

**City of Worcester Human Rights Commission Minutes**  
**VIRTUAL & IN-PERSON MEETING – Monday, April 4, 2022, 6:00pm**  
Video available online: <https://play.champds.com/worcesterma/event/1235>

**Members Present:** Elizabeth O’Callahan, Edward G. Robinson, Guillermo Creamer Jr, Ellen Shemitz, Jorge Lopez-Alvarez

**Members Absent:** Jacqueline Yang, Charles Hopkins, LaToya Lewis, Lillian Chukwurah

**Staff:** Jayna Turchek

### **1. Call to order and Introductions**

A quorum was established, and Chairperson Yang called to order. The Chairperson welcomes members of the commission and those present and introductions of those in attendance as well as roll call were taken.

Chairperson began with an acknowledgement of the traditional, ancestral, territory of the Nipmuc Nation, the first people of Massachusetts and those whose land we are convening on tonight. While the Nipmuc history predates written history, records from the 1600s inform us that the original inhabitants of Worcester dwelled principally in three locations: Pakachoag, Tatasset (Tatnuck), and Wigwam Hill (N. Lake Ave). It is important to make this acknowledgment and to honor the ancestors that have come before us. It is all too easy to live in a land without ever hearing the traditional names and the history of the people who first resided and prospered in these lands and continue to reside and prosper.

The Human Rights Commission was established to promote the city’s human rights policies. It is the policy of the City to assure equal access, for every individual, to and benefit from all public services, to protect every individual in the enjoyment and exercise of civil rights and to encourage and bring about mutual understanding and respect among all individuals in the city. Our work requires us to address institutional racism so that as a community we can achieve racial equity. Our work also requires us to make visible the unheard, unearned, and unquestioned privilege enjoyed by some members of our community to the detriment of others. We take time to make this acknowledgement, to educate, so a path can be cleared for healing.

The term “**institutional racism**” refers specifically to the ways in which institutional policies create difference outcomes for different racial groups. The institutional policies may never mention any racial group, but their effect is to create advantages for whites and the oppression and disadvantage for people from groups classified as people of color.

The term “**racial equity**” is the active state in which race does not determine one’s livelihood or success. It is achieved through proactive work to address root causes of inequalities to improve outcomes for all individuals. That is, through the elimination or shifting of policies,

practices, attitudes, and cultural messages that reinforce differential outcomes by race or fail to eliminate them.

The term “**privilege**” describes the unearned social power and informal institutions of society to all members of a dominant group. For example: “white privilege” and “male privilege.” Privilege is usually invisible to those who have it because we are trained to not see it but nevertheless it puts them at an advantage against those who do not have it.

## **2. Approval of Meeting Minutes**

Approval of the meeting minutes for the March 7, 2022, Human Rights Commission meeting.

## **3. Reflection and discussion on the impact of Florida’s Parental Rights in Education Act.**

**Commissioner Creamer:** We wish to start this meeting by creating a safe space to acknowledge what is happening in the state of Florida and other states as well. As a proud LGBTQ Latino who is a lifelong resident of this city and with some of the most recent things that have been happening such as within our middle schools flying of a pride flag now getting some hate for that. There is no place for hate. Especially in a city like Worcester. We are a powerful city because of our diversity, because of the unique qualities that all the residents bring to the table when forming such a beautiful city. As the second largest city in New England, we really are somewhat of a pillar and an example to many of our surrounding towns and cities. It is extremely important for the Human Rights Commission to reiterate the fact that LGBTQ families have a safe space in this city. We want to make sure that we are honoring that, and we are creating that safe space for, not just residents, but for the students in our city, for LGBTQ families, who are being forced to be silent, and ultimately just reminding us all that just because you may not identify within that does not mean that someone that you love doesn’t. I know that we have a school committee and a city council that would strongly be in favor of enforcing our security and rights for LGBTQ families. As a commission this is where we stand: we care deeply for all residents of the city, including our LGBTQ individuals and families alike.

**Commissioner Shemitz:** I have a question to pose to our host, Jayna. I have read somewhere that there is opportunity for flags to fly down at city hall, in addition to the state and the city one. I wonder, at this time of division, if it is worth asking the City Council if we could be flying a flag to show our support for diversity and inclusion. I think many of us thought that we had, sort of, moved forward in a more inclusive manner but perhaps it’s all the more important, when the rest of the country is not really doing that, to make that statement very visibly.

**Jayna Turchek:** For those of you that many not be aware, the City of Worcester has a policy and procedure on the City’s website to request to fly a cultural flag, be it a cultural observance or a civil observance. It is a very simple process. Just provide your contact information and the date to request the flag. If we don’t have the flag within our collection then you can drop off a flag for us to fly, so long as it is keeping with our City of Worcester Human Rights Policy. If the

commission wishes to put that to a motion, I would be happy to grant that request as I am the one who receives those requests directly so I will accept a verbal request.

Commission motion and passed to request to fly the progressive pride flag.

