

**Report  
to the  
Northampton City Council  
Committee on Social Services and Veterans Affairs  
on  
Activities of the Northampton Human Rights Commission  
by  
Carol Rinehart, Chair  
October 2011**

**Introduction**

The report that follows covers activities of the Northampton Human Rights Commission (NHRC) since the last report to the city council provided by Heather Johnson in January 2010. The commission continues to refer to the founding charter established in 1998. We understand that our charge is to:

- a) Monitor and respond to human rights issues that arise in Northampton;
- b) Raise community awareness of human rights issues by supporting and sponsoring public forums, voicing concerns and through community media;
- c) Participate in the city government by presenting issues to the City Council and Committee on Social Services and Veterans Affairs for their response;
- d) Receive and respond to complaints of possible discrimination brought by people living and working in Northampton who feel that their human or civil rights under the law have been violated,

The report will review our service to the community during 2010 and 2011. It will conclude with a list of the challenges and opportunities for continued attention to human rights in Northampton.

**Human Rights Issues As They Arise on Northampton**

Although our primary human rights focus is local, national and international concerns may be felt in local ways. We believe we are all interconnected as are all actions, small or far reaching. For this reason, the NHRC has adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) as our guiding document for educating ourselves and testing issues that come to the Commission. At one time, Northampton listed itself as a member of the Anti-Defamation League's No Place for Hate Campaign. This program fell away in late 2009 when many communities' human rights commissions withdrew in protest against that organization's resistance to recognizing the history of Armenian

genocide. In response to this dilemma, the commission made a commitment to adopt the UDHR and reaffirmed our commitment to provide the types of programs that had been encouraged under No Place for Hate.

Citizens and representatives of community organizations often bring issues to the Commission for possible sponsorship to the City Council. Through this process over the past two years the City Council has passed:

- Annual endorsement of a living wage goal under the Living Wage Resolution originally adopted in 2008;
- A Resolution to Bring the War Dollars Home—passed with some modifications after a public forum was conducted in June 2010 so that many differing points of view could be heard;
- A Resolution of disagreement with the state of Arizona’s controversial immigration laws (brought forward by NHRC and American Friends Service Committee);
- A Resolution asking that our state legislators add transgender rights for protection under Massachusetts anti-discrimination law;
- A Resolution to Preserve the Civil Rights of Immigrants in Northampton (brought forward by the Bill of Rights Defense Committee and American Friends Service Committee)
- Sponsorship of a panel discussion for veterans, “The Things They Carried and Still Carry” in conjunction with the city-wide On The Same Page community program related to the book selection, *The Things They Carried*, by Tim O’Brien;
- Observance of a Moment of Silence following a Mayoral Proclamation on the National Day of Holocaust Remembrance at the request of NHRC.

In our role as speakers and educators on human rights issues, commissioners have published letters and editorials in the Daily Hampshire Gazette and served on panels on the issues reflected in the above resolutions.

Additionally, commissioners have served on the panel that allocates Community Development Block Grant Program and on the On The Same Page Planning Committee.

Sara Weinberger represented the NHRC in two or three profound dialog sessions with military family members and other community members as an outgrowth of the public forum on the Bring the War Dollars Home Resolution.

**NHRC members have been active participants in annual events marking the December 10 anniversary of the passage of UDHR, as well as the annual Gay Pride Day and Transgender Pride Day events.**

***Response to Discrimination Complaints and Human Rights Concerns***

***Relatively few formal complaints have come to the commission in the past two years; however, in addition to these formal complaints, members of the public have stepped forward to voice concerns during our public comment period.***

