

Human Relations Commission  
Informal Meeting Minutes  
March 16, 2022 5:00 p.m.

**Attendance:** Tasha Edens, Henry Fernandez, Anthony Gennaro, Ava Hart, and Faith Jackson, Director of Equal Opportunity and Diversity Management

**Excused Absence:** Ed Ford, Sanji Lawrence, and Debbie Ruimerman

**Absence:** Howard Thody

**QUORUM:**            **Yes:** \_\_\_\_\_    **No:**   X  

**Call to Order:** Chairperson Hart called the meeting to order at 5:09 p.m. She noted for the record that there was not a quorum present. Commissioner Gennaro indicated that he would likely have to leave the meeting before it concluded due to a family commitment.

**Public Session:** Jay Tulin and Myra Clark-Siegel were present from the public to speak on the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance and to clarify what is being asked of the Human Relations Commission. Chairperson Hart asked them to speak on this and advised them that they had about five to ten minutes. Jay Tulin thanked the commission for giving them the opportunity to speak tonight. He then turned the floor over to Myra Clark-Siegel.

Myra Clark-Siegel thanked the commission, as well, for the opportunity to speak this evening. She introduced herself and indicated that she is the regional director for the American Jewish Committee Westchester/Fairfield (AJC). However, they work with the entire state of Connecticut. She provided some background about AJC. She explained that AJC is the oldest Jewish civil rights organization. It was founded in 1906. Through all of its work, a consistent part of the DNA of AJC is fighting extremism, combating hatred, combating antisemitism, and working to ensure equality for everyone. One of the hallmarks of AJC's work is its partnerships. It is a nonpartisan 501c3 organization. It believes that the issues it addresses are not connected to any one political party. AJC is regional, national, and global. She said that their interfaith work is central to the work they do. AJC has an official Muslim/Jewish advisory council and a Latino/Jewish advisory council. They have official partnerships with the Asian American/Pacific Islander community and the National Urban League. They have launched in the US House and the US Senate a Black/Jewish congressional and senate caucus. And, they have an official partnership with the US Conference of Mayors. AJC truly believes that they all need to stand with and for one another. Specifically today, she wants to talk to commission about antisemitism. They are requesting that the Human Relations Commission adopt the International Holocaust Alliance working definition of antisemitism.

Myra Clark-Siegel provided some background on antisemitism. She said that a few weeks ago there was a report that in New York City alone, antiemitic crime jumped by 400% in the month of February. The attacks in Colleyville, Texas were a recent reminder of what American Jews are facing. Shortly after that, in Florida, Nazis and white supremacists marched openly. And, during the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection, people were seen wearing sweatshirts that said 6MWNE, which stood for Six Million was not Enough. These are just a few examples of what the Jewish community has been facing; however,

the attack on the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 2018 was the real wakeup call. Therefore, AJC commissioned a survey after the attack in Pittsburgh to determine if that was an isolated incident or if something deeper was occurring. The first survey was in 2019. In 2020 and 2021, they repeated the survey but added a parallel component to it, which was a survey of the general American population. These surveys are the largest of their kind to assess antisemitism and the perception of American Jews. She shared a few highlights. The survey asked American Jews how much of a problem they believe antisemitism is, as well as surveying the general American population. Among Jewish Americans, 90% believed it to still be a problem; whereas, 60% of the general population believed it to be a problem. Both groups were also asked if they believed antisemitism has increased, decreased, or stayed the same for the past five years. This survey was after the Tree of Life massacre, which was the worst attack of American Jews on American soil in American history. She said that the survey showed that of American Jews, 80% believe that antisemitism has increased; however, of the general population, 40% believe it has increased. Also, the general public was five times more likely to believe that antisemitism had actually decreased. She said that one of the more troubling findings was that one in four American Jews has been a target of antisemitism over the past 12 months. And, American Jews are changing their behavior out of fear of antisemitism. Therefore in the last year alone, four in ten American Jews have avoided publically wearing, carrying, or displaying things that would identify them as Jewish, attending certain events specific to Jews, or posting content online that would identify them as Jewish.

Myra Clark-Siegel said she was sharing this information because Jewish people have to think twice before going to their house of worship. Jewish people cannot simply visit a synagogue to worship anytime they desire. There are security measures in place. She explained that they are asking the Human Relations Commission to make a statement by adopting the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance working definition of antisemitism. The working definition is not legally binding. It is a working definition to help guide government officials, law enforcement officials, and others to understand antisemitism. When they can define it, they can measure it. And, when they can measure it, they can take action to combat it.

