

Boston Human Rights Commission Public Meeting Minutes

April 28th, 2021 at 5PM via Zoom due to COVID-19

Present: **Commissioners:** Chairwoman Margaret McKenna, Reyes Coll-Tellechea, Ben Goldberger, Robert MacEachern and Anne Rousseau (Commissioners Leslie Harris and Leonard Lee were absent)
Staff: Executive Director Evandro C. Carvalho and Executive Assistant Susan Helmy
Others: Approximately 25 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 stated that during the Covid-19 Pandemic, there has been an uptick of hate incidents against the Asian American & Pacific Islanders across America. Here in Boston, 70 thousand residents or 10% of the population identify as Asian.
2. The Human Rights Commission has been leading an effort, along with the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Advancement, Boston Police Department, Office of Neighborhood Services' Chinese and Vietnamese Liaisons, the Office of Fair Housing and Equity, and the Office of Race and Resiliency to combat this issue citywide. Commission staff has met with Asian Community Leaders and Organizations to identify ways the City can provide comprehensive support to Asian Citizens.
3. An "Anonymous Incident Report Form," has been drafted and circulated in this space. This form will be for individuals that have witnessed or were victims of a hate crime and want to report it anonymously. This form will be available on HRC's website once it is finalized.
4. Director Carvalho closed his remarks with informing the Commission that a statement has been drafted in response to the verdict on George Floyd's jury trial. This statement was signed by Chairwoman Margaret McKenna and will be posted on HRC's website.
5. Chairwoman began her remarks on a letter that was drafted on behalf of the Commission to Mayor Kim Janey urging the Mayor drop it's Appeal in the *Smith vs City of Boston* discrimination case. This case not only involves an exam that is not even used anymore but many of the plaintiffs are retired police officers. This case is currently docketed and will most likely have a September hearing date. This case has gained the attention of the US Department of Justice who has also urged the City to drop it's suit. If the city goes forward with this suit, it could jeopardize precedent in civil rights. A majority of Commissioners voted that this letter should be sent to the Mayor.

C. Hearing on Broadband Access

1. Kathryn Cohen, Esq, Director, Government Affairs and Public Policy for the Massachusetts League of Community Health Centers

- a. The League is Massachusetts' Primary Care Association, representing and serving the state's 52 community health center organizations, serving patients at more than 300 access sites across the Commonwealth.
- b. Nearly three-quarters of Boston's Federally-Qualified Health Centers (FQHC) patients identify as a racial or ethnic minority. The patient population at health centers looks very different than that of other providers: 15% uninsured, 49% Medicaid, 10% Medicare.
- c. Vulnerable communities in Boston with limited or unaffordable broadband services can often find themselves cut off entirely from video telehealth. Results from an ongoing survey conducted on 16 Massachusetts community health centers demonstrates that the majority of health center patients have done visits predominately over the phone; with 85% of visits conducted via phone and 15% via video. However, the lack of reliable internet means choosing a video visit is not an option.
- d. Others do not have a strong enough internet connection to support video technologies. As an example, for a successful video telehealth visit, many health center patients need translation services that require more intense broadband power.

2. Lily Clemente, AmeriCorps member and ESOL instructor for immigrant adults

- a. Ms. Clemente is an AmeriCorp member that works as a virtual English teacher at the Boston International Newcomers Academy in Dorchester. This is a public high school that serves immigrant students and their families.
- b. The Academy has given out chromebooks, however, these chromebooks can only be used with BPS access and this is the only way that classwork can be completed. Many students and families have tried to log on through their phone, if their internet is not stable but class work cannot be completed or be effective this way.
- c. Ms. Clemente's partner Hannah is a rising 2L at Cornucopia Law School in New Haven Connecticut. In her free time, Hannah finds individuals who want to donate old laptops, specifically MacBooks and refurbishes them. The Academy has paid for any parts for the laptop that might be needed. Hannah reiterated that though that while this has been successful, access to a device does not mean that individuals have access to broadband connection.

3. Nikki Shults, Executive Director of Little Brothers - Friends of the Elderly, Boston

- a. Little Brothers - Friends of the Elderly (LBFE) is a small nonprofit dedicated to relieving isolation and loneliness among the elderly, this is done by community-based intergenerational programming.
- b. A recent Pew study found that 75% of people over 65, and only 44% of those over 80, use the internet. Only 46% of older adults with annual incomes lower than \$30,000 go online and only 27% of low-income older adults have high-speed internet at home.