***Formal Complaints***

<b>Issue</b>	<b>Actions Taken</b>
Job discrimination (Complainant had also filed with MCAD)	Two commissioners met with the executive director and board president to talk about the issue and other concerns that have been brought to NHRC about this employer. Information was exchanged about the efforts of the agency and the resources of NRHC.
Housing discrimination based on transgender identity	Inquiries with MCAD indicated this incident would not be protected by the law as it now stands. Referrals were made to advocacy organizations. Efforts were made to contact the building owner who arranged for his lawyer to meet with commissioners. Changes were made in the building after a commissioner made inquiries on the person's behalf with the City. The complaint was dropped when the aggrieved individual relocated from Northampton.
Job discrimination based on gender at a local restaurant	The employer was notified and quickly responded with a statement that the candidate was given misinformation by a non-manager and is welcome to apply for a position. The employer also indicated a plan to offer sensitivity training to all employees.
(Current) Transgender discrimination relative to access to bathroom and shower facilities	Currently not under the protection of law. A review of the agency letter reveals compliance with the law; however referrals to the Stonewall Center for support to the individual and sensitivity training for the agency are underway.

**Public comments (Individuals did not file formal complaints)**

<b>Issue</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
<p>Northampton Police handling of</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Treatment during an arrest</li> <li>b. A youth complaint about a threatening anonymous telephone call.</li> </ul>	<p>NHRC members contacted the police department for an explanation of their handling,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Northampton Police made a presentation to NRHC regarding their practices and methods for maintaining accountability standards relative to arrests.</li> <li>b. In discussion with a commissioner, a police representative outlined steps taken to support the family and investigate the concern within the limitations of the case.</li> </ul>
<p>Pioneer Valley Coalition Against Secrecy and Torture (PVCAST) considered requesting a resolution be taken to City Council</p>	<p>PVCAST elected to drop the effort in order to concentrate on the Bring the War Dollars Home resolution.</p>
<p>Hampshire Student Sanctuary Project concerning illegal immigrants</p>	<p>The students requested ideas for their organizing activities.</p>
<p>Northampton High School student group, STAND</p>	<p>Requested financial support for their project concerned with the needs of the Sudanese people. Individual commissioners gave support.</p>
<p>Supporters of a gender discrimination in housing complaint</p>	<p>Commissioners listened carefully and followed up with inquiries with the housing inspector for the city.</p>

**Educational Presentations to the Commission**

Chief Sienkiewicz – arrest policies and practices of Northampton Police

City Solicitor Elaine Reall – Open Meeting Law

Gordon Shaw – Mass Justice Project and fair housing issues

**Looking Ahead: Human Rights Challenges and Opportunities in Northampton**

Northampton is a city that expects the best from itself. The members of NHRC have identified several areas for increased and improved attention by the commission and for the city. We intend to bring these to the City Council and the Committee on Social Services and Veterans Affairs as issues arise.

- In conjunction with Human Rights Day (December 10) NHRC will invite the city's service agencies to an informational session on December 1 in order to

expand communication and information exchange in order to facilitate referrals and support for citizens who may need a place to explore possible discrimination.

- NHRC will continue to support dialog events across political differences such as its recent sponsorship of a veterans panel at the World War II Club
- NHRC will continue to welcome and support
  - Concerned residents requesting examination of ways that *world and national human rights issues* impact Northampton policies;
  - All concerns and efforts to monitor and protect *the safety and rights of immigrants* as a major concern in our nation and in our city;
  - Programs supporting *minority residents* of color and speakers of English as a second language;
  - Efforts to address *economic health and concern for disparities* in Northampton, including the Living Wage Campaign;
  - *Gender justice*, including concerns for the rights and safety of transgendered people;
  - *Youth initiatives* concerned with human rights issues, including availability to assist their projects and assure youth inclusion in human rights projects.

### **NHRC Commissioners During 2010 and 2011**

Richard Hernandez (Current)

Pauline Jovens

Robyn Linde

Natalia Muñoz (Current)

Emily Odgers (Current)

Carol Rinehart (Current)

L’Tanya Robinson (Current)

Wanda Rolon (Current)

Linda Stone\*

Michael Stotts\*

Mia Kim Sullivan\*

Sara Weinberger (Current)

### **Advisory Board**

Marjorie Hess

Heather Johnson

**\* Completed long terms of service to NHRC. Special thanks to Linda, Mia and Michael for their many contributions to Northampton during their tenures.**