Myra Clark-Siegel asked if the commission had any questions. Chairperson Hart thanked Myra Siegel-Clark and Jay Tulin for being at the commission's meeting. She also thanked Myra Siegel-Clark for shedding light on the ongoing crimes against the Jewish community. She said she appreciated the information about the day-to-day challenges and the difficulties in even going to worship. She asked if the working definition to which they are referring is the three-page document that was previously sent to the commission. They confirmed that it was the same document. It was written by global experts and provides additional examples of antisemitism. Chairperson Hart asked how other towns have rolled this out and asked if she could give an example of what this would look like for Middletown. Myra Clark-Siegel explained that this is a new initiative. However, 30 countries have already adopted it, along with the Federal Government, the Department of State, and the Department of Education. A number of states and municipalities have adopted it, most recently South Windsor. In some cases, a Human Rights Commission has adopted it and then recommended that the town council do the same by either vote or executive order. Therefore, it depends on the procedures of the individual municipality. In terms of utility, the working definition can be shared with officials, such as the school superintendent or law enforcement officials.

Director Jackson said she had a question. She asked if the commission were to consider adopting the definition and forwarding it to the mayor or Common Council as something to endorse, would the

lengthy definition provided have to be the one used. Myra Clark-Siegel said the definition with examples should be one page, and she can re-forward it to the commission. Commissioner Gennaro said what they present or read to the Common Council could be abbreviated, but the longer definition could be included. He added that he has experience with this issue both personally and in his work in the Police Department. He is very supportive of the initiative and looks forward to working with AJC to put together something that can be presented to the Common Council. Director Jackson added that she is the president of the Middlesex County NAACP, which has just re-established its bond with the Jewish community. Additionally, the NAACP was established in part by wealthy Jewish people. And, she believes the NAACP signed off on this initiative, as well. Myra Clark-Siegel mentioned the program and film called *Shared Legacies*, which focuses on Black/Jewish history in the Civil Rights Era.

Chairperson Hart asked Myra Clark-Siegel to resend the one-page document to her and the commission so they can discuss it at their next meeting and vote on it. Myra Clark-Siegel said she would do that, and she added that AJC was here to be a resource. They also participate in and coordinate a number of interfaith events, such as an upcoming event, Stand with Ukraine. She added that if the commission decides to adopt this, she would be happy to brief the Common Council if that is necessary.

Myra Clark-Siegel and Jay Tulin thanked the commission for its time and exited the meeting. Chairperson Hart closed the public session.

### **Regular Meeting:**

**Approval of Agenda:** The March 16, 2022 Meeting Agenda could not be approved due to lack of quorum.

**Approval of Meeting Minutes:** The February 16, 2022 Meeting Minutes could not be approved due to lack of quorum.

**Old Business:** Chairperson Hart moved the discussion to Resolution 17-22 as Amended at the February 7, 2022 Common Council meeting regarding the creation of a Civilian Review Board by the Public Safety Commission, Human Relations Commission, and the Permanent Task Force on Anti Racism. She explained that at the last meeting, the commission had charged her to reach out to the Anti Racism Task force on behalf of the commission and to invite the chairperson to attend the commission meetings. She updated the commission on the recent communications to Co-Chairperson Sacha Armstrong-Crockett. Chairperson Armstrong-Crockett declined her invitation to attend the Human Relations Commission indicating lack of time. Chairperson Hart indicated that she reached out to Darnell Ford who is a co-chairperson of the Permanent Task Force on Anti Racism and chairperson of the Public Safety Commission. Chairperson Hart indicated that Chairperson Darnell Ford has not responded at all to her communications.

Chairperson Hart said she wanted to express for the record her extreme disappointment in this process and her concerns about how things have played out. She said she has reached out several times. She has received some communication back, but no commitment on the part of the Anti Racism Task Force to have Human Relations Commission members attend meetings of the task force, as requested by the

Common Council in this resolution. The Human Relations Commission received little to no information prior to being added to this resolution. That trend has continued throughout the process. Also, there was a recent vote to add Chairperson Hart to something and ask her to attend meetings. The vote didn't pass. She indicated that she had no information about this, and this just highlights the lack of communication.