#### **4. Vote on Support of the Resolution to Deprioritize Law Enforcement on Entheogenic Plants and Fungi**

Last month the commission held a hearing to discuss the resolution to deprioritize law enforcement on Entheogenic Plants and Fungi. Commissioners were provided with a written copy of the full testimony provided during the February and March meetings.

##### **Sarko Gergerian (Winthrop, MA)**

I work in law enforcement by day, and I am a practicing psychotherapist at night. I am grateful that the commission is taking this request into serious consideration, this request to deprioritize these plants and fungi. From the attention of law enforcement, I would like to say that it blows my mind that the substances in question are shown, have been shown, and are known for thousands of years to be helpful and healing, are convoluted and intertwined with the mess we are currently in being highly processed synthetic lab-based chemicals. Please, when taking this into consideration, don't mix the two. They are different. We do not have a state of emergency based on these substances; they are not addictive in the traditional sense. They are shown to be highly effective in helping people. It is a tragedy that we are heading in the direction of only allowing access after a diagnosis. Oregon has made it possible for adults to access mother earth for self-care and I think if you, all, move in that direction you will be doing something in-line with social justice. It is very important for people, including my brothers and sisters working as peace officers. Thank you for your time.

##### **Devin Dickinson**

Tonight, is about more than making plant medicines available to those who need them. It is about ending the war on drugs. It is about individual and spiritual freedom. It is about social and environmental awareness, protecting us from predatory people and companies and it is about saving lives. I've given my story about my experience with these medicines and provided ample evidence. Every week a new city seems to be deprioritizing these plants. Worcester is a beckon of hope and education should be leading the efforts to get this done. There is no excuse or reason to keep the laws as we currently have them. There is no benefit in incriminating hundreds of thousands of innocent people, most disproportionately people of color. There is no benefit to our current model of mental healthcare. There is no benefit on wasting tax dollars on ruining families and no benefits to letting out vets and first responders suffer for their service. There is no benefit to keeping people away from loving themselves and the world. We need to change the laws and the status quo. Now is the best time, as it always is. Please don't shy away from saving lives and turning tomorrow to a better direction. Please vote yes to support this resolution and that will be a change the people need.

Commissioner Shemitz motioned for the commission to support a resolution to deprioritize law enforcement for Entheogenic plants and fungi. Commissioner Robinson seconded. Unanimously passed on a roll call vote.

**5-10. Acting chairperson O’Callahan requested items 5-10 be taken together on a vote. No discussion. Commissioner Shemitz motioned to approve items 5-10. Commissioner Creamer seconded. Unanimously passed on a roll call vote.**

5. Recommendation to post all Executive Orders on the City of Worcester webpage.
6. Request for update on progress with drafting body camera policy and department wide body worn camera implementation
7. Request update on when WPD Records Bureau Service window will reopen.
8. Request status report of WPD Racial Equity Audit (as set forth in the February 2021 Executive Order)
9. Request status report of creation of Division of Investigations within the Human Resources Department (as set forth in the February 2021 executive Order)
  - Please provide a statement of duties and responsibilities and explanations of how this division will work with the WPD Bureau of Professional Standards on complaints and training oversight.
  - Please provide an explanation as to how this division will work with public complaints regarding city employees.
  - When and where will the public be able to access this information on the city webpage?
10. Request status update on the Worcester Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Committee’s recommendations that the City of Worcester leave civil service.

**11. Vote to amend the March 7<sup>th</sup> requests for information from WPD.**

Clarifications:

Q #15 – Civil Service Exams making them more equitable. Is there a way to make it so that people of color who have years of service can also get points equivalent to the points given to those who have a family member in or previously in service? Agreed to leave question 15 as is and wait to review WPD response before making specific recommendations.

Q # 5 – Previously there was a way to physically go into the police department to request and receive an unredacted copy of a report of a crime for which you were a victim. At some point last year, a notarized letter became required to get said copy. It was clarified for us that the change was a result from victims’ advocates that for some entering a police department could be uncomfortable, so a notarized letter was a way to allow someone to request their own police report, unredacted, without having to step foot into the police station while also ensuring that unauthorized people are not able to get that unredacted report. The amendment for tonight is to amend so that hardcopy copies of notarized requests can be made by mail or in person, but to

also add an option for victims to be able to present in-person to make the request with a valid government issued photo ID.

Information came out today regarding drone technology being proposed through the council. Add request to review that proposed policy once it becomes available. What was provided was vague and open-ended language which would be beneficial to review.

Commissioner Shemitz motioned to approve amendments to information request. Commissioner Robinson seconded. Unanimously approved on a roll call vote.

## **12. Notice of upcoming Election of Officers**

An election of officers will be held next month. The open positions are Chairperson, Vice Chairperson and Secretary. If interested in taking on a leadership role please consider putting your name forward or nominate another.

## **13. Adjournment**

Our next meeting will be May 2, 2022, at 6pm.