

City of Worcester Human Rights Commission Minutes
VIRTUAL MEETING – Monday, February 1, 2021, 6:00pm

Members Present: Lilian Chukwurah, Guillermo Creamer Jr, LaToya Lewis, Elizabeth O’Callahan, Edward Robinson, Jacqueline Yang

Members Absent: Deidre Padgett, Lauren De Oliveira, Aaron Richman

Staff: Jayna Turchek, Miriam Nyante, Alyssa Parker-Szabo (legal intern for HRAO)

Guests:

Nicole Bell, Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Living In Freedom Together, Inc.
Evis Terpollari, Homeless Projects Manager, Worcester Health and Human Services

1. Call to order and introductions

A quorum was established, and Vice Chairperson Yang called to order at 6:04pm. The Vice Chairperson welcomes members of the commission and those present and introductions of those in attendance as well as roll call were taken. The Chairperson welcomed newest Commissioner Guillermo Creamer, Jr.

Vice Chairperson Yang began with an acknowledgement of the traditional, ancestral, territory of the Nipmic Nation, the first people of Massachusetts and those who’s land we are convening on tonight. While the Nipmic history predates written history, records from the 1600s inform us that the original inhabitants of Worcester dwelled principally in three locations: Pakachoag, Tatesset (Tatnuck), and Wigwam Hill (N. Lake Ave). It is important to make this acknowledgment and to honor the ancestors that have come before us. It is all too easy to live in a land without ever hearing the traditional names and the history of the people who first resided and prospered in these lands and continue to reside and prosper.

The Human Rights Commission was established to promote the city’s human rights policies. It is the policy of the City to assure equal access, for every individual, to and benefit from all public services, to protect every individual in the enjoyment and exercise of civil rights and to encourage and bring about mutual understanding and respect among all individuals in the city. Our work requires us to address institutional racism so that as a community we can achieve racial equity. Our work also requires us to make visible the unheard and unquestioned privilege enjoyed by some members of our community to the detriment of others. We take time to make this acknowledgement, to educate, so a path can be cleared for healing.

The term “**institutional racism**” refers specifically to the ways in which institutional policies create difference outcomes for different racial groups. The institutional polices may never mention any racial group, but their effect is to create advantages for whites and the oppression and disadvantage for people from groups classified as people of color.

The term “**racial equity**” is the active state in which race does not determine one’s livelihood or success. It is achieved through proactive work to address root causes of inequalities to improve outcomes for all individuals. That is, through the elimination or shifting of policies, practices, attitudes, and cultural messages that reinforce differential outcomes by race or fail to eliminate them.

The term “**privilege**” describes the unearned social power and informal institutions of society to all members of a dominant group. For example: “white privilege” and “male privilege.” Privilege is usually invisible to those who have it because we are trained to not see it but nevertheless it puts them at an advantage those who don’t have it.

2. Approval of December 7, 2020 meeting minutes

<http://www.worcesterma.gov/agendas-minutes/boards-commissions/human-rights-commission/2021/20201207.pdf>

Commissioner Lewis motioned to approve the minutes as written. Robinson seconded. Motion passed with all in favor.

3. Follow up- Listen to Survivor Event (1/11/2021) with Nicole Bell, Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Living In Freedom Together, Inc. (LIFT)

Nicole Bell is the founder and chief executive of Living In Freedom Together (LIFT), a survivor led organization, founded in 2014 and comprised of those who have overcome systems of prostitution, allies centered on the needs of the vulnerable population. Their mission is to provide resources, advocacy and support to individuals, the educate to recover from the impacts of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) and end prostitution.

More information about LIFT can be found at: www.LIFTworcester.org or through the following social media handles:

- Facebook: Living in Freedom Together
- Instagram: LIFTWorcester
- Twitter: @LIFTWorcester

HARBOR

Today, LIFT launched its newest program, HARBOR (healthcare advocacy room board outreach and rehousing), a 15-bed shelter for women experiencing homelessness, sexual exploitation, substance/opioid use disorder and/or mental health disorders. As of today (2/2/2021) there are currently eleven women utilizing the shelter and its resources. LIFT believes that housing is a right that everyone should be afforded, and LIFT additionally believes in a “harm reduction model” and keeping people as safe as possible. LIFT does not encourage drug use, but if somebody was to use drugs, the response would not be to throw them out of the

program. Instead, they would be reminded of the policies and move them to a location within the program where they would be more connected with staff.