Chairperson Hart continued by saying the process is riddled with conflict. She said there appears to be a political struggle at play. Also, she is not a politician. She is a volunteer. She added that she wanted to make a suggestion that the Common Council come together and figure this out for the Human Relations Commission and the Permanent Task Force on Anti Racism. It is disheartening, as a volunteer, to continue to follow through on communications and continue to make calls. At this point, it's not that the Human Relations Commission is not being included: it's being excluded from a process in which it has been asked to participate. She said on behalf of the commission that the members should be treated with respect and with consideration for their time and efforts. She wants everyone to be aware of the great frustration this has caused her personally, and she would assume it has caused other members frustration, as well.

Commissioner Fernandez said this seems to be a constant theme. He said the City will exclude people but then add them in at the end of the process when they want something to go through. He said it's not so much about politics. It's more about friendship and kinship. The Human Relations Commission is the group that began this work and this initiative, and not it's being included. The commission shouldn't have to ask to be included. It should demand it. The Anti Racism Task Force came out of the work of the Human Relations Commission. He said it shouldn't be about what the task force says. It should be about what the charter and the resolutions dictate. They can't make changes without the commission agreeing to those changes.

Chairperson Hart said she absolutely agreed with Commissioner Fernandez. However, the commission can't force the task force to work with them. She added that her concern was that the process was flawed from the beginning. She is not committed to continuing to reach out to people who have demonstrated a total lack of interest in working with the commission. Perhaps if the commission had been included at the inception of the resolution along with the Public Safety Commission, things would be going differently. At this time, she is receiving pushback, and the Human Relations Commission is not responsible for that, and the commission should not shoulder the burden of making this work.

Commissioner Gennaro said that he is on the same page as the other commissioners. He said at the beginning of this process, he was overly quiet due to his position as a retired Police Officer. He added that he is all for accountability in the Police Department. He said just because he was an officer doesn't mean he doesn't think there was room for improvement. However, he voted no because he didn't think it was ready. Others within his party on the Common Council voted yes, even when they initially indicated that they would vote no. He said that Councilman Ed Ford abstained because of his position as a member of the Human Relations Commission. Commissioner Gennaro said he thought it came too soon and was political in nature. He explained that is why he chose to get into politics. He became frustrated with how things were going in Middletown and decided he wanted to be a part of the solution. He said he wants things to be done the right way because he is exhausted of seeing things done the incorrect way. Eventually, the commission has to call out the wrong doings. He said a lot of money went into this work, and things just cannot continue to proceed in this manner. Middletown needs to be mindful of the economic climate, and he doesn't want this to move forward simply because

certain council members campaigned on it. That's not the right way to go about this. He would rather hold off and then put something forward the correct way instead of rushing it and doing it the wrong way.

Commissioner Edens said she agreed with Commissioner Gennaro. She wanted to see where this process would go. She added that she is frustrated like Chairperson Hart because the commission has been continually requesting communication and information and getting nothing.

Director Jackson said the commission's expressions and statements are on point. She said she agreed with Chairperson Hart. The commission gave Chairperson Hart a charge, and she has diligently and earnestly reached out to both chairpersons of the Permanent Task Force on Anti Racism. Their response, or lack thereof, is disheartening. They talk about equity, diversity, inclusion, and working collaboratively together for the common good of the people and the best interest of Middletown citizens. The task force has come from the hard work of this commission that is supposed to work with them. The task force is not only not working with the commission, but also it's adding the name of the Human Relations to projects at the last minutes. She said it sounds to her as if the task force is expecting the commission to get the work done because, as it stands now, nothing is getting done. She reminded the commission that the Black community will become very frustrated and disappointed with the commission if, after everything they provided during the dialogue sessions, nothing is done. She said the Black community will lose faith in the commission and won't come back again when asked. She also recommended that a letter go to the mayor from the commission expressing this frustration and this desire to move forward with the charge to work together and the pushback the commission is getting from the task force.

Chairperson Hart said she wanted to clarify that she believes the commissions and committees are doing good work. She added that she was initially frustrated with the chairpersons of the task force. However, after more thought, she came to the conclusion that the process is altogether flawed. Whoever created the process needs to reconsider it and make a plan for them to move forward. Commissioner Fernandez asked why the commission wasn't included on the resolution for the CRB from the beginning. Commissioner Gennaro said that the explanation was that it was an oversight. However, he is not content with that reasoning.

