

North Carolina Human Relations Commission

Meeting Minutes

May 27, 2021

The Human Relations Commission met on Thursday, May 27, 2021, via Video and Phone. Commissioner's present were Toussaint Romain (Chair), Matthew Hughes (Vice Chair), Linda Jackson Barnes, ZaKiya Bell-Rogers, Nicolas Byrne, Edith Chance, Sheila Cuffee, Jameesha Harris, Lauren Haigler Henderson, Howard Morgan, Paul Norman, Philip Sheridan, Reginald Speight, Ralph Stevenson, and Amelia Stinson-Wesley.

OAH staff members present were Lamont Goins, Gene Troy, Richard Boulden, Elouise Williams, Jacques Chappell, Ashley Foster, Arthur Harrell, and Linda Worth.

CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order at 11:05 am with Chair Romain presiding. The meeting opened with the Pledge of Allegiance, prayer, and opening remarks by Chair Romain.

ROLL CALL

Commissioners virtually present were noted as well as those who phoned in. A quorum was established for business.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The minutes from the February 18, 2021, meeting were unanimously approved and accepted as written by majority vote. Motion on minutes was made by Commissioner Linda Jackson Barnes and second by Commissioner Jameesha Harris.

COMMISSIONER APPOINTMENTS

Director Goins reported that we have no pending appointments, and we have a full commission with no vacancies. He also noted that some commissioner terms were scheduled to end on June 30, 2021, and inquiries were made to determine interest in reappointment with follow-up with the Director of Boards and Commission.

HRC STAFF ANNOUNCEMENTS AND REPORTS

Director Goins introduced the newest member of the HRC staff, Ms. Ashley Foster who joined the agency as a Human Relations Specialist conducting fair housing investigations. Ms. Foster addressed the commissioners by sharing remarks on her education, work experience, and training. Chair Romain welcomed her and wished her well. Program Manager Gene Troy provided a comprehensive Hate Crimes and Hate Bias Report on incidents across North Carolina. He also, reported on the January 6, 2021, incident in Washington D.C. which involved six (6) persons from North Carolina who were arrested and charged by the FBI. During the open question period, Commissioner Harris spoke on a current incident that occurred in Elizabeth City and possible ways the state commission could assist the community. Since there was no local HRC, it was decided

that Gene Troy would follow-up with the city and county managers to determine how the NCHRC could help.

INTRODUCTION OF GUEST SPEAKER

Chair Romain presented to the commission a PowerPoint presentation addressing systemic racism and the challenges we face in addressing this issue covering the past, present, and future. Chair Romain noted the commission's goal was to make this a better state for everyone.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

The meeting was opened to the public however there were no public comments.

OLD BUSINESS

FEDERAL MORATORIUM ON HOUSING

Attorney Richard Boulden reported that the federal moratorium to stop evictions has not been lifted by the CDC. The state moratorium is also still in effect from the governor's office through June 30, 2021. There has been some action, but no real change to the status quo, at least, as far as North Carolina is concerned.

LOCAL HRC STATEWIDE MEETING

Program Manager Gene Troy reported the Statewide Meeting with the Local Human Relations Commissions was held on Tuesday, April 27, 2021. The event was hosted by the Salisbury Human Relations Council. A total of 50 people, including Commissioners Tony Durden, Sheila Cuffee, and Judge Julian Mann, as well as persons representing 16 of the 23 Local Human Relations Commissions in the state attended the meeting. One focus of the meeting was building partnerships with numerous community organizations, businesses, city agencies, and colleges within the city of Salisbury. The Salisbury Human Relations Council discussed providing resources for them when the council sponsors their events, workshops, and seminars throughout the city of Salisbury. NCHRC Program Manager Gene Troy, presented an update on the 2021 Hate Crime/Hate Bias Incidents Log as of March 31, 2021. The next Local HRC Statewide Meeting will be during the third quarter of 2021. Notice will be provided once scheduled.

Commissioner Nicholas Byrne asked how many local HRCs are active and how are they staffed. Mr. Troy provided an overview of the different local commission structures. There are 23 local human relations commissions throughout the state. Some have paid staff, others are volunteers and one is a nonprofit. Mr. Troy then discussed other counties interested in establishing nonprofit commissions. Commissioner Sheila Cuffee gave comments on the push for a governor's taskforce on racial equity in criminal justice for a bill to be pushed forward to aid in helping with this transparency. She also asked if the Commission would be interested in assisting in this situation. Chair Romain stated that he has been in touch with the governor's office regarding the racial equity task force and the work being done. There has not been anything tangible yet for us to do, but we are waiting on them to reach out to us. We can be proactive in this situation. Commissioner Stevenson asked Mr. Troy how many of the staffed HRCs within the state are federally funded and

