Summary of the HRC Community Conversation on December 10, 2014

In celebration of the 66th Annual International Human Rights Day, the Human Rights Commission hosted a community conversation on December 10, 2014 from 6:30 to 9:00 p.m. at the VBCPS Renaissance Academy.

The purpose of this event was to bring citizens together to discuss what they have in common, listen to community concerns and to identify the misunderstandings among the diverse cultures in our community. Attendees were asked in advance to provide major concerns in their community that they would like to address in open discussions. The conversations were formatted on the top three topics: Education, LGBT and Living in the Shadows.

Commissioner Jim Parke opened the meeting with an overview of Human Rights Day. Special guest speakers were the Honorable Mayor William D. Sessoms, Jr., and District Manager for Congressman Scott Rigell, Shannon Kendrick who read a letter from Congressman Rigell. Also in attendance were 50 citizens, members of the Human Right Commission, Councilmembers Bob Dyer and Dr. Amelia N. Ross-Hammond, VBCPS Superintendent Dr. Aaron Spence, School Board Member-Elect Sharon R. Felton, Commonwealth’s Attorney Colin Stolle, Police Chief James Cervera, and Fire Deputy Chief Terrence J. McAndrews.

After a brief presentation about the HRC, former commissioner Zach Nissen provided an overview of the conversation topics and conversation rules.

Participants were asked two questions about each topic:

- What do you see or experience in your community in the areas of:
  - Education
  - LGBT
  - Living in the Shadows
- What steps are needed in each of these areas for improvement:
  - Education
  - LGBT
  - Living in the Shadows

The roundtable discussions were facilitated by HRC members and HRC chairman Cliff Rice delivered closing remarks.

The attached table reports provide the information scribed by each table facilitator.
Here are the common themes that emerged:

**What do I see or experience in the Education community?**
- Broader participation from community in mentoring program for schools; need to involve seniors as mentors
- We need Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) programs in every school. There are calls about high school students who are horribly bullied
- Virginia Beach has one of the highest populations of LGBT homeless youth
- LGBT youth need to feel safe
- There are 5 GSA clubs in the 11 high schools, and none in any of the VBCPS middle schools
- We need more stats on LGBT youth in our schools and ratio of African American teachers to students
- Parents need help to navigate through the school system from enrollment of undocumented children to understanding parent/student rights and the special services available
- Concern for the racial makeup of teacher/students
- Homeless students
- Requirements for Hispanic children to register for public school. The requirements differ at various schools

**What do I see or experience in the LGBT community?**
- Gay Straight Alliance in all schools
- Most incidents of bullying in middle/high school aren’t being reported because students are afraid of family hearing that they are LGBT
- Median age of identifying LGBT is 14, median age of coming out is 17
- LGBT numbers are increasing as more students “come out”. As a result, LGBT students are bullied in schools and are “dropping-out”
- “Coming out” is difficult enough without others casting harsh judgment
- We see lots of gay pride once the “coming out” has happened
- Bathrooms are an issue for LGBT community
- The schools are all over the place in response to how LGBT students are treated in the schools

**What do I see or experience in the Living in the Shadows community?**
- Homeless, undocumented immigrants, Muslims
- PREVALENT fear of deportation in Virginia Beach. Police in Virginia Beach profile Hispanic people so much. They’re often afraid to go out in certain situations, afraid of being deported
- Documented vs Undocumented
- In schools-some folks feel as though they are being questioned in a hostile way when registering for schools. Racial profiling in schools
- Undocumented aliens
- LGBT’s
• Homeless
• Muslim community (while they may have some visibility they are perceived as living in the shadows)
• Undocumented worker, abuse, some can’t register their children in school
• Religious differences
• Immigrants shipped out for minor offenses so scared to come forward for anything

Notes submitted by Table Facilitators

Table 1 - Facilitator Commissioner Elaine Scholl-Iglecia

What do I see or experience in the Education community?
• Broader participation from community in mentoring program for schools need to involve seniors as mentors
• Clearing house to connect volunteers with resources (NextDoor.com)
• More face to face forums

What do I see or experience in the LGBT community?
• More conversations in the community
• City Council appoint a commissioner who is openly LGBT
• Gay Straight Alliance in all school
• “That’s so gay”

What do I see or experience in the Living in the Shadows community?
• Homeless, undocumented immigrants, Muslims
• Attitudes are tied to social norms
• Opportunities for communication
• Get to know individuals and their stories

Recommendations:
➢ Become Ambassadors of Inclusive Citizenship Dialogue in our communities.

