

Minutes of 22 July 2020 meeting of the Northampton Human Rights Commission

Commissioners present: Karen Bellavance-Grace, Booker Bush, Laurie Loisel, Davina Miller, Nural Mohammed, Megan Paik
via Zoom

Meeting called to order at 5:34 pm

Minutes of June meeting

Motion to approve by Commissioner Bush

Second by Commissioner Mohammed

Approved unanimously

CoVid-19 Era Emergency Housing for Homeless Neighbors

The Commission welcomed Ahalya Raman, staff person at Servicenet, and specifically at the emergency shelter at Northampton High School from March - May and continuing at the Cot Shelter and Grove Street housing was our guest.

Ahalya shared the following conditions and concerns and answered Commissioner's questions.

The following reflect our guest's comments as well as conversation among Commissioners:

- After the High School closed, when there were approximately 30-some guests, some people were moved to the Cot Shelter, and some to Grove St - under maximum capacity in normal times, but reduced for covid guidelines. (The Chair of HRC is aware of at least one person who was not moved to housing when the high school closed)
- Both shelter locations began closing from 8:30 am to 4:30 pm even though there were no options for cooling either at a city-sponsored center or in public libraries or cafés, both of the latter being previous strategies for people to remain cool and hydrated in summer weather. The city was slow in rolling out cooling centers and while they were open for 100 degree temperature days, 90 degree days can be equally debilitating. A city official suggested that shelter guests could go sit under a tree as a cooling strategy.
- A help center is open on Tuesdays and Thursdays offering case work support and a space to be temporarily inside, however the space is severely limited per covid guidelines and

insufficient for shelter from the elements. These are also the two times a week that shower facilities are open to the public, whether or not you are a guest of the shelter

- Our shelters are at capacity. Our city's need is beyond that capacity. Shelter staff create capacity by asking guests to leave (kicking them out). Those that leave are not completing a program or meeting milestones or moving on to other housing: it is punitive - sometimes for infractions of rules, sometimes because of the times we are in.
- There is insufficient affordable housing for our shelter guests to move into. In one case, shelter guests have been on a Northampton Housing Authority waiting list for two years, and they are likely to have to wait two more before an apartment will be available for them.
- Representative Sabadosa has been contacted about requiring hazard pay for shelter workers, and the HRC can contact the Representative for her work on this front.
- What landlords require - both in terms of up front cash and recent landlord history - makes moving into housing extremely challenging.
- Governor Baker has extended the stay of evictions through the end of October, which will coincide with the start of cold, even wintry weather - a terrible time to contemplate a potential explosion of evictions. Neither our city nor ServiceNet (nor even our Commonwealth) is currently prepared to handle.
- It remains unclear why the temporary shelter at the high school closed as abruptly as it did and as early in the season when there were still three months before school would be scheduled to start and it was still uncertain whether and how school buildings would be used in September.
- The chair of HRC noted that as a volunteer at the high school temporary emergency shelter she became convinced of the need for year round shelter in Northampton moving forward - closing shelters at the end of April until the beginning of May is not consistent

with our mandate for basic human rights.

- The Commission learned that Worcester has launched a new ‘microunits’ housing project - could microunits or ‘tiny houses’ be part of a path forward in Northampton?
- Commissioner Loisel noted that the Resilience Hub - one of the recommendations of the Mayor’s panhandling report last winter - is a project on the fast track since the pandemic hit. She will follow up with Northampton Planning Director Wayne Feiden to learn the timeline.
- Asked what immediate needs the HRC might advocate for, Ms. Raman noted especially:
 - Space to take refuge from high temperatures and summer downpours during the day
 - Reusable water bottles
 - More public water stations (like the one in Pulaski Park)
 - More accessible rest room options. There are port-a-potties that are frequently overflowing
- There is also an ongoing need for shelter services in Northampton for people who cannot arrive sober (known as ‘wet shelters’)

The Commission discussed people we would like to hear from on the issues of homelessness, the resilience hub, and extending the eviction moratorium.

We also want commissioner Bush to be clear in the priorities of the HRC as he takes his place on the Police Commission Task Force which begins work in August.

The Chair will ask the Mayor to fast track new members to the extent possible.

Motion to Adjourn by Commissioner Bush

Seconded by Commissioner Miller

Meeting adjourned at 7:03 pm