

Members Present: Sylvia Nery-Strickland (Chair), Beatriz Amberman, Heidi Daniels, Emiliano “Jojo” Orenca, Mark Stevens, Allison White, Rabbi Israel Zoberman

Staff Present: Stacy Hawks (Human Resources), Regina Hilliard (Human Resources), Shelley Johnson (Human Resources), Dominique McKinnon (HRC Liaison)

Liaisons Present: Councilman Michael Berlucchi, Deputy Chief Sean Adams, Jennifer Franklin (School Board Liaison), Rod Ingram (Deputy City Attorney)

I. Call to Order

The meeting was called to order by Chair Nery-Strickland at 4:05 p.m.

II. Roll Call

Roll Call of the Commissioners was taken. There was no quorum present in the meeting room; therefore, Commissioners Gunn, Hesseltine, Taylor and Thompson could not participate in the meeting from their remote locations. Vice Chair Jenkot, Commissioners Burnsworth, Lagoe and Lui were absent.

III. Minutes Approval

There was no quorum in the room; therefore, the Commission could not vote for the approval of the March 10th minutes.

IV. VBPD Presentation – Mental Health Initiative for VBPD Officers

Michael Gresham with the Virginia Beach Police Department (VBPD) joined the meeting to speak to the Human Rights Commission about mental wellness and resiliency initiatives for officers in the department. He reviewed the following approaches that the department is taking:

Proactive approach - Education on the signs of someone in distress. Peer support teams have doubled in size and are at every precinct. They are assigned and trained to look for signs of distress, and to reach out to officers having difficulties as connectiveness is effective with preventing mental health issues with officers. Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and 1-year check-ups with officers out of the academy to make sure they are practicing mindfulness.

Reactive approach – mental health counseling for PTSD and counseling for financial stress. Officers have critical incident debriefs with a mental health professional and peer support for office involved shooting or serious car accidents. Most of the time a peer support team member is there on the scene. If an event is very traumatic, within 48-72 hours, they bring all parties together with a mental health professional to discuss the incident.

Michael added that the goal of this initiative is for officers to be present and mindful when they arrive at a scene, and to make sure officers are the best versions of themselves during and after their service. The department is working with the City to hire a full-time mental health professional for all of public safety. They are working on lower the stigma on mental illness with medical health professionals going out to different command to be present and get officers used to having them around. They would like to eventually have a separate facility for officers to visit mental health professionals or members of the wellness team to help them and their families. The department is already partnering with outside organizations for family events and they currently have an equestrian program for the families. They want to hold 8 or 10 family events in the next year, outdoor activities to help with stress.

Deputy Chief Sean Adams reported that part of the hiring process is a psychological exam and in the academy that learn about understanding mental health as a responding officer and CIT training.

School Board Liaison Jennifer Franklin asked about using yoga as a mental wellness tool for officers and Michael stated that they suggest restorative yoga to the officers. VBStrong offers yoga classes to officers, and they are applying for a grant with the Department of Justice for funding for five train the trainers to teach mindfulness to law enforcement as a yoga practitioner. They currently teach officers breathing techniques to lower heart rate, making them more aware and more tactical.

V. Planning and Community Development Prestation - New HRT Bus Routes

Megan Gribble with the Planning and Community Development Division and Lisa Bleakley with the Resort Management Office joined the meeting to talk about two new HRT bus routes that provide more access to the Oceanfront.

The new trolley route – called the Oceanfront Connector, route 34/30T, will include service to the parking areas at the Convention Center and Sports Center. It will be a 15-minute service that is set to start May 15th and until the Neptune Festival with service only on Saturdays and Sundays from 8AM to midnight.

Route 960 – This route was updated to better connect Virginia Beach and Norfolk and stop at key areas for employees. It is a limited express service that starts at the downtown Norfolk transfer center and stops at Waterside and Commercial, Newtown Road Station, Columbus and Central Park- the new stop in Town Center, Artic and 19th, Pacific Avenue stops at 25th ½, 28th and 30th, and then loops back towards Norfolk. The fare for route 960 was also reduced from \$4 each way to \$2 each way or \$4.50 for a day pass.

She reported that the Atlantic Park project will occupy the