Table 2 - Facilitator 2nd VC Teresa Stanley

What do I see or experience in the Education community?
• African American students in Virginia Beach- there are a problem because there are not enough African American teachers in schools
  o Where are the role models?
• Significantly low participation of African American students in student government/leadership activities
• Financial gap-less money, can’t join clubs and organizations
• We need Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) programs in every school. There are calls about high school students who are horribly bullied
• Need more sensitivity toward African America individuals
• Ms. Caldwell noted the effort to train guidance counselors to help with these issues
• Virginia Beach has one of the highest populations of LGBT homeless youth
• LGBT youth need to feel safe
• There are 5 GSA clubs in the 11 high schools, and none in any of the VBCPS middle schools
• We need more stats on LGBT youth in our schools and ratio of African American teachers to students
• Shout-out to Mrs. Tina Garfield at Princess Anne High School! She’s a teacher making a difference

Recommendations:
- Hard thing to do is change the culture
- Economic prejudices - work to do away with prejudice
- Elitism - root of prejudice
- Civics classes
- Teach teachers (about these issues and how to be a part of the solution)
- Teach parents (about these issues and how to be a part of the solution)
- Hire more diverse teachers. The perception is out there that “if you’re brown, you’re not going to get hired.”
- Make the city a more welcoming place
- Create hiring and job protection policies
- Currently in Virginia, you can get fired for being gay
- Teachers need to have the protection to be openly LGBT role models

What do I see or experience in the LGBT community?
• The more steps forward there are, the more backlash
• Pride Celebration in Towne Point Park- 17,000 people- yay! Nat’l & Local leaders were there. There’s more support in some cases! But we’re still not there
• Dilemma. There’s progress and backlash with conflict (see above two)
• Cities can support with legislation, but if the general assembly doesn’t pass it, it can’t really be enforced
• Glouster school - transgender student bathroom situation. From discussion around the group there was the idea that the school’s response to the situation was appropriate and there was also the idea that the school’s response to the situation was inappropriate.
• Most incidents of bullying in middle/high school aren’t being reported
  • Students are afraid of family hearing that they are LGBT
• Median age of identifying LGBTQ is 14, median age of coming out is 17

Recommendations:
- More GSA clubs needed
  • Worth asking about whether all schools can have one says student initiation because of the mental health risk associated with not having them
    ▪ Superintendent indicated it wasn’t possible to mandate something like this
- Training police officers
- Mandate confidential counseling for LGBT students in schools
  • This is under resourced in schools today
City mandate that private businesses serve LGBTQ customers

What do I see or experience in the Living in the Shadow community?
- A lot of time, Hispanic speakers don’t have a language to express themselves
- PREVALENT fear of deportation in Virginia Beach. Police in Virginia Beach profile Hispanic people so much. They’re often afraid to go out in certain situations, afraid of being deported
- Stigma toward getting tested for HIV/AIDS
- Stigma has moved from gay community to black community. Black women have the highest rate of infection
- Documented vs Undocumented
- In schools- some folks feel as though they are being questioned in a hostile way when registering for schools. Racial profiling in schools
- Mental illness in Virginia, people are hiding. It’s hard to get help for these issues. A lot of attendance issues are probably related to mental health issues
- Virginia is the 48th most underfunded state in the union with respect to behavioral health
- Not a lot of addiction facilities in this region
- Mental health issues in jail. Vast majority of attacks in jails were by people with mental health issues. By giving meds, attacks went down by 85% 
- After leaving jail, many don’t have access to meds

Recommendations:
- Effort to hold Virginia accountable for moneys that were supposed to be given to local community for mental health needs
- Community health initiative to get people meds after release from jail
- State-level being welcoming toward immigrants. Be a welcoming community