When LIFT started in 2014, it was quickly recognized that prostituted women who were stuck in the life were not going to come to support groups, so LIFT started working, instead, to build bridges in the community, and started a drop-in center which is now the most heavily utilized program and the most underfunded because it is believed that women who access the drop-in center do not want help. The women served by LIFT are often considered to be “unshelterable” and are mostly terminated from shelters for because of their trauma. However, pre-contemplation by the victims, and the drop-in center are often the longest step to recovery. The drop-in center provides tangible needs and resources such as condoms, hypodermic needles or whatever is believed needed to help women stay safe.

Jana’s Place

Jana’s Place is a 16-bed facility for prostituted women with substance abuse disorder. Capacity has been met at this facility and there is a large waiting-list.

Youth Program

LIFT has a Transitional Youth Exiting Services, where two youth mentors work with 16–25-year-olds. Two of the beds are HARBOR are designated for youths 18-25 years old. Youth experiencing homelessness is a large community problem. There are youths on the streets of Worcester being exploited currently. The trauma experienced by youth on the streets are significant. Services, funds and support are needed in this area.

Trends of Human Trafficking

Prostitution is recognized as a human rights violation. The Palermo Protocol, signed by the UN, recognizes money as a coercive factor, but the United States takes a different view.

1. During the Pandemic

Despite the pandemic, exploitation is still happening. Men, women, and children are being exploited by buyers who are predominately white, married, men of means. COVID has impacted the drop-in center. LIFT mobilized outreach services.

When the stay-at-home order was put in place, women were still going out and buyers did not care that there is a global health pandemic. Prostitution activity cannot be done at a safe distance. This speaks to the regard buyers have for both prostituted women and their community because contraction and spread are two major concerns in during a pandemic.

2. Generally

There is a lack of shelter services for women that are actively using substances, struggling with mental illness and have experienced trauma. Women who have had to experience homelessness have often had to exchange sexual acts for a place to stay. LIFT operated a temporary shelter during the height of the pandemic and brought all services they had available into it. Of the 36 women who stayed with LIFT during this time, 33 of them have moved onto somewhere else to stay such as mental illness housing, adult foster homes or other location in the direction of permanent housing.

Between LIFT and the only other program in Massachusetts, set in Boston, there are less than forty beds for prostituted women and trafficking victims. LIFT's goal is to eventually end prostitution and to get the city and the police department to focus on the demand, which would reduce prostitution in communities.

3. The DCF Cycle

There is a lack of support for DCF involved mothers. What happens with trafficking and exploitation is, often times, these are system involved children who have aged out and who nobody had intervened on behalf of. Now, as adults, they are being told they are to blame for the position they are in, as if when they blew out the candles on their 18th birthday, they stopped being victims. These aged-out children are then having children of their own who end up back under DCF management creating a cycle when the reality is the services available often come at a cost to those who use them. As an example, a mother with substance abuse disorder, taking a prescribed medication such as suboxone, will be reported to DCF for having used their prescribed medication while pregnant and giving birth, calling it abuse and neglect. Now, if the mother is a woman of color, institutional racism plays a part and frequently that child will be removed from the care of its mother and placed into a foster home under DCF.

Law Enforcement Involvement

In Worcester we still heavily criminalize prostitution, most often arresting women or color for prostitution or solicitation. LIFT's goal is to find a way to encourage the city and police department to focus on demands, instead of those who are victims of prostitution, by targeting buyers.

According to a questionnaire by LIFT on their intake form, 99% of women who are accessing services say white men say white men were paying to access their bodies, but police have said that 70% of those arrested during prior demand stings were men of color. Victims have reported that during prostitution stings police are touching prostituted women to prove they are not officers and then arresting them, but, according to the police, they are not breaking the law "because they asked for it" by telling them to prove they are not police.

This is an issue of consent when officers are in a position of power. It is still legal in Massachusetts, and other states for police to have sex with people in their custody. Our laws are behind the times, many other states have enacted laws to prevent such occurrences.

