

# Boston Human Rights Commission Public Meeting Minutes

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

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**Present:**      **Commissioners:** Chairwoman Margaret McKenna, Reyes Coll-Tellechea, Leslie Harris, Robert MacEachern and Anne Rousseau (Commissioners Ben Goldberger and Leonard Lee were absent)  
**Staff:** Executive Director Evandro C. Carvalho and Executive Assistant Susan Helmy  
**Others:** Approximately 18 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 started his remarks by informing the Commission that he had recently gone before the City Council in regards to the FY22 budget.
2. In regards to the Anti-Asian hate initiative, Mayor Kim Janey has agreed to hold a meeting for AAPI City of Boston employees. This is a result of the Commission leading a “working group” with other City Departments and external groups to combat the rise of hate incidents against AAPI residents. The purpose of this session is to create a safe space for colleagues to share their experiences during this tough period.
3. Director Carvalho also stated that he has begun to form another internal City Department working group to brainstorm ideas on how the City can better support the LGBTQ and Transgender Community. This was prompted by the killing of Transgender Activist, Jahaira DeAlto in Dorchester. One of the ideas that came out of this working group is holding a “listening session event” next month, which is also Pride Month.
4. Director Carvalho ended his remarks by informing the Commission that the Commission’s website has been revamped and now includes a brief mission statement, commissioner name and biographies, intake form, upcoming meetings and public statements.
5. Chairwoman McKenna stated that a letter was sent to Mayor Kim Janey urging her to drop it's Appeal in the Smith vs City of Boston discrimination case, which Mayor Janey ultimately did.
6. Chairwoman McKenna then went into a brief presentation to start off the conversation of the Digital Divide. This presentation included statistics that we have heard in past meetings and a brief recap of the experiences we heard from the last Commission meeting.

### **C. Councilor Ed Flynn's Remarks**

1. Councilor Flynn thanked the Commission for having this important discussion and for the work towards this Digital Divide initiative. He stated that he recently hosted a Digital Equity hearing.
2. Councilor Flynn also stated that he is encouraged to see the Commission come together with other City departments to brainstorm on what the city can do to combat Anti-Asian hate. The Councilor stated that the district he represents has a large percentage of residents who identify as Asian American Pacific Islander.

### **D. Hearing on Broadband Access**

#### **1. Angela L. Holm, Director-Government/Regulatory Affairs, Comcast**

- a. Ms. Holm began her remarks with a brief history and overview of Comcast. Comcast has the ability to cover close to 100% of Boston neighborhoods. Comcast is both fiber and cable based. Comcast deployed their Internet Essentials plan for 50 mbps for \$10 a month. They have also started constructing Lift Zones or “wifi on steroids.” Some of the hurdles that Comcast runs into is affordability, digital literacy skills and adoption, not infrastructure.
- b. Commissioner MacEachern made a remark in regards to storefronts. He stated that in his own personal experience and that of the experience of others, the accessibility of storefronts is one of concern. He stated that the one located in Dorchester was run down and he could not return his equipment there. He had to drive 30 mins to a store in the suburbs. He inquired as to how the locations of the stores are determined. Ms. Holm stated that Comcast has a contract with the City of Boston which entails storefronts and geographic location. There are currently 7 stores in Boston. Additionally, Comcast has a relationship with UPS and 7/11 convenience stores.
- c. Commissioner Coll-Tellechea asked whether Comcast limits or monitors speeds of each neighborhood. This question was asked because recent data has shown that only 62% of speed tests conducted in the City for over one year proved target speeds of 25 Mbps. Ms. Holm stated that Comcast does not throttle or limit speeds.
- d. Commissioner Coll- Tellechea asked a question regarding the “up to ..” language provided in advertisements and contracts stating that this language means that the service provided will not be consistent, however the rate of pay is. Ms. Holm stated that this language was placed by the lawyers in the advertisements and contracts. Normally, however, the speeds you pay for

through Comcast is the speed that you are provided. However, sometimes when the speed is not up to par, this is usually “user error” or outdated equipment such as an old modem. Ms. Holm stated that some individuals have a separate modem that might not even be a Comcast modem.