are actually co-equal in authority with the state's Human Relations Commission where fair housing is involved? Mr. Troy answered there are a total of five North Carolina Human Relations Commissions that have enforcement power in fair housing. They have a contract with HUD to enforce fair housing just like we do at the state level. Attorney Richard Boulden added that whenever there is a federally certified substantially equivalent local agency we lose our jurisdiction, but that is not because of the federal law, that is the way the state law is written. So, if for some reason the state of North Carolina does not think that is a good idea, they, we can amend our own statute. It is not a federal mandate, but a state mandate. Commissioner Stevenson commented on the 2015 proposed legislation for further discussion. Chair Romain commented that at least five jurisdictions in our state, have separate and sole authority to address housing issues. What we are proposing here is looking into legislation that would remove that barrier and would allow jurisdiction to remain with the Human Relations Commission statewide or just some other aspect there. Mr. Troy also commented there are three (3) other commissions or departments in addition to the previously stated ones that are interested in becoming fair housing assistance programs in their local areas to enforce ordinances. Chair Romain commented that some checks and balances would be a good way of addressing all of the issues the people are facing in our state with fair housing issues.

UPDATE ON COMMISSIONER BADGES

Director Lamont Goins reported that all of the commissioners have received their badges, except for Commissioner Sheridan, due to an issue with the vendor company, not with the staff.

LOCAL HRC COLLABORATION

Chair Toussaint Romain reported that Mr. Troy invited him to present at a meeting in December at which he met several individuals. He had spoken with Wanda Allen-Abraha, the director of the city of Winston-Salem Commission and the chairperson who is a pastor in the local community. They are doing amazing work there and are very interested in sharing what they are doing with the commission. They are also looking at expanding their work to other local HRCs. Chair Romain is continuing to meet with individual local Human Relations Commissions, chairpersons, staff members, or volunteers to build relationships and rapport.

NEW BUSINESS

HRC RESOLUTION ON HOUSING ACCESS AND HUMAN RELATIONS IN NC

Commissioner Nicholas Byrne reported the resolution circulated earlier in the month to the commissioners to review for today's meeting. He reminded the commissioners that a presentation was made at the October 2020 meeting that included expertise and insight shared by practitioners in the field of legal aid services and economic development as well as planning. This resolution was born out of those presentations and these exchanges, and out of our preliminary discussions around trying to be a little more proactive and engaged on issues that come before the commission. Many of the commissioners stated they did not receive the resolution. Efforts were made in the meeting for the resolution to be shown through screen share but were not successful. Commissioner Lauren Haigler Henderson commented on a follow-up process for the commissioners when receiving documents and also about the voting process for this resolution.

Commissioner Sheila Cuffee asked if the commissioners could have a virtual brief special meeting if the email voting could not be done. Chair Romain responded with yes if the email voting is not allowed. Commissioner Bryne and Chair Romain made further comments on tabling this due to technical difficulties. Since many of the commissioners did not receive the resolution, commissioners voted to table this agenda item until all commissioners could review it. A HRC brief virtual meeting will be held June 3, 2021, for this agenda item to be voted on by the commissioners.

NC LEGISLATIVE BILLS ON HOUSING

Attorney Richard Boulden reported that the House of Representatives' Bill #H854 has a lot of things about housing, but in particular, section 3 applies to fair housing matters and therefore is directly relevant to this commission and the staff. Section 3 deals with support animals in rental units and it goes would enact into state law a set of standards for medical documentation of handicapping condition, and of the need for a service animal or an emotional support animal. It also provides for a private action by a landlord to file suit against those who misrepresent disabilities or the need for a particular animal and submit documentation that is not in accordance with the provision. Other provisions of the act allow any landlord to file a counter suit to a fair housing complaint for fraud, which could have a chilling effect, on complainants.

PENDING EMPLOYMENT CRISIS

Director Lamont Goins reported that there are a number of bills in the General Assembly that are addressing aid either direct or to organizations on providing help. The number of employees or potential employees who were at risk for not having a job was based on the numbers, which were in the millions. The economy has started to open up and right now we don't have the most recent data on the availability of people returning back to the workforce. July's numbers will provide a better sense of whether or not the pending employment crisis continues or if we're going to see an upturn in the economy not just for North Carolina, but nationwide.

CHANGES AT HUD AND FAIR HOUSING ENFORCEMENT

Director Lamont Goins reported three (3) changes in HUD. The new technical monitor is Anna Marie Dolce. She is the person that we interact with on a regular basis on issues related to implementation and contracts. The new Branch Section Chief is Dustin Parks, he oversees the management operation. Also, a new person has been appointed as the Regional Director, Vicki Johnson. She oversees the HUD operation at the regional level.

CLOSING REMARKS AND Q & A

Chair Toussaint Romain gave closing remarks and opened the floor for questions. Commissioner Jameesha Harris asked about addressing what is in the online chat area. The questions and statements were read by Program Manager Troy and addressed by Chair Romain. Chair Romain will also confirm the upcoming HRC meeting dates. He thanked the HRC staff for their work. He also thanked the HRC commissioners for their work and time.

ADJOURN

Chair Romain adjourned the meeting. The Human Relations Commission meeting adjourned at 1:14 p.m.