

ALEXANDRIA HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION
MINUTES OF THE MEETING TUESDAY, JULY 15, 2025
7:00 P.M., City Hall
301 King Street, Room 2000
Chet and Sabra Avery Room

Members Present

April Breslaw, Vice Chair
Lisl Brunner
Matt Harris
Elisabeth "PJ" Palmer Johnson
Megan Prince
Tom Reeder
Sam Schwartz, Vice Chair
Jon Thompson, Chair

Staff Present

Paul Valenti, Director
Miladis Martinez Gutierrez, Adm. Support

Members Excused

Marc Bendick
Manisha Maniyar

Members Unexcused

Conrad Sylvanus
Iulia Fratila
Kara Pitek

1. Call to Order/Introductions

Chair Thompson called the meeting to order at 7:01 p.m.

2. Approval of June Minutes

Upon motion by Commissioner Harris, seconded by Commissioner Prince, the Commission approved the minutes of the June meeting as amended. Commissioner Palmer Johnson suggested the following changes to the June minutes.

Commissioner Palmer Johnson reported that the Commission for Women received a presentation from AEDP staff regarding small businesses, particularly women-owned businesses. The percentage of businesses in Virginia that are women-owned is 23.8%; moreover, the percentage of businesses in Alexandria that are women-owned is 27%. Virginia has a greater percentage of women-owned businesses than any other state in the United States except Hawaii. The percentage of businesses in Hawaii that are women-owned is 24.7%. Therefore, Alexandria has a greater percentage of women-owned businesses than most states in the United States. She announced that, on June 28, there will be an NAACP town hall meeting with Congressman Beyer, J.D. Spain, and someone from Fairfax. The NAACP town hall meeting will feature EDDC Congressman Don Beyer, Alexandria City Councilman John Taylor Chapman, Arlington County Board Member Julius "JD" Spain, Sr., and Virginia Delegate Marcus B. Simon.

3. Executive Committee

Pride Event Re-cap

Chair Thompson reported that the Pride Event was very well attended this year and also reported that they received over 140 signatures in support of the rainbow crosswalk in Del Ray. Chair

Thompson noted that they will be collecting signatures at the Farmers Market in Del Ray, and they hope to collect over 200 signatures. He also stated that he talked to Councilman McPike about the possibility of doing a Pride display in Del Ray, but he made it very clear that they want a crosswalk. Commissioner Reeder said that he spoke with Pat Miller and tried to represent what Daniel Roth said at the last meeting, and she said in no way was he speaking on behalf of the board. Chair Thompson said that he tried to reach back to Mr. Roth to discuss coordinating with the entire business association and get a sense of what they would recommend, and also to try to find a time when the Commission can do one of the ICE training courses. He reported that Mr. Roth had not gotten back to him.

Chair Thompson also reported that he attended the Pride event held by the West End Business Association and said that they are also interested in working with the Commission to provide ICE training for their Businesses. He reported that these are industrial businesses, employing a lot of people, and they felt this policy could be impacting their businesses. Chair Thompson noted that they were notified that the phone number on the yellow cards might not be working because there have been staffing issues at the non-profit that is supposed to be answering calls. He suggested reaching out to the Legal Justice Center to see if those cards are still active.

Chair Thompson informed the Commission that Commissioner Harris and Commissioner Maniyar will be the new members of the Executive Committee. He also reported that it will be helpful to have three subcommittees composed of two commissioners, and each subcommittee will be responsible for a specific area. He also said that he would like someone from the subcommittees to give an update during the liaison report part.

The first subcommittee will be the outreach to the Council. Commissioner Harris suggested drafting protocols so that when they communicate with the Council, they do not offend anyone. Chair Thompson said that when they are speaking with someone from the Council regarding their role on the Commission, they are communicating a message that is not their message, but it is the message of the Commission. He also said that anything that the Commissioners say to the Council member in that role is something that they, as a Commission, have a consensus about. He also stated that the communication needs to be given and delivered to all Council members, not just a select few. Chair Thompson stated that since they do not have any volunteers to serve on this subcommittee, the Executive Committee will take on this responsibility.