**2. Rebecca Fracassa, Director of Community Impact, Comcast**

- a. Ms. Fracassa stated that Comcast has worked with Tech Goes Home in the past and will continue to work with them. In regards to Chairwoman McKenna’s remarks about language accessibility, Ms. Fracassa stated that information regarding the Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB) was distributed in 15 different languages. Also, when a phone call is made to Comcast, there is an option to tap into a language line that offers service in 7 different languages.
- b. In regards to debt forgiveness, Ms. Fracassa stated that bad debt was forgiven for those that were enrolled in the Internet Essentials program.

**3. Virginia Lam Abrams, SVP, Communications & Government Relations, Starry, Inc.**

- a. Ms. Abrams opened her remarks with a brief history and description of Starry. Starry originated in 2018 and it is a fiber wireless network. It is new and currently moving into new neighborhoods for the first time, Starry is the current provider of 425,000 households in Boston. Some of the hurdles that Starry runs into is lack of affordability from individuals, credit checks and exclusivity service agreements of buildings. Exclusivity service agreements means that a building will only advertise or allow a certain provider to put their fiber network line into their building. This is a common practice of building with 50 or more units and in 75% of interactions with Starry. Since Starry needs the permission of the building owner to put their fiber line, this proves to be a significant hurdle.
- b. In regards to Commissioner Coll-Tellechea’ question regarding throttling, Ms. Abrams stated that Starry, under the FCC prohibition, does not monitor speeds unless there is an unusual spike in activity.
- c. In regards to debt forgiveness, Ms. Abrams stated that Starry forgave all debt for all of their customers, not just those in their Starry Connect program.
- d. Commissioner Coll- Tellechea asked a question regarding the “up to ..” language provided in advertisements and contracts stating that this language means that the service provided will not be consistent, however the rate of pay is. Ms. Abrams stated that Starry publishes a Performance Report on their website on a consistent basis in an effort to show transparency. Additionally, Starry users have an app that allows the user to conduct a speed test. A user

can contact customer service when the speed test concludes that they are not getting mbps they are paying for.

- e. Commissioner Harris inquired as to linkage and whether anything has been done to help low income individuals who cannot afford the service or the funds to buy a new modem. Ms. Abrams stated that Starry Connect, which started in 2018, is \$15 a month, does not require the individual to be on any other kind of federal assistance and does not require a credit check. This program entails a partnership between Starry and public and affordable housing organizations such as the Boston Housing Authority. To date, Starry Connect has been placed in 30,000 public housing units.

#### **4. Stephanie Lee, State Government Affairs, Verizon**

- a. Ms. Lee began her remarks with a brief description and history of Verizon Fios. Verizon Fios started in 2016 and is a 100% fiber optic network. Verizon Fios started in Nubian Square and moved into Dorchester, Jamaica Plain and Hyde Park. Verizon Fios currently covers about 70% of the city. It is now being placed in Downtown Boston and then will move into Beacon Hill.
- b. One of the hurdles that Ms. Lee indicated that Ms. Abrams also mentioned - the permission of building owners. This issue was further exacerbated by the pandemic when individuals and families did not allow or want technicians to come into their homes.
- c. In regards to Commissioner Coll-Tellechea's question regarding throttling, Ms. Lee stated that because Verizon is an all fiber network, each block is dedicated to a specific fiber line and is not monitored under any circumstances.
- d. In regards to debt forgiveness, Ms. Lee stated that Verizon did not charge any fees during the pandemic and that individuals who had a balance were worked with individually to be put on a payment plan.

#### **E. Votes**

- 1. Three votes were taken during this meeting.
  - a. Majority vote of approval of the April 28<sup>th</sup> 2021 Meeting Minutes.
  - b. Majority vote to adjourn at 6:32pm.