1. Creating Alternatives to Incarceration (CATI)

LIFT currently works with the District Attorney's office on a pre-arraignment program where prostituted women are arrested, booked and sent to court where they are given the option of a low-barrier diversion program instead of facing charges. LIFT provides court advocacy, trying to keep women out of prison for prostitution or substance abuse related crimes. If a person agrees to be a part of the diversion program, they are connected with an outreach worker and helped to create an exit plan, have a substance abuse evaluation and attend 4 groups in 90 days, with no requirement to stop drugs and alcohol. The program is geared at connecting people to services to provide a foundation for recovery. Once people start to believe that they have a community and support, they start to believe that they have what it takes to make the scary changes that recovery requires.

2. Post-Incarceration

There is currently only one re-entry coordinator for all Worcester County women reentering the community after a prison sentence. We have lost many women during reentry because of the lack of resources and support upon reentry.

Question: What would you like to see around WPD stings and when was the last sting that WPD had and what are some of the best practices regarding actual stings for Johns? – Vice Chairperson Yang

Most places are moving away from arresting victims of sexual exploitation. Boston has not arrested prostituted women in years. In order to actually make an impact, the city would have to have operations across all forums where people are being exploited. This includes online, massage parlors and street based. Worcester has focused on street-based prostitution.

The police department did one online hotel sting. They had to shut the operation down because they did not have the capacity to arrest the johns that shown up.

Online there exists review boards online, called “John Boards” which is like Yelp for prostitution where buyers can go on and go different reports (“street walker reports” “massage parlor reports”) and rate the “product” that was purchased in Worcester. This is a tool that could be utilized by law enforcement, they know it exists, but they report not using them to drive operations because “they can’t get on them from city computers.”

Legislation

Criminalizing prostituted women does nothing except for put up more walls for those victims to exit and the only way to decrease prostitution is to put strain on the buyers to stop exploiting human bodies for money.

Nicole Bell and My Life My Choice are working to introduce legislation on February 18th, 2021 that is based on the equality model, decriminalizing prostitution and would implement a sliding scale of fine for buyers based on their income. This legislation would also provide for funding for exit programs and preventive programs.

Information on pending legislation will be available after February 18, 2021.

How can the Human Rights Commission and the public help?

Women’s programs are historically under resourced. Talking with legislatures to increase funding. LIFT is the only organization in central west that are providing services to prostituted women.

Question: Do you also advocate for the legalization of sex-work? I am curious where your personal stance is on that. – Commissioner Creamer

LIFT does not believe in the legalization of sex-work, they advocate for partial decriminalization or prostitution. Typically, most who enter prostitution do so because they do not have another choice. There are people who advocate for full decriminalization of prostitution and then there are people who advocate for the equality model. In Germany, when the sex trade was fully decriminalized prostitutions, it became a sex tourism site where workers have been trafficked in to mean demand. When you repeal the law, making prostitution legal, there will be an increase in

the market. As of right now, there is already not enough willing participants to meet the demand for commercial sex so if the increase occurs, the participants will be trafficked in. In places where prostitution has been fully decriminalized there has been an increase in human trafficking and organized crime and a cultural shift where women are viewed as less.

There can be no gender equality if one gender is for sale and if any woman is for sale, all women have a price tag on them. The equality model is the decriminalization of the selling under the belief that no one should be arrested for their own exploitation and regulating fines and penalties of those who buy.

Question: Regarding preventive education to young males before the age of 16 to end the idea that you can buy women of girls, what type of program would that look like? If we educate them earlier the demand should dry up. – Commissioner Robinson

The preventative program would be geared at undoing the damage caused by our culture, music and media which grooming young women and men to become perpetrators. There is no formalized sexual education in the schools. Pornography is being accessed earlier and earlier and much of what is being learned about sex by the youth is through pornography which has gotten increasingly more violent and degrading to women over time.

Culture Reframed is a great program model focused on talking about consent, respect and boundaries. For more information on Culture Reframed go to: <https://www.culturereframed.org/>

Question: Why is it that these of types of programs are not receiving funding? Why is it so hard to get resources, support, and funding to make this a successful program? Why can't we bring the Worcester Police Department and other agencies to the table and ask them to answer these questions as well? – Commissioner Lewis

These programs do not get funding because they are historically under-resourced. The population of women served are criminalized and villainized so funding programs often wonder “why bother?” There is bias in grant-making. Programs for women and people of color are historically underfunded. They will pour money into programs that are not impacting change instead of funding those that could make changes. It is time to have conversations with grant-makers and the state to make changes. Grassroots organizations attempting to make change are not funded until they can prove they can make have the funds to do the work.

