

# Boston Human Rights Commission Public Meeting Minutes

October 28, 2020 at 5PM via Zoom due to COVID-19

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**Present:**      **Commissioners:** Chairwoman Margaret McKenna, Reyes Coll-Tellechea, Ben Goldberger, Leslie Harris, Leonard Lee, Anne Rousseau and Robert MacEachern  
**Staff:** Executive Director Evandro Carvalho and Executive Assistant Susan Helmy  
**Others:** Approximately 10 individuals from the public attended this meeting including Chief Karilyn Crockett and Age Strong Commissioner Emily Shea

## A. Introductions

1. Chairwoman Margaret McKenna called the Meeting to order at 5PM with a majority of Commissioners in attendance.

## B. Chairwoman McKenna and Executive Director's Reports

1. Executive Director Evandro Carvalho expressed appreciation for Chief Crockett's work towards closing the gap of the Digital Divide in the City of Boston. Additionally, Director Carvalho informed the Commissioners of his attendance in meetings with Chief Crockett and the Budgeting Office in regards to BHRC's FY21 Implementation Plan and additional staff hirings.
2. Chairwoman Margaret McKenna informed the Commissioners of her meeting with Boston Police Reform Task Force Leader Wayne Budd the following day. She also encouraged the Commissioners to look into policing in school as this topic would involve a great intersection of many BHRC project initiatives.
3. While the COVID-19 Health Inequities Task Force has not released their final report, Director Carvalho and Chairwoman McKenna are looking to schedule a meeting with Chief Marty Martinez.

## C. Discussion on Broadband Access: Mike Lynch, Boston Dept. of Innovation and Technology (DoIT)

1. Mike Lynch started this discussion with a PowerPoint Presentation of the City's current initiatives and goals toward bridging the gap of Digital Divide. Some of these initiatives include "Wicked Free WiFi" and hotspots in public libraries. He made it clear that these initiatives are not long term solutions. He spoke to what he believes is the biggest challenge and that is of Digital Skills and Connectivity.
  - a. Mike Lynch also spoke of the organization "Tech Goes Home" who received 1 million dollars in funding from the City of Boston. Tech Goes Home provides lessons, assistance and tools to those in need.
2. Isolated and vulnerable populations such as seniors have limited technical expertise. This means that when they are provided with a laptop or wifi router, they will need assistance in setting it up. However, during this COVID-19 pandemic, in-person assistance is not feasible while virtual assistance is complex.
  - a. Commissioner Emily Shea of the City of Boston Age Strong Commission who was in attendance of this meeting, provided a comment in the chat which stated that the intersection of digital access and social isolation is a

growing issue for older adults especially as related to COVID-19. Social isolation can have the same health impact as smoking 10 cigarettes a day.

- a. Commissioner Coll-Tellechea suggested reaching out to Mike Fresta who is the Director of AARP in Massachusetts. AARP could be a good partner in addressing the needs of seniors and older adults.
    1. Commissioner Shea of Age Strong informed the Commission that AARP has teamed up with UMASS Boston's Gerontology Institute to lead a task force in ending isolation and loneliness.
  - b. Chairwoman McKenna made a comment that hospitals that support those in recovery, remote learning for kids and immigrants need help connecting remotely.
3. Mr. Lynch also provided the Commission with data and information of the three major Broadband providers, Comcast, Verizon and RCN along with their current efforts to help individuals during this pandemic.
- a. Comcast and RCN have offered an "internet essential package" which is an affordable plan for households to connect to broadband.
  - b. Chairwoman McKenna made a comment that if an individual is eligible for free lunch that should be enough for determining the eligibility of discounted internet programs.
4. Mr. Lynch also informed the Commission that the current funds in the Digital Equity Fund will not last for much longer. The funding for these various projects and initiatives are very important as providing laptops and internet access are expensive.
- a. To date, the City of Boston has provided 70,000 Chromebooks to those in need which has cost a total of \$10,000,000.00. This cost does not include tune-ups for the devices.
  - b. Commissioner MacEachern inquired as to the accessibility to the purchase of broadband connectivity.
    - a. Mr. Lynch stated that Comcast has accessibility all over the City of Boston while Verizon has plans to build more infrastructure. RCN is a smaller organization and has no more funding.
5. Mark Racine along with Mike Lynch estimate that 5-10% of residents in Boston do not have any internet connectivity. This is about 15,000 households. Additionally, Mr. Lynch stated that there are many City of Boston employees that do not have access at home. Many individuals simply rely on their broadband access at their workspace.
- a. Commissioner Reyes made a comment that the eviction epidemic will only exacerbate this issue.
6. Next Steps for BHRC
- a. For our next Commission Meeting, Chairwoman McKenna suggested that BHRC invite individuals that are in recovery, healthcare and senior housing. These individuals and their story will help better understand the challenges of broadband access.

#### **D. Discussion of International Human Rights Day**

1. Chairwoman Margaret McKenna suggested that BHRC invite a guest speaker such as Ibram Kendi to our International Human Rights Day event on December 10th. She suggested that the event start with an interview of Mr. Kendi followed by a discussion by local leaders.
  - a. Commissioner Goldberger suggested that we have another academic become guest speaker if Mr. Kendi is unable to attend.
  - b. Commissioner Harris stated that this would be a great kick off event and suggested some local leaders such as Harold Cox.
2. Commissioner Coll-Tellechea suggested the start of a Black Lives Matter Series since Executive Director Evandro Carvalho informed the Commissioners that Commissioner Lee, who spearheaded this topic, does not want this even to be a “one and done event.”
  - a. Executive Director Carvalho also suggested that BHRC form subcommittees and this could be the start of the first subcommittee.
3. Chairwoman McKenna suggested that BHRC hold events quarterly to bring important topics such as this to light.
4. Next Steps
  - a. Send an Invite Letter on behalf of the Boston Human Rights Commission to Ibram Kendi.
  - b. Commissioner Harris will help search out local leaders that are doing work in this area.

#### **E. Public Comments**

1. Haroon Rashid provided a comment that Crispus Attucks was the first individual to fight for Human Rights.
2. An individual by the name of Rowan asked for assistance and advice. Rowan is a non-binary transgender individual who was turned away from COVID testing due to not wanting to identify as a he, she or they when asked by Clinic Staff. Rowan was advised to reach out to Executive Assistant Susan Helmy with more information.
3. Elena Taborda asked about the timeline of the additional staff hirings and where the job posting would be announced. Executive Director Carvalho informed her that the PRC hiring process will take a while but the job posting will be posted as soon as they can.

#### **F. Votes**

1. Two votes were taken during this meeting.
  - a. Majority vote of approval of the September 30<sup>th</sup> 2020 Meeting Minutes.
  - b. Unanimous vote to adjourn at 6:30pm.