The second one is a subcommittee on reaching out to Non-Profit Partners. He reported that Commissioner Brunner and Commissioner Bendick volunteered to serve on this subcommittee. He also stated that Investigator McClure has an extensive list of all the non-profits that the Office of Human Rights has worked with in the past. He asked that this subcommittee, every month, check in with one or two of these non-profits; just call them and ask if there are any needs, if they have seen any uptake in services, or need for services; and in any way that the Human Rights Commission or the City of Alexandria might be able to assist or provide more resources.

The third subcommittee is about Community Events, and he said that the Office hosts a lot of events that happen throughout the year. It will be helpful if the Commission can attend those events and participate in tabling. Commissioner Fratila and Commissioner Pitek volunteer to serve on this committee.

4. Introduction of the Director of the Office of Human Rights – Paul Valenti

Chair Thompson introduced Paul Valenti, the new Director for the Office of Human Rights. Mr. Valenti stated that he comes to Alexandria from Florida and brings approximately 25 years of Human Rights and Civil Rights work to the city. He started as an investigator in Connecticut and moved to some leadership positions at the local level in the state of Florida. He also served as the Director of the Miami District of the EEOC and, most recently, in Civil Rights with the City of Tampa in the Human Rights Office.

Director Valenti stated that the City is warm and welcoming, and said that he is fortunate to have inherited a dynamic staff; it is a good team, and they write exceptionally well, so it is a wonderful feeling.

Commissioner Brunner asked to hear more of Director Valenti's vision for this position and other lessons that he thinks he can apply here. Mr. Valenti said that he is a big advocate of being in the community and being of service to the community we serve, so he feels it is critically important to be out there to make sure that the community receives the information about the function of the office. He also stated that we will be relying on the Commission to work in partnership to identify opportunities to engage with the community.

Director Valenti expressed that he is learning so much from the staff and also mentioned that with some personal changes that may be happening soon, there is an opportunity to do a little reorganization to recognize some of the more senior staff and give them more elevated duties. It involves creating a career ladder or path for new employees who might come in, so that there is a growth opportunity.

Director Valenti said that he is more than curious that the Non-Federal partner at HUD is now going to be moving to Alexandria and noted that our office is not a FHAP agency, and that means we do not have a contractual relationship with HUD. He informed that every agency that he had the privilege to lead was a designated FHAP agency and had an MOU with HUD. He said that he is going to explore the opportunity of having a contract with HUD, and noted that it also brings revenues, just like the contract with the EEOC.

Director Valenti said that he is contemplating some reorganization to gain career goals internally in the office. He is also hoping to ramp up the office training activities or offerings and make an impact on the community. He hopes to help the City navigate the developments at the Federal level to ensure that we do not jeopardize the federal funds.

Commissioner Harris mentioned that they used to receive updates from the office on topics that were of concern to the Commission, like a legal briefing. He suggested having a briefing before the commission meeting. Chair Thompson mentioned that one of the things that cropped out past year is that their role as the Human Rights Commission is solely focused on addressing discrimination that happens not only within the community, but also in the City Government office, and knowing when there is an issue; being aware of if someone is accusing a department of discrimination in the Police Department or at any other department or agency. Commissioner Schwartz mentioned that they used to get charts with the number of claims within City offices and the general nature of the claim, such as the protected class, so that they could see trends over time, and said that they do not have access to that information anymore. Chair Thompson mentioned a specific case where there was a verdict, and they did not find out about it until they read the newspaper. They were unaware of the allegation that had been made. He said that he does not know if this is a necessary issue with the office or the City itself communicating with each other. He suggested setting up a system where any allegation of discrimination against a

protected class would be immediately transferred to the office of Human Rights. He suggested keeping the commission aware of what is going on. Mr. Valenti stated that he will try to get the information and keep the Commission updated on issues.

Chair Thompson stated that it will be beneficial for the Commission to receive a list of cases that the office accepts, and it will be good to get them twice a year, just so that they can have a sense of how many complaints the office receives and what the complaints are about. Commissioner Schwartz suggested compiling the desired data categories, returning them to the office, and then hearing from the office as to which one the office can provide. Director Valenti proposed to share with the Commission the report that they use to prepare yearly in two places where he used to work. Chair Thompson stated that if Director Valenti finds the office needs help with tracking or has not been tracking, he does not want the office to feel that the Commission will be upset by that; we should be starting now. He does not want the Commission to put more pressure on the office staff.