Question: Has there been movement to fix the fact that it is legal for police to have sex with someone in their custody? – Clerk O'Callahan

That information was surprising. Nicole is not sure there has been movement to change that law. People assume that it will not happen, so there hasn't been a concerted effort to change it because we haven't seen such blatant cases like what happened in New York. Even when people hear about there being a lack of complaints against police departments in the state, they believe that it means they have good police departments, but it could also mean that there is not a accessible way to report without fearing retaliation.

Question: Being underfunded, are there funding sources that you are looking at in particular or things that can be looked at to help, in terms of bringing attention to being under resourced? – Clerk O’Callahan

Talking with legislators. Part of it is that LIFT is the only organization in Central West that are providing services for this population. That means one of two things, either the state does not care about prostituted women or they don’t trust an all women led organization. It is hard because of the stigmas attached to prostitution. We have not created resources for this population and then when we, as a community, do create those resources, we don’t fund them.

Question: Can you talk about the Governor cutting funding? – Clerk O’Callahan

The Governor just cut funding for homelessness. Many people experiencing homelessness are at risk for commercial sexual exploitation. Homelessness is a vulnerability. Safety is a basic human right. You cannot have safety without shelter. Cutting funding to support services for homelessness means that many programs will not be funded. Unfortunately, the services provided do not provide all the help needed to help those keep housing.

Question: Is there any sort of inter-cooperation with the city working to keep people housed and preventing homelessness? – Clerk O’Callahan

The city of Worcester is working on microunits for a housing first model support services. Often supportive services are not incredibly supportive. Many need additional support to get through every day. Supportive services need to be supportive or the housing first model does not work.

Question: Is there anything specifically in the city that the Human Rights Commission can do to move these needs forward? – Clerk O’Callahan

Looking at signing on to support the legislation and make a question to the city manage to look into the prostitution arrest records by gender, by race and then asking the police department to account for those reports and why the breakdown is what it is. There has been some work to change the mandated reporting laws, which is discriminatory by both gender and disability, which could use the commissions support.

Question: If you had the police department here today to ask them questions, what would you be asking them to consider? – Clerk O’Callahan

I would ask them to consistently target demand across all forums and to stop criminalizing exploited people.

Motion: Clerk O’Callahan motioned to request, in writing to the Worcester Police Department, a report answering the following question: How many people have been arrested for prostitution and solicitation in the last two years? And for the Police Department to provide the racial data for those arrests within that report. Commissioner Creamer seconded. Motion Passed with all in favor.

4. Annual Update and Discussion on Homelessness Outreach and Housing First Efforts with Evis Terpollari, Homeless Projects Manager, Worcester Health and Human Services

Since last year, the Department of Health and Human Services has been assessing the number of people in homeless shelters and the immediate response was there was a need to depopulate the shelters. With the help of City Manager Augustus the department has been able to open up several overflow shelters which opened between March and June 2020 (Ascension church, 44 Vernon and North High). In addition to that, the Worcester Vocational School, which was dedicated to those who tested positive for COVID-19 and also the DCU shelter were also opened. At the end of June, the Department had successfully housed over 40 individuals, a number of which were classified as chronically homeless. There was a medical approach taken in that there was Telehealth in shelters, access to providers, medication, and recovery. The Department had secured adequate care and shelter for those who were trying to remain safe and COVID-free. All these shelters were quarantined, those who arrived at shelters stayed until June. A considerable number of people were housed.

The Quality of life and Outreach responses continue to assess the needs of unsheltered persons and started engagement with those individuals. One of the agencies being able to assist in securing first and last months rent for people was Open Skies, which is an agency which the Department are still engaged with for referring people to various programs such as Seaspec program designed for chronically homeless individuals with disabilities. To qualify as chronically homeless the individual must at least one disability and/or 12 months of consecutive homelessness or 4 occurrences of homelessness in the last 3 years. That program has been a success because people can be connected to housing services and support rapidly which can provide phones to access people where they are at to provide service.

