

Human Rights Commission (HRC) - March 10, 2021- via Webex

Purpose: Promotes cultural diversity in Duluth; promotes the elimination of hate, prejudice and discrimination against persons or groups based on race, gender identity or expression, religion, sexual orientation, ability, or other status; educates the community on issues of discrimination and cultural diversity; advises the City Council and City on human rights issues; and promotes the goals and objectives of the Minnesota Human Rights Act.

Commissioners in attendance: Bettina Keppers, Chair; Carl Huber, Secretary; Ashley Neenan; Ri Preap; Sandra van den Bosse and Mark Hakes. Carl Crawford, the Human Rights Officer for the City of Duluth was also present.

There was concern about recent alleged hate crimes reported by Asian-American residents of Duluth in the News Tribune. Carl Crawford will try to get in touch with them to talk about the issue and make sure they know about the Duluth HRC.

Commissioners voted to disband their committee on Gender and Sexuality because the city has established a separate commission on that issue. In its place, a Family Preservation Committee will begin to address issues of parents experiencing difficulty re-establishing custody of their children in foster care.

The Findings Committee met in late Feb with the St. Louis County Sheriff to discuss recent complaints filed with the HRC re: visitation policies and crowding at the facility. Commissioners learned that 50% of the population at the jail is people of color despite the fact that the population of the county is 90% white. They will follow up with the Sheriff to express their concerns and write to the Duluth Police Department and the Prosecutor's Office because they also hold power over who is held in jail.

They plan to hold a virtual "Listening Session" during the trial of Derek Chauvin so that people can express their feelings and what it tells about the state of human rights in MN.

Respectfully Submitted Polly Thomson Edmunds

Human Rights Commission (HRC) – February 10, 2021- via Webex

Purpose: Promotes cultural diversity in Duluth; promotes the elimination of hate, prejudice and discrimination against persons or groups based on race, gender identity or expression, religion, sexual orientation, ability, or other status; educates the community on issues of discrimination and cultural diversity; advises the City Council and City on human rights issues; and promotes the goals and objectives of the Minnesota Human Rights Act.

Commissioners in attendance: Bettina Keppers, Chair; Carl Huber, Secretary; Ashley Neenan; Ri Preap; Sandra van den Bosse. Mark Hakes was excused.

Commissioner Preap, who is on staff at SOAR Career Services, introduced her colleague, Cynthia Finley, who coordinates a re-entry program for formerly incarcerated people, to explain their services and some of the issues these people face. She reported that their program, using intense case management, has a lower recidivism rate (27%) than the U.S. (76%).

When Commissioner Keppers asked how the HRC could help them, Ms. Finley said the biggest problem their clients' face in putting their lives back together is finding affordable housing. She said that Duluth "has sectioned off parts of the community where certain people can't live." And that, for her clients, "If housing is precarious, everything is precarious."

Commissioner Huber reminded people about the UMD Summit on Anti-Racism to be held March 2-4. Commissioners volunteered to present information about the HRC on the day set aside for community resources.

The Findings Committee will be meeting in late Feb with the St. Louis County Sheriff to discuss recent complaints filed with the HRC re: visitation policies and crowding at the facility. Commissioners learned that 50% of the population at the jail is people of color.

The most common complaint that the HRC receives is related to trouble getting back custody of their children. The HRC may add a new committee on this topic.

Submitted by Polly Thomson Edmunds

Human Rights Commission (HRC) - January 13, 2021- via Webex

Purpose: Promotes cultural diversity in Duluth; promotes the elimination of hate, prejudice and discrimination against persons or groups based on race, gender identity or expression, religion, sexual orientation, ability, or other status; educates the community on issues of discrimination and cultural diversity; advises the City Council and City on human rights issues; and promotes the goals and objectives of the Minnesota Human Rights Act.

This was a full meeting with some encouraging news for diverse communities in Duluth. Carl Crawford, the Human Rights Officer, reported that funding has been restored for his assistant's position. Laura Laaksonen who holds that position was present for the meeting.

Alicia Kozlowski, the Community Relations Officer for the City of Duluth, reported that the Mayor has approved the appointment of Corinthian Rutherford to one of the three open seats on the HRC. Her appointment now goes to the City Council for approval. Two seats remain open, but recommendations have been made to the Mayor. The HRC should have a full roster by March.

Ms. Kozlowski serves on the Mayor's Communication Team which works to assure that the city staff has the tools they need to engage the whole community of Duluth. They will be soon releasing a Community Engagement Guide. She also reported that the city has received a grant to provide DEI training for the City Commissions.

Elena Foshay, from the City of Duluth Office of Workforce Development, came to the meeting to ask the HRC for input on how they could improve the cultural responsiveness of their services. Some suggestions that were made by Commissioners were:

- to look at retention rates for employment by diverse class;
- to support front line workers who feel threatened in their workplace by COVID; and
- to look at how St. Louis County is prioritizing vaccine delivery and make sure that there are enough locations in marginalized communities.

Commissioner Mark Hakes reported that he is contacting the Indigenous Commission and the African Heritage Commission to join with the HRC to make a joint statement on racism as a public health emergency.

