

# Boston Human Rights Commission Public Meeting Minutes

February 24th, 2021 at 5PM via Zoom due to COVID-19

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**Present:** **Commissioners:** Chairwoman Margaret McKenna, Reyes Coll-Tellechea, Ben Goldberger, Leslie Harris and Anne Rousseau (Robert MacEachern and Leonard Lee were absent)  
**Staff:** Executive Director Evandro C. Carvalho and Executive Assistant Susan Helmy  
**Others:** Approximately 5 individuals from the public attended this meeting

## A. Introductions

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

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

1. Executive Director Evandro Carvalho expressed his gratitude to those that were able to attend the "Human Rights and the Black Man in America" event last month. This event had 50 individuals in attendance and has been posted on YouTube.
2. Director Carvalho also informed the Commission that he and Chairwoman McKenna have met with various City Councilors such as Julia Mejia and Ricardo Arroyo. The purpose of these meetings were to introduce the Commission to the Councilors so that they can get an understanding of the dynamics, mission and priorities of the Commission.
  - a. The Director will provide a letter he received from Councilor Flynn. In this letter, Councilor Flynn asks that the Commission continues to be a strong supporter for LGBTQ residents, and take proactive steps in preventing acts of discrimination against LGBTQ+ residents and other communities.
3. There are four additional staff hirings that are in the works. The goal is to have these individuals hired by the end of the fiscal year. These new staff positions are Policy and Research Analyst, Investigator, Program Manager and Education and Outreach Manager. Additionally, the Commission has two PhD graduate students completing an internship for the spring semester. One intern will conduct research on the Digital Divide and the other intern will conduct research on the successes and failures of other Human Rights Commissions.
4. Director Carvalho has been in contact with Chief Karilyn Crockett in regards to the BPD reform task force recommendations. Determined in the previous Commission meeting, Director Carvalho sent a letter to former Boston Police Commissioner and then Chief of Staff Dennis White requesting a status on the implementation of the recommendations.
  - a. Chief Crockett informed Director Carvalho that the City is in its final stages of hiring the Executive Director of the Office of Police Accountability & Transparency (OPAT). She is also in contact with BPD

about developing Diversity and Inclusion Unit, and the Use of Force recommendations among other things.

5. Chairwoman Margaret stated that the Commission should look into the diversity and number of women in the first ever Boston Fire Department Cadet Program.

### **C. Discussion on Broadband Access**

#### **1. Mark Racine, Chief Information Officer of Boston Public Schools (BPS)**

- a. Mr. Racine started his opening remarks with the two factors that have gone into the issue of the digital divide: device and internet connectivity.
- b. In regards to the device, 55,000 to 60,000 chromebooks have been delivered to students. There were 1,000 chromebooks that were repaired over the February winter break. There are some students that are using personal devices and this is around 29% of students.
- c. In regard to internet connectivity, Comcast developed low cost plans such as "Internet Essentials." This plan is free for 60 days. BPS has been able to provide families with a voucher and pay for the program once the 60 days have ended. However, signing up for this program has proved to be a big problem. Comcast provides the subscription form. This form asks for sensitive information that many families are hesitant to provide.
  - a. Additionally, call centers providing assistance to families are only in English or Spanish, leaving many families who speak other languages without proper support. .
- d. A typical situation is as follows: BPS hands the family a voucher, the family calls Comcast to get it set up but has trouble connecting or sometimes gets sold a higher plan (upselling). This leads the family to not want to reach out again to BPS or Comcast to get help simply because they do not feel like they will receive any. This has led to a low turnaround in the vouchers. BPS was given 3,000 vouchers, 2,000 vouchers were given to families and only a fraction of that have been used.
- e. BPS has a direct line to Comcast and a representative that works with the Schools and this has proven to be one of the biggest help in assisting students and families to get connected.
- f. In regards to feedback of speed of the internet, BPS used to rely on survey data but since everything is done through Zoom, BPS can see the speed and providers of the students logging into their classes.
  - a. According to this new data, there have not been any disparities in terms of the speed of the internet within the Boston neighborhoods but there is a big disparity in providers within the neighborhoods.

#### **2. Joel Wool, Special Advisor for Policy and Planning at Boston Housing Authority and Lydia Agro, Chief of Staff and Public Affairs at Boston Housing Authority (BHA)**

- a. Mr. Wool started his remarks with some background information on the Boston Housing Authority. BHA serves around 24,000 residents which is 9% of city residents. There are about 60 developments with 10,000 in

public housing and 14,000 with mobile vouchers. Of these residents, 40% are non- English speaking at home.

- b. During the summer of 2020, BHA conducted a survey regarding internet accessibility and connectivity. There were 700 responses with 75% of households stating that they had some form of internet. 1 in 3 of elderly/disable sites and Spanish speaking sites stated they did not have internet and 1 in 5 of family sites stated they did not have internet.
- c. Residents who do not have internet connectivity or are not well connected need 1-3 of the following items: affordable or free internet connection, a device or training.
- d. BHA notified the Commission that the City of Boston is paying to put fiber optic cables in city buildings which includes BHA developments. Once this is established, BHA will work on getting this internet connectivity in the public areas of the developments.
- e. It was also stated that like BPS, BHA has a direct representative that works with them but not a direct line to provide their residents with.

#### **D. Discussion of Federal Civil Rights complaint against the City of Boston for discrimination against Black and Latin owned businesses**

1. The Black Economic Council of Massachusetts, the Greater Boston Latino Network, and Amplify Latinx filed the complaint with the Department of Justice and Department of Transportation, days after Mayor Martin J. Walsh's administration completed a study showing that just 1.2 percent of nearly \$2.2 billion in procurement from 2014 to 2019 went to Black- and Latino-owned businesses.
2. Mayor Walsh signed an Executive Order shortly after the release of the Disparity Study. In this Executive Order, the City of Boston will make it a goal to utilize at least 25% minority- and women-owned businesses across all contracts awarded in any fiscal year,
3. Chairwoman McKenna stated that procurement is done throughout the government and that the Commission should find out who the members of the advisory board committee are and their goals.

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

1. There were no public comments made during the meeting.

#### **F. Votes**

1. Two votes were taken during this meeting.
  - a. Majority vote of approval of the December 16<sup>th</sup> 2020 Meeting Minutes.
  - b. Majority vote to adjourn at 6:25pm.