Another program is the BHJI, Behavioral Justice Initiative Program, a product of Masshealth, which helps people with open court cases to avoid rapid in and out of incarceration. Other programs, depending on the clinical needs of the individuals, can be used to connect individuals to CSU or helped to get medical treatment and long-term care.

Additionally, the Department of Health and Human Services was able to hire a part-time Recovery Coach who works hand and hand with the Department to provide services and connect individuals to treatment. Also, there is now a part time Community Navigator who is working with the Worcester County Sheriff's Office to address where the homeless population is going and being able to connect them with treatment, or housing, upon release from incarceration. The Homeless Strategist has been a huge resource in being able to analyze data and identify trends regarding homelessness.

Shelter Capacity

As it stands right now the following information are the shelters and their capacity:

1. Smock shelter – 50 beds (some availability)
2. MLK Shelter – 40 bed (some availability)
3. Hotel Grace (seasonal) – 50 beds (usually 1-2 free beds a night)
4. CMHA – Family units – 6 units can house approximately 23 people
 - a. Referrals required. DHCD must have denied.

5. Friendly House – city approval required
6. Abby’s House – 7 beds
7. YWCA Emergency Shelter – 13 units
8. Veterans, Inc. – 12 beds for male; 12 beds for females
9. HARBOR – 15 beds (some availability)

Individuals are able to go in and seek shelters at any of the 3 main shelters. (Smock, MLK and Hotel Grace).

City of Worcester Rental Assistance

Individuals may qualify for up to \$3,000 per tenant to cover rent, household expenses and utilities that a past due. There is a medium income average to qualify. There have been 5 agencies appointed to manage this. Applicants who have received other COVID assistance may still be eligible.

The five agencies managing this program are (1) Central Mass Housing Alliance, (2) Friendly House, Inc., (3) Open Sky, (4) Worcester Community Action Counsel, and (5) Worcester Community Housing Resources.

In the Works:

- Lewis Street Project: The Worcester Housing Authority has been approved for a 25-unit modular single room occupancy. This is an SRO project and funding is anticipated to close in March or April of 2021. Construction is expected to begin in summer of 2021. There will be a residential staff present and 24 homeless individuals will be able to be housed there.
- The South Middlesex Opportunity Counsel has submitted a preapplication to DHCD to build an 18-unit, modular, SRO. The hope is that DHCD will approve this application this year.
- The East-Side Community Development Corporation has a project to build a 21-unit tiny home village different than the SROs. Individuals would have a tiny home (approximately 300-500 sq. ft.) and a parcel. Open Sky has been designated by the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health to provide residential support services for this project.
- The Department of Health and Human Services is also working with Worcester Community Housing Resources in exploring several development parcels for addition units.

Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Counting of Homeless Persons

Every year HUD requests that the Department of Health and Human Services outreach workers to go out into the City and count the number of homeless individuals. On January 27th, 2021, the outreach team went out and counted the number of homeless individuals in the city. Preliminary numbers, for the entirety of Worcester County, have been provided to the Human Rights Commission but HUD has approved the numbers and allows them to be used publicly.

COVID-19 and the Homeless Population

The Department of Health and Human Resources has been very involved in the testing of potential COVID-19 cases within the City and are also assisting in COVID-19 vaccinations. About half or more homeless individuals had COVID-19 and nearly all were A-symptomatic. Individuals who tested positive were brought to the designated COVID-19 shelters. There was one life lost. This individual had additional health issues that may have contributed to their death.

Extreme Weather Conditions:

In times of extreme weather conditions, the outreach team attempts to locate individuals who are unable to access adequate shelter because of substance abuse or mental health disorder, to attempt to hand out gloves, shoes and/or other necessities.

Question: Do individuals have to qualify for disability, in the legal sense, in order to qualify for assistance and what would disability include? – Clerk O’Callahan

Disability qualifications are based on the HUD qualifications. Mental Health disorders are a disability under HUD. If an individual is dealing with substance abuse disorder, that is also a qualified disability. A majority of individuals outreach workers engage with, approximately 90-95%, have mental health disorders such as Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Depression, PTSD, etc. Often, they cope with drugs or alcohol. The efforts of housing first are to build developments that are adequate and clean and outside of the average landlord units or programs already in use. Part of the reason there are extra units being built is because sometimes there are all the programs in place but there are no units available for housing.