Commissioner Carl Huber reported that the annual UMD Summit on Equity, Race and Ethnicity will be held on March 2-4 as a virtual event. The 2021 focus will be anti-racism. On March 3, the keynote speaker (unconfirmed) will be Ibram X. Kendi, author of How to be an Anti-Racist. The March 4 program will feature a virtual activity fair featuring different groups from Duluth talking about what they are doing to promote anti-racism.

The Education Committee met with the new Superintendent of the Duluth Schools to inform him about the HRC and to discuss disparities in the DPS on suspension rates. One issue in his "100 Day Plan" is equity.

Commissioner Hakes reported that the City Council recently passed unanimously an ordinance creating a commission on gender equity. The name has not been decided.

Submitted by Polly Edmunds

Human Rights Commission, November 12, 2020

Five members of the Commission along with Carl Crawford, the Human Rights Officer for Duluth, convened on November 12 for their monthly meeting. There are three seats vacant. Sixteen people have applied for the three positions. (The Commissioners were to discuss choosing three at the December meeting, but that meeting did not take place.)

Kathy Hermes, Coordinator of the Together for Youth Program for LGBTQ2S+ youth at Lutheran Social Services spoke to the Commission about the unique challenges experienced by these youth during COVID-19 and distance learning.

Discussion followed:

There is a group working on a tool youth can use if they believe they are being targeted by someone for abuse.

Question raised about whether gender appropriate lockers are available to students in Duluth. Denfeld has two gender-neutral bathrooms on each floor. The School Board has asked East and Ordean to create those also. No problems have been reported.

A committee is working on updates to the HRC website to make language more inclusive.

There have not been many complaints filed this fall. Officer Crawford asked whether COVID may be affecting access to filing complaints.

A webinar, open to the public, followed the meeting. It focused on the makeup and goals of the Commission and how to file a human rights complaint.

Submitted by Polly Edmunds

Human Rights Commission, October 14, 2020

Five members of the Commission along with Carl Crawford, the Human Rights Officer for the city, convened on October 14 for their monthly meeting. There are several seats vacant and they are trying to add to their number.

Public Comment: Lisa Fitzpatrick commented about a group that is trying to create an ordinance to add a provision to the City Charter that would grant “Rights of Nature” for the St. Louis River Estuary. This would involve a petition and a referendum.

Announcements: A judge ruled that schools must allow students to use the locker room matching their gender identity. An effort is ongoing in MN to provide more training for child welfare workers about the Indian Child Welfare Act. Native children are 18 times more likely in MN to have contact with the child welfare system. This is one of the highest rates in the nation.

Committee Reports: Commissioner Mark Hakes is drafting a statement declaring racism a public health emergency in the City of Duluth. He will speak to the Indigenous and African American Commissions and the Mayor’s office to get input.

There was concern about whether the ISD is providing adequate support for students with special needs (students with disabilities, LBGTQ and homeless students) during this time of isolated learning. Federal agencies have been instructed to stop all diversity and inclusion training until they are approved. One member reported that universities are putting DEI programs on hold because funding may be cut.

Submitted by Polly Edmunds

Human Rights Commission, November 13, 2019

Three new members were present. They are Mark Hakes, Ri Preap, and Sherry Williams. The HRC discussed having a future regular meeting in the community, probably at Gloria Dei. No date has been set. Carl Crawford, the Human Rights Officer, reported that the largest number of complaints received come from people with disabilities. Most cases end with a need for mediation. It is difficult to find trained mediators in Duluth. There is only one group that provides that service. The Commission passed a resolution to send a letter to Essentia asking them to make public their plan for replacing the affordable housing units that were demolished in preparation for new construction. They asked the Human Rights Officer to find out what has happened to plans for providing a hygiene center for homeless persons in the City. The feasibility study was finished months ago. Sandra Van Den Bosse reported that the committee that drafted the use of protective gear by the police has completed their work. She expects that dates for a public meeting will be announced soon. The committee discussed the need to plan more meetings in the community to make sure it is well understood, especially by youth.

Submitted by Polly Thomson Edmunds

Human Rights Commission Meeting: October 9, 2019

For the second month in the row, the Commission did not meet for lack of a quorum. Ashley Grimm was the only member present on 10/9/19. I did learn from Carl Crawford, the staff person responsible for the HRC that the ad hoc committee working on the policy for use of protective gear by the Duluth Police has finished their work. The City Legal Dept. has seen it and commented. There will most likely be a public hearing scheduled in November.

Submitted by Polly Thomson Edmunds

Human Rights Commission, June 12, 2019

The topic of interest was that the committee draft a policy for the use of protective gear by the DPD is just about finished. The members still have issues left to resolve. Members of the committee are from the Duluth Police Dept., Human Rights and Civil Rights Commissions, the NAACP and three City Councilors. When there is consensus on a draft policy, the Civil Rights Commission will plan meetings to present the policy for community comment.

Submitted by Polly Thomson Edmunds

Human Rights Commission, May 8, 2019

The Commission drafted a statement in response to signs posted recently in Leif Erickson Park intended to arouse hate and division in the Community. The posters were taken down by city workers, but the Commission felt they should take a public stand. The draft statement passed and was sent to the City Communications Office. A member of the HRC will begin serving on the Education Equity Advisory Committee. There are two open seats on the HRC.

Submitted by Polly Thomson Edmunds

