

Human Relations Commission
Meeting Minutes
February 17, 2021 5:00 p.m.

Attendance: Brandie Doyle, Henry Fernandez, Ed Ford, Anthony Gennaro, Ava Hart, Debbie Ruimerman, Howard Thody, and Faith Jackson, Director of Equal Opportunity and Diversity Management

Excused Absence:

Absence: Sanji Lawrence

QUORUM: *Yes:* X *No:*

Call to Order: Interim Chairperson Doyle called the meeting to order at 5:07 p.m.

Public Session: Interim Chairperson Doyle welcomed Sacha Armstrong-Crockett, Co-Chairperson of the Anti-Racism Task Force. She said that Sacha Armstrong-Crockett was invited to the commission's meeting to discuss the NCCJ report. She asked Sacha Armstrong-Crockett to introduce herself and tell the commission how she came into this role. Sacha Armstrong-Crockett said she was excited to learn about the focus groups that occurred in 2019, but she was also disappointed that she wasn't aware of them at the time and therefore couldn't participate. She said she decided to reach out to Director Jackson to get a better understanding of the work that was done. She said that the Anti-Racism Task Force got handed the NCCJ report without any real direction on how to unpack it. She said that as the members of the task force has met and gotten to know each other, they have an understanding that the radical healing that they want to happen in the community must be done from the inside out. There's needs to be a more unified effort. She said that there are a number of partners in this work, but they need a better way to connect so they can feel like they're moving forward and not just spinning their wheels. She said she's excited to be speaking to the commission and learning from the members, some of whom are familiar faces. At this time, she said they want to focus on accountability and getting the necessary data to work toward the suggestions in the report. She said the suggestions are surface and don't come with the knowledge of Middletown. She said they can't move forward without having the proper data and a full asset map of the stakeholders.

Interim Chairperson Doyle explained that the report she is referencing was the final report compiled by NCCJ, which was the consultant that drove the project through over a year of work in collecting information and conducting trainings, focus groups, and dialogue sessions. Something that came out of the report was that the commission's reach was limited so it was a struggle to get the word out. Also, one of the commission's charges is to mend that issue. They will look for ways that opportunities such as these are publicized more and they can get more involvement and therefore more solid data. Also, the commission wants to focus on bringing the right people together to achieve more substantive change. She further explained that at the meeting tonight there are commissioners present who have been involved with the work from the beginning and some new members, as well, so responses may be varied. She then turned the meeting to Sacha Armstrong-Crockett to ask the commission any questions.

Sacha Armstrong-Crockett said she wanted to address the labor equity piece. She said it was if they're trying to dismantle a family business. There was progress when the mayor was going to institute performance reviews, but that was stunted with the recent grievance that was filed. Considering that, how does the commission see potential progress for black and brown people who want to see themselves in City employment?

Interim Chairperson Doyle said that when the report was completed and before the formation of the task force, the commission looked to address suggestions in the report one piece at a time. The first effort was to compose a letter to the mayor to change contract language in the manager's union contract that was being negotiated to allow nonunion members and members of the public to apply for job opportunities that are normally posted internally and to the manager's union first. The idea behind that suggestion was not only to open up the applicant pool and therefore create more diversity but also to set a precedent for other union contracts when they are up for negotiation.

Sacha Armstrong-Crockett asked the commission if it would be an appropriate request for the Anti-Racism Task force to see recruitment data. Director Jackson said that her office monitors the recruitment activities of the Human Resources division. The Common Council receives a hiring report, which gives a snapshot of the makeup of employees within the City who have been newly hired, promoted, transferred, demoted, reclassified, or have separated from the City. She said that the data is available, but people need to better understand the recruiting and hiring process for the City. She added that Pat Alston, who is on the Anti-Racism Task Force is also a member of the Affirmative Action Monitoring Committee, which also reviews the quarterly reports. She went on to explain the recruitment and hiring process. She said that when a vacancy occurs, the department initiates the process by submitting an Employment Requisition. The requisition goes to her department where she indicates the hiring goals for that EEO job category. The goals are calculated by formulas put in the place by the federal and state government based on the makeup of the City's workforce. Then, Human Resources posts the job. Sometimes it's posted right away. Other times it's not. The position is posted internally first. This is generally one of the issues, and the commission is on the right track on trying to amend the language that requires the job to get posted internally first. If there is only one employee who meets the minimum qualifications, that employee is given the job for a probationary period. If there's no diversity in the applicant pool, then there will be no diversity in the promotions. She explained that the commission was suggesting that the language in the UPSEU contract allow for people outside the union and outside City employment to apply for the job. She added that the reason the job is posted internally first is because it's the only way for City employees to get promoted. There is no merit system in the City that allows an employee to move to a higher salary grade. She added that with regards to the performance evaluations, the City can do them, but it won't affect the salary increases at all because step increases and cost of living increases are built into the contract, and everyone gets them regardless of performance.