Table 3 - Facilitator Commissioner Luis Rivera

What do I see or experience in the Education community?
- Lack of parent participation in the education of their children and within the school system (example lack of participation in Parent Teacher Student Association). Schools should do more to seek out increased parental involvement
- There is a disenfranchisement, disparity and disconnect of parents and students in the school system. Not enough resources for disadvantaged and parents. Forty percent of suspensions in VB schools are African American and minorities overall are failing at a higher rate
- Parents need help to navigate through the school system from enrollment of undocumented children to understanding parent/student rights and the special services available
- Push needed for minority parents to promote reading in the home
- More early childhood education is needed
• SOL’s are a joke! Avoid conditioning students to prepare for tests through repetition and get them to think (use their intelligence)
• Homeless children are a reality and they need help. Many have no address to register at school and 40 to 60 percent can be LGBT
• It takes a village to educate our children. Question that needs to be asked is, “How do we raise a child in a contaminated community/village?” The community in general needs to be aware of the challenges faced by students like bullying, peer pressure, illicit drug abuse, poverty, LGBT concerns and one parent homes
• If there is a failing school system, then restructure it. Take advantage of all resources available: governmental, professional, community and financial. Make all stakeholders vested in the education of all children

What do I see or experience in the LGBT community?
• LGBT numbers are increasing as more students “come out”. As a result, LGBT students are bullied in schools and are “dropping-out”
• Many LGBT students are forced to leave their homes by parents
• In order to survive, some LGBT students work in the sex trade thereby taking the risk of contracting sexually related diseases and/or HIV
• Hampton Roads is the 22nd largest AIDS afflicted area in US
• Some members of the community at large are anxious and confused about their understanding of the LGBT community. Some cultures are having a difficulty accepting LGBT and their members are more prone to be involved in bullying
• We are living in the Bible belt and religion/beliefs can drive thinking about LGBT’s

Recommendations:
  ➢ Parents and educators need to be trained about needs of persons with special interests and their concerns
  ➢ Gay Student Associations (GSA) needed in all public schools to help students with identity, bullying, etc. (not all participants were in agreement)
  ➢ Community should reevaluate “Right to Work State” issues that are discriminatory toward LGBT community and other employees. Your employment can be terminated for being LGBT without recourse
  ➢ “The key to dealing with the issues facing our community regarding LGBT, is courage to say it’s not correct to treat others wrongly no matter what their sexual orientation… The city should emphasize equality for all.” (Luis Rivera informed the group about efforts made by the HRC regarding LGBT, i.e. Letter to city council)
  ➢ Military (Navy) needs to be involved in educating service members Docks and ships have high incidence of sexually transmitted diseases
What do I see or experience in the Living in the Shadow community?

- Due to most table participants being unaware of the definition of the “Living in the Shadow community” discussion followed on, “Who makes up the Living in the Shadow community”?
  - Undocumented aliens
  - LGBT’s
  - Homeless
  - Victims and perpetrators of human trafficking
  - Mentally ill
  - Drug addicted and suppliers
  - Elderly living in poverty
  - Rape victims
  - Muslim community (while they may have some visibility they are perceived as living in the shadows)

- One participant spoke of her personal struggles living in the shadows for more than a decade as an undocumented alien. She shared about the fear she suffered from being detected and deported, until she was able to receive her green card and became a legal resident

- Many of the issues and concerns raised in the previous topics of Education and LGBT were reiterated as problems affecting the Living in the Shadow community

Recommendations:

- In the final analysis, participants believed that a greater emphasis should be made by city leaders and agencies to determine the needs of these communities and they should be brought to light in helping to educate every citizen to the plight of those less fortunate living among us.

Table 4 - Facilitator Commissioner Geraldine Hunt

What do I see or experience in the Education community?

- Classes are too large. Believe effective learning will better be served with smaller classes
  - No consistency in class size
  - Other systems pay higher salaries for teachers
  - What is the racial makeup of teacher/students?

- After-school programs are not available to older kids. The YMCA will only allow children up to age 13 to participate in the after school program. Kids did not have organized activities at the various locations

- Much discussion centered on requirements for Hispanic children to register for public school. The requirements differ at various schools

- Some schools offer programs that are not available in other schools. Is this based on social/economical/racial make-up of a community?