Chair Thompson stated that he wanted to invite everyone to have this discussion about where they see the commission moving forward this next year. He said that they have seen an immense fear within the immigrant community; those who are here undocumented and those who are here on a temporary status. He thinks that is a big part of what this commission is going to have to deal with moving forward in the coming year. He believes that another part of that is assisting the non-profit groups that are trying to help those who are facing economic hardship. He also mentioned issues with the school board and students having First Amendment rights and ensuring those rights are protected. Commissioner Reeder reported that the Commission on Aging is hearing reports of an increase in age discrimination among job applicants.

Commissioner Brunner talked about the federal employee resource network and said that the idea is a full one-hour session of legal advice for federal employees who have been laid off. She noted that access to justice in that area could be a real need, and that is an area that interests her. She said that there is a considerable gap in the capacity to afford assistance, particularly in cases involving adverse proceedings such as eviction proceedings. She noted that some states are looking into licensing professionals to represent people in these proceedings.

ARHA Outreach

Chair Thompson stated that he will try to invite the ARHA CEO to the September meeting, and also possibly invite Kevin Harris. Commissioner Palmer Johnson suggested going through the ARHA CEO Executive. Chair Thompson said that the Commission would like him to speak about the changes that they are seeing with ARHA units, moving residents from older ARHA units to new development, all the new construction that is going on, and also about the complaints from the residents and how responsive they are to residents' requests. Chair Thompson suggested having Kevin Harris, residential representative, come to speak to the Executive Committee Meeting, and invited everyone to attend. He said they can communicate with the entire commission about what was communicated to them and then be ready with questions for the following week when Mr. Johnson comes to the full commission.

Commissioner Harris suggested ensuring that Mr. Johnson attends the September meeting before inviting Kevin Harris.

5. Old Business & New Business

Avery Amendment

Upon a motion by Commissioner Schwartz, seconded by Commissioner Harris, the Human Rights Commission will not meet in August. All Commissioners present voted aye.

6. Liaison Reports

Commissioner Reeder reported that the Commission on Aging takes a two-month break in the summer, so they did not meet in July. However, he noted that he had forgotten to mention in the last report that they had elected their new officers for the coming year. He reported that Michael Schuster is going to stay as Chair, but will chair with DT Oliver, the Vice Chair is Ana Rivas Beck, and the secretary is Kimberly Koch.

Commissioner Palmer Johnson reported that the Commission for Women does not formally meet in July. Women of the Commission met in their respective subcommittees, said that the Advocacy Healthcare met at the Alexandria Health Department. She reported that Alexandria released its 2025 State of Health Report on Tuesday, July 8th at 6:30 p.m., at the Nannie J. Lee Recreation Center. The Alexandria Commission for Women will be reviewing the report, and one of the things that they found in the report that they were concerned about is the fact that the Alexandria teen pregnancy rate is so high. She reported that they are going to be looking at the different groups, because at present, they find that the pregnancy rate for Hispanic teens has dramatically increased. She specifically wants to look at how the data was collected because that could have some implications. The Commission for Women plans to incorporate those findings, as well as the conclusions of the Alexandria Economic Commission, into its new Status of Women Report, which will be given to the Mayor and City Council. She also reported that the Commission for Women has an in-person planning retreat on Saturday, August 9th, from 12:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m. at the Mark Center.

Commissioner Prince reported that the Alexandria Commission on Persons with Disabilities heard a presentation about the proposed design for the new City Hall renovation project. She reported that they were provided with some of the exciting things that they are going to do for accessibility, but they had excluded all of the other things that they should be doing for accessibility; so, it was a very productive meeting. She also reported that they elected the new officers and said that she was elected Chair. She also noted that they have a new staff person, who is the ADA Coordinator for the City, Delante Wade. She added that they had the ACPD awards in June and had some awesome people recognized. She reported that at the last meeting, they had Housing 2040 coming and presented on the Housing 2040 Master Plan and talked about their initiatives and how horrific it is in terms of what they set aside for accessible housing for people with disabilities, which is a 2% requirement. She also reported that ACPD does not meet in August.

7. Announcements/Adjournment

MOTION: Adjourn the meeting.

Commissioner Palmer Johnson/Commissioner Schwartz PASSED unanimously.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:25 p.m.