Question: Would a person not qualify under the HUD definition of disability if they have not applied for disability income or services through the state? – Clerk O’Callahan

If we were to wait for social security to define disability then there would be a long wait. Disabilities can be helpful in showing a person’s disability status, but when that is not available, outreach workers meet with, and gain the trust of, individuals then assist them in engaging mental health services and establish an intake, engagement and disability verification for the purposes of a COC application. There is a more targeted approach taken for individuals who meant the DMH level of services. There is a variety of different approaches that can be taken to figure out how to get those who are in shelters with serious mental illness into programs where they could receive the services they need.

Question: Is there a pro-active approach to providing shelter to LGBTQ and trans-individuals? - Clerk O’Callahan

There is a lot of emphasis placed on capturing the data to determine what type of shelters are most needed. Programs that target assisting LGBTQ and trans individuals are needed. Dignity, respect and love are what people should be experiencing when they walk into a shelter. Housing is a basic human right, not an entitlement by any means.

Question: How many beds are available for individuals over all in the City of Worcester? For families?- Vice Chairperson Yang

Overall, for individuals, there are approximately 200 beds. When it comes to families there is the Massachusetts Right to Shelter Law which requires that DHCD shelter families with children under the age of 21 who meet the income guideline requirements. For those who have been denied DHCD, referrals to catholic charities, Friendly House, Visitation House are available. CMHA can do referrals to DHCD. Legal Aid is available for those who have been denied DHCD.

Question: Is there an App to show available beds in live time?- Vice Chairperson Yang

No. There is *stigma free Worcester* which will give shelter and services information.

Question: Is there a formal training provided to the shelters regarding treatment of those staying at a shelter?

There is a working group called the Crisis Response Group who meet to discuss improving shelter care. Shelters should be run appropriately with dignity and respect for all. They address things such as: sending out questionnaires for what type of groups would be most appropriate and seeing how to bring health care to shelters.

Question: With COVID there will be an increase in eviction and homelessness. What is the medium income for the assistance mentioned earlier and how does one apply for those services?- Vice Chairperson Yang

Information about this program should be available on the Worcester Website, on the COVID resources page. The answer depends on the number of household members.

For more information: <http://www.worcesterma.gov/coronavirus/assistance>

Question: If people are interested in applying for a unit in the new housing developments, where would they apply? – Vice Chairperson Yang

All applications have to go through the Coordinated Entry System who keep track of all housing needs.

5. Election of officers

The current positions for election are: (1) Chairperson, (2) Vice Chairperson, and (3) Clerk. Nominations and self-nominations were accepted beginning with Chairperson. Vice Chairperson Yang nominated herself for the position of Chairperson for Vice Chairperson, Yang nominated Clerk O’Callahan. No Nominations for Clerk were posed.

Roll call was read for each officer for each position. Unanimous votes for both candidates.

Jacqueline Yang is now Chairperson Yang.

Elizabeth O’Callahan is now Vice Chairperson O’Callahan

There is an open vacancy for the Clerk position.

6. Black History Month Notice of Local Observances

Memo was shared with City Counsel
[20210202ccm \(5\).pdf \(worcesterna.gov\)](#)

Black Lives Matter 365 days year, 24 hours 7 days a week.

Its important to remember that Black History Month for those who are not black to sit back and listen. This is a moment to educate ourselves and let our black counterparts teach. Elevate black voices this month and every month.

7. Public Comment: No questions.

Motion: Amendment by Commissioner Lewis to have the Worcester Police Department appear at a future date to answer questions submitted by Nicole Bell, the counsel and the public regarding Human Trafficking. This amendment pertains to the motion put forth by Clerk O'Callahan earlier in the meeting requesting documentation from the Worcester Police regarding human trafficking. This Motion to Amend has been tabled for the next meeting because the Police Chief is scheduled to attend the June 2021 meeting as a follow up to the questions that were left unanswered in the December Meeting.

8. Adjournment at 8:41pm. Next Meeting: Monday March 1, 2021, 6:00pm.

- Presentation by Worcester Consumer Rights Program
- Continued discussion and development of questions for WPD (CSE et al)