Interim Chairperson Doyle said in reinforcing Director Jackson's point that starting with data is good in theory. However, a lot of the data is hidden by the process. The hiring process is exclusive from its very first step. Many positions never go public, so there's no diversity in the pool because there's no diversity at City Hall. The other reason for suggesting this change to the manager's contract is because they can affect more change by diversifying the pool of managers. Also, it hedges against the similarity bias. People in management positions, who are responsible for hiring, tend to hire people who look like them. She suggested that the task force pursue a hiring process audit to build more transparency and understanding.

Sacha Armstrong-Crockett asked when the commission submitted the letter to the mayor. Interim Chairperson Doyle said she believed it was in July of 2020. Sacha Armstrong-Crockett asked if the commission received any response. Interim Chairperson Doyle said there was no response. Sacha Armstrong-Crockett asked if the commission could provide that to the task force. Interim Chairperson Doyle said that she put together a package for the task force that contains the letter as well as the relevant contract language. Director Jackson reminded Interim Chairperson Doyle that whatever information she provides the task force should be provided to the commission, as well. She added that this is a perfect time for the task force to ask about the status of the contract negotiation and that recommendation from the commission.

Sacha Armstrong-Crockett said that there are a lot of elements to the NCCJ report. However, there is nothing about health or mental health. Now, with COVID-19, and the fact that it is disproportionately affecting black and brown folks, it changes everything. Commissioner Fernandez said this work was completed just before COVID-19 broke out. Therefore, the commission and the consultant had no reason to consider that. He said that he wanted to add with regards to the union contracts, the best place to affect change is to start with the process of new hires getting in the door. Unions will fight hard to keep the preference of seniority. He added that this issue has been going on for years, and the two major factors are Human Resources and the mayor. Interim Chairperson Doyle said that they will not be able to remove all preferences for union members in the hiring process. However, it would be interesting to see if the language is amended if City employees are getting positions over more qualified external applicants. She added that how COVID-19 has affected the community is a pressing issue and likely more important than the other issues in the report. She said that she feels beholden to the hundreds of people who contributed to this work and would like to honor the information in the report because there is a great deal of substance in the pain points. They're trying to chip away at the structural systemic issues, and that's going to take a long time. She said that she sees the task force as contributing to that effort, particularly because the task force has funding and the commission does not. Sacha Armstrong-Crockett asked for clarification on the number of participants in the work. Director Jackson said there were four focus groups, three for adults and one for youth, and two community conversations. Also, all of the sessions were affinity groups. She then explained that there were two, full day, two-day trainings for the City leadership.

Director Jackson said with regards to health issues and COVID-19, the NAACP has been working with the Ministerial Alliance, Community Health Center, and Middlesex Health and others to form a COVID-19 task force. They have been working to get out wellness packages, communication, and masks. Commissioner Ford asked if a survey went out to the participants. Interim Chairperson Doyle said that a survey went out to those who attended the two-day training. There was no public survey. However, after participating in the focus groups and dialogue sessions, people did tell her that they want something done. They have spent too much time meeting and answering surveys. They want action. Sacha Armstrong-Crockett said she looked for models and contacted other anti-racism groups, and they told her they were still in the community conversation phase. Middletown is far ahead of other towns. Director Jackson agreed and said they would need to develop a model for their particular town and residents. However, first, they need to understand the systems and how they work.