- Some students are zoned where there are 6 or 7 trailers, why?
Recommendations:
- Should have consistency in supervise activities for children
- Need to provide more programs for all ages
- Improve/better training for ALL OFFICE STAFF registering students who are entering Virginia Beach schools. All schools should request the same requirements
- Transportation should be offered throughout the community

What do I see or experience in the LGBT community?
- The schools are all over the place in response to how LGBT students are treated in the schools

Recommendations:
- Every school needs a GSA (Gay Straight Alliance). This would improve the atmosphere and lower tension in the schools
- Recreation Center should offer group discussion on LGBT
- Invite religious organizations leadership (Inter-faith) to a forum to discuss issues related to LGBT in all facets of life

What do I see or experience in the Living in the Shadow community?
- Undocumented worker, abuse, some can’t register their children in school
- Felons living in the shadows
- The hearing impaired “because it is an invisible disability
- More people need to know about neighborhood watch
- More than 40% of homeless youth are LGBT

Recommendations:
- Need more training for felons on their restored rights to vote
- HRC recommend to City Council to add voting rights/civil rights to the City Council Legislative Agenda
- Request that Police Captains stay longer than two years. It is difficult to develop a relationship when they change frequently

Table 5 - Facilitator VC Vivian Blaize

What do I see or experience in the Education community?
- Homeless students
- Food for students on weekends and holidays
- Virginia Beach Fest program for students
- Adult education
- Money set aside for new technology training
  - How to use the software
  - Computer training
- More apprentice programs highlighting basic tools for successful workforce opportunities
• Find out students’ passions, i.e. marching band, any extra circular activities that given them encouragement to keep involved in the learning process
• VBCPS does a good job keeping in communication with the parents via electronic mail, counseling meetings with parents, etc.

Recommendations:
- Don’t cut extra activity funding but expand it in the budget
- Must develop workforce skills appropriate
- Innovative options to keep students interested and involved
- Finding teachers who will champion and head extra circular activities
- Partnering between schools, business, and civic leagues
- Encourage lifetime learning

What do I see or experience in the LGBT community?
• Students are tolerant of each other
• Have gay debate to alignment with the LGBT community
• Let people be who they are without judging
• “Coming out” is difficult enough without others casting harsh judgment
• We see lots of gay pride once the “coming out” has happened
• Bathrooms are an issue for LGBT community

Recommendations:
- Meet more of the LGBT community to better understand their perspectives
- Accept LGBT as total persons not some oddity
- Bathroom signs should be unisex versus ladies/men’s rooms
- Be as tolerant as the millennials and students are of the LGBT community
- Let people be who they are not who we want them to be
- Treat them equally as straight persons are

What do I see or experience in the Living in the Shadow community?
• Religious differences
• Immigrants shipped out for minor offenses so scared to come forward for anything
• Focus on immigrants versus the real issues
• Fear by people who think ignorantly that immigrants take jobs, spread illness like Ebola, will overrun our economy, etc.
• Incitement of hatred from comingling with immigrants
• Ex-prisoners
• Drug addicts
• Mental health issues among people who surface sometimes with violence
• Rape victims both male and females

Recommendations:
- Awareness of who is out there
- More dollars allocated to mental illness
➢ Programs that will transition ex-prisoners back into society (not focusing on hard criminals i.e. murders)
➢ Not showing so much prejudices in rape cases where victims are afraid to come forward
➢ More prosecutions for rape victims

Through open dialogue participants engaged and listened in a very positive and respectful manner. They learned from each other by sharing their cultural experiences. Citizens left the meeting with a better understanding of others’ cultures. They expressed a willingness to assist the City by sharing their thoughts, ideas and ways they could increase civic engagement to build a more inclusive community as we celebrate our gifts of diversity.

Together we can achieve great changes and results. We hope these types of conversations will work towards aligning with the 2040 Vision of a diverse community where residents are seamlessly infused and celebrated throughout the neighborhoods.

The HRC recommends the following actions in order to assist:
➢ Send a letter to Dr. Aaron Spence highlighting the feedback received about VBCPS and seek opportunities to partnership and assist
➢ Send a letter to Police Chief Jim Cervera highlighting the feedback received about VBPD and seek opportunities for training, partnership and assist
➢ Recommend City Council to include some of these concerns in their General Assembly Agenda packet
➢ Send this report to attendees
➢ Post report on HRC website
➢ Continually educate and engage the public by improving and increasing ways for involvement
➢ Seek citizen, business owners, city and school employees input and understanding of their responsibility and roles
➢ Establish an HRC subcommittee to follow-up with community leaders to address specific concerns within their communities

In closing, we are hopeful this year’s conversation served as a means for our citizens to discuss and share their thoughts, experiences and recommendations on some very sensitive topics. Additionally, we hope this provides support to the efforts being made to ensure this great City is a ‘Community for Lifetime’ for citizens and visitors.