- c. Ms. Shults stated that access to technology is a social determinant of health. Access to technology means three things: the ability to own or access a physical device, affordable, high speed internet connectivity, and support/training to use it.
- d. This past year with the help of the City of Boston LBFE distributed tablets with prepaid data plans to program participants who needed them, and deployed student volunteers to host regular weekly CitySites programs via Zoom. Older adults however aren't online and it is not because they aren't interested but due to lack of broadband access. Too often technology is considered through a narrow lens of youth and students - but older adults need to be centered in the conversation.

4. Carl Richardson, ADA Coordinator, MA State House

- a. Mr. Richardson serves as the State House ADA Coordinator. He has also served on Boston's Disabilities Commission for 12-13 years.
- b. In terms of internet connectivity in the disabilities community, it comes down to three items: economics, accessibility and access to equipment and training itself.
- c. Economics refers to affordability of broadband itself. Accessibility refers to the ability to view or interpret information. Mr. Richardson stated that many individuals might be able to access the internet but need some sort of accommodation such as an interpreter for ASL.
- d. This leads us to the last item which is access to equipment and training. Mr. Richardson stated that he uses a \$500 computer to work on but has about \$4000 of equipment attached to the computer such as a screen reader and a braille device. Not only are these items very expensive but training needs to be conducted to learn how to use these items.

5. Joanne Chambers, 76 year old resident of Roxbury, MA

- a. Joanne stated that for the past 2-3 months, she has had little to no internet connectivity. She currently has Comcast.
- b. Joanne uses Zoom to connect with the community organizations that she is a member of but she is oftentimes unable to get on Zoom due to the poor connectivity. She has called Comcast 2-3 times a week. They have done many system "refreshes" and have come to change her modem twice but nothing has changed.

6. Professor Sinan Erzurumlu, Babson College professor

- a. Professor Erzurumlu stated that access to technology is a vital necessity. At his research with Future Labs, it has been found that many adults aged 50 and older are socially isolated in ways that put their health at risk.
- b. Social isolation and lack of social engagement is as detrimental to the health of the aging population as the COVID-19 pandemic, arguably worse.
- c. He also stated that access to technology has a three part component to it: device access, broadband access and digital literacy skills.

7. Lungelow and Martin Family, Dorchester resident

- a. Tracy is a resident of Fields Corner in Dorchester. Her young nephew spoke to his experience with the Digital Divide. He stated that he attends a BPS

school and due to his internet connectivity, he misses out on a lot of school work. He states that it often freezes and then kicks him out. It also does this when he and his family tries to watch a movie.

- b. Tracy spoke to an incident that happened today. She serves as a caretaker for an Alzheimer family member. In order to track this family member or get in touch with him, she uses a specific device that is connected to the internet. Today the internet went out and when this happened, she had to run from one household to another to make sure that her family member was okay.
- c. Tracy informed the Commission that she was told that she was not eligible for Verizon Fios because it was not offered in her neighborhood. However, a neighbor that lives a street over from her has Verizon Fios. Tracy stated that her internet connection was bad prior to the pandemic but the pandemic exacerbated it. Tracy was using her phone as a hotspot in order to testify at this hearing.

8. Paulette Durrett, Senior Citizen of Mattapan

- a. Paulette is a retired educator who volunteers with many senior organizations such as AARP, Mass Senior Action Council, Seniors on the Move, Elder Health Care Disparities and the Kroc center.
- b. Paulette stated that she lives on Mattapan Street in Mattapan and she does not have access to 311. When she informed the City about this, they stated that they were working on it. However, this was 8 months ago.
- c. Additionally, Paulette called Verizon in regards to this issue and she was told that they only have certain geographical areas that they are working on and have not gotten to her residential area.

D. Votes

- 1. Three votes were taken during this meeting.
 - a. Majority vote of approval of the February 24th 2021 Meeting Minutes.
 - b. Majority vote of approval to send Mayor Kim Janey a letter urging the Mayor to drop it's Appeal in the Smith vs City of Boston discrimination case.
 - c. Majority vote to adjourn at 6:28pm.