Sacha Armstrong-Crockett said that the Anti-Racism Task Force discussed health and mental health. She said that growing up in Middletown, they never felt they had a safe place to discuss this. However, oppression in labor, education, and housing affect health and mental health. Watching the deaths of

black people on social media and dealing with COVID-19 has left people of color in a fragile place. She added that the NCCJ report is very important to the task force, but it also wants to acknowledge that some things have changed significantly. She said another concern among people of color is the end of the eviction moratorium. People don't have any information on how the money coming into the City is going to be disbursed to help people catch up on their rent and utility bills. She said that reading the report as a black person, it was clear that it was written so white people would understand the racism they face. The black people already knew the information in the report. It wasn't new to them because they live it. She said that this report is great for the City. To have radical healing, the City needs to play a role in that. However, they need to also address the issues brought on by the pandemic, such as potential homelessness. She then asked the commission how it addresses multiple issues, all at once or one at a time.

Interim Chairperson Doyle said that has been on ongoing struggle for the commission. She also said in regards to the report that it is written for a white audience. Unfortunately, historically, the government leaders and decision makers have been white. The building of awareness has been an unfortunate necessity. However, it has provided a valuable framework to start this work of affecting change. COVID-19 has caused a lot of changes, but it has also made the existing issues outlined in the report that much more important. She added that their next step is to invite DesegregateCT to a commission meeting. The goal of the commission overall is to chip away at the structures that have held this system in place. She said the commission is a slower, more deliberate municipal entity; whereas, the task force can affect change more quickly. Therefore, a flow of information between the two groups is key.

Interim Chairperson Doyle advised the commission that it had business on the agenda that requires a quorum to vote, and she wanted to be mindful of everyone's time. She asked Sacha Armstrong-Crockett if she wanted to stay at the meeting and resume discussion after the vote. Sacha Armstrong-Crockett said that she'd be interested in coming back to another meeting but at this time she had to leave.

The commission thanked Sacha Armstrong-Crockett for her time. Sacha Armstrong-Crockett said she'd love to come back to another meeting and that this was really informative. Interim Chairperson Doyle said the task force members are always welcome to join the commission for any meeting, and she encourages them to attend March's meeting where DesegregateCT will be in attendance, as well.

Regular Meeting:

Approval of Agenda: Commissioner Hart motioned to approve the February 17, 2021 agenda. Commissioner Thody seconded. Interim Chairperson Doyle called for a vote. The motion properly carried.

Approval of Minutes: Commissioner Fernandez motioned to approve the January 20, 2021 Meeting Minutes. Commissioner Thody seconded. Interim Chairperson Doyle called for a vote. The motion properly carried with one abstention.

Old Business:

Interim Chairperson Doyle discussed next steps for the commission. She said she believed the commission covered that quite a bit in the discussion with Sacha Armstrong-Crockett. Additionally, the most logical next step would be to establish permanent leadership.

New Business:

Nomination: Interim Chairperson Doyle nominated Commission Hart for Chairperson. Commissioner Hart accepted the nomination. Commissioner Ford seconded the nomination. Interim Chairperson Doyle called for a vote. The commission voted unanimously to elect Commission Hart as Chairperson.

Nomination: Chairperson Hart nominated Commissioner Doyle as Vice Chairperson. Commission Doyle accepted the nomination. Commissioner Ford seconded. Chairperson Hart called for a vote. The commission voted unanimously to elect Commissioner Doyle as Vice Chairperson.

Chairperson Hart moved the discussion to the commission vacancy. Vice Chairperson Doyle advised that Paige Petit who had recently joined the commission was hired for a position that directly conflicted with the commission's meeting times. Therefore, Paige Petit has resigned creating a new vacancy. She asked the commission to think about a potential replacement between now and the next meeting. Recommendations can be forwarded to Chairperson Hart or Director Jackson.

Director Jackson asked Vice Chairperson Doyle if she wanted her to send communication out to the churches in town. Vice Chairperson Doyle said yes.

Chairperson Hart said she spoke to Lorenzo Marshal in regards to the youth employment program. However, it would be a more appropriate agenda item for April.

Review: The commission reviewed the 2021 attendance.

Announcements The next meeting of the commission will be March 17, 2021 where the commission will be hosting DesegregateCT.

Adjournment: Commissioner Thody motioned to adjourn. Commissioner Ford seconded. Chairperson Hart called for a vote. The meeting was adjourned at 6:10 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted by,



Kasey Maurice,
Administrative Sec. III