Director Jackson says it goes back to the initial resolution, which says that the Permanent Task Force on Anti Racism is supposed to work with the Human Relations Commission. That collaboration is not happening. Commissioner Gennaro said when it comes to the CRB, there should be clarity on what needs to be improved. If there are problems, that needs to be made plain. If there are no problems, then there needs to be discussion on why this is necessary. Just saying, "Cops are racist" isn't productive. They need to address the issues and outline who, what, and why this is being done.

Director Jackson said she would like to see the data that demonstrates the need for a CRB. Perhaps there's a need for something else, like community policing. Some of these issues were brought up in the NCCJ report, so there is data on which to build, but there needs to be further research on what is applicable to Middletown. There was further discussion on how Middletown is a different kind of town and has a different level of crime than Bridgeport or Hartford. Director Jackson said the Common Council members who put forth the resolution regarding the CRB were Councilman Nocera, Councilman Darnell Ford, and Councilman McKeon. The commission should meet with them to get an understanding of their mindset in putting together this resolution. Chairperson Hart suggested that the

commission invite them to a meeting to explain that the charge is not happening. The council people should hear this from the commission.

Chairperson Hart asked Commissioner Gennaro his perspective on how to handle the situation. Commissioner Gennaro answered that it's difficult to be in the minority party on the Common Council. He had communicated with the minority leader, and he thought the council members would vote differently than how they did in the meeting. Unfortunately, because they did not do the right things at the right time for the right reasons, they now have a mess.

The commission discussed either inviting the common council members a commission meeting or putting something in writing to them. Commissioner Fernandez suggested that Chairperson Hart draft communication to the three Common Council members who were the makers of the resolution and invite them to either attend a Human Relations Commission meeting or provide the commission written clarification of the resolution because it is not happening. Commissioner Gennaro agreed with the suggestion.

Chairperson Hart moved the discussion to the Quarterly Report on Anti Racism Task Force as presented to the Common Council on March 7, 2022. Commissioner Gennaro said that the report was very similar to the one the task force has presented to the council previously. He said he had no additional comments.

Commissioner Gennaro said he had to leave due to the previously mentioned family commitment. He wished the commission a good evening and exited the meeting.

The commissioners had no other comments about the quarterly report. Chairperson Hart moved onto the discussion of the use of the term BIPOC. She explained that throughout the commission's meetings, the term has been used because it began appearing in a number of reports and other documents. She said Director Jackson and Commissioner Fernandez have been vocal about their opinions against the term. The Permanent Task Force on Anti Racism has been using the term and includes it in its glossary of terms. Commissioner Fernandez said he had great concern about this term. He also said he attended a training recently for LGBTQ+ and spoke on how society continues to move more and more toward inclusiveness. He said a difference between people who are a part of the LGBTQ+ community and people of color is that others automatically know if someone is a person of color. Those in the LGBTQ+ community have to communicate their identity. The stories and the history of these communities cannot be combined into one thread, and doing so is harmful.

Director Jackson said her issue with the term is that it continues to divide them. The term is Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. She asked what is wrong with the term People of Color. NAACP is an organization for People of Color. Black and Indigenous people are People of Color. Therefore, other People of Color looking at BIPOC would think the term doesn't refer to them. She said they should just use the term People of Color and keep it simple. She said she does not use the term. Other groups and committees use it in meetings, but she does not.

Chairperson Hart said she agreed and that she doesn't want to adopt anything that further divides people. She said that she has always proudly identified as a Black woman and is happy with just that label. She then asked the commission if there was something it, as a group, wanted to do about the use

of this term. Director Jackson said she didn't think it was necessary to take a position on it. However, she personally would not be using the term.

Chairperson Hart moved the discussion to the update on the person interested in serving on the commission and filling the current vacancy. Director Jackson said that someone contacted her office and indicated interest in the commission and said she could attend the monthly meetings. Standard procedure is that the office sends a letter, along with the ordinance and the 2022 Meeting Schedule, to the person interested and ask for confirmation by a certain date. At this time, the office is still waiting to hear back from the interested person.

**New Business:**

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

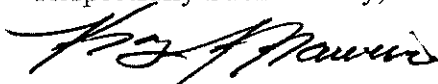
**Announcements:**

The next meeting of the commission will be April 20, 2022.

**Adjournment:**

The meeting adjourned at 6:41 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted by,



Kasey Maurice,  
Administrative Sec. III