations. The commission
agreed that they would try to schedule the conversations for February because there’s less of a chance
of conflict with a holiday, and it’s Black History Month. Commissioner Price asked if NCCJ would
have enough time to produce a data report by the end of March if they held the conversations in
February. Nyaunu Stevens asked if the report would be due by March 31st or if they’d have a little time
after the end of the contract. Director Jackson said that they could probably extend out the due date a
few weeks because NCCJ will need time to put all the information together including the community
conversations. Also, they will have preliminary report for the council in January.

Commissioner Doyle suggested that they offer the preliminary report from the focus groups to those
they invite to the community conversations. Director Jackson said it would be better to offer the
information at the beginning of the conversations instead of giving it to the attendees ahead of time.

Chairperson Carbonella asked Nyaunu Stevens if the commission could take the lead of scheduling the
conversations. She responded that the commission should come up with a few dates, and she could see
if she has trainers available on those days. The commission agreed with having it on either Tuesday,
Wednesday, or Thursday and could give NCCJ those dates in February and see what works. They
agreed that for consistency they’d want Nyaunu Stevens to conduct the conversations because she
facilitated the focus groups. Nyaunu Stevens agreed and said that she would absolutely be there. The
commission asked how long the conversations are, and Nyaunu Stevens answered that they are two
hours.

Chairperson Doyle said a good time would then be 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. She suggested that they firm up
the dates at the December meeting so they can get the announcement out to everyone.

Chairperson Carbonella concluded the discussion of the community conversations. He thanked
Director Jackson for negotiating with NCCJ to extend the contract to March 31st. He also thanked
Nyaunu Stevens for participating via conference call. He asked if they could get the preliminary report
by the commission’s next meeting, which is December 18th. She responded that she would aim to have
the report done by then.

The call concluded.
New Business:

Approval of 2020 Meeting Schedule: Chairperson Carbonella asked for a motion to approve the 2020 Meeting Schedule. Commissioner Hart motioned to approve the 2020 Meeting Schedule. Commissioner Price seconded. Chairperson Carbonella called for a vote. The motion was properly carried.

Review: The commission reviewed the 2019 attendance. Chairperson Carbonella explained that he will reappoint the Youth in Government students.

The commission also discussed whether commission members who were elected to council people could serve on the commission. Director Jackson said they should be able to serve on the commission. However, if the commission wanted her to she would check with the Common Council Clerk and get back to them.

Announcements The next meeting of the commission will be December 18, 2019 at the Youth Services Bureau.

Adjournment: Commissioner Doyle motioned to adjourn the meeting. Commissioner Blackwell seconded. The chairperson called for a vote. The motion was properly carried. The meeting was adjourned at 6:50 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted by,

Kasey Maurice,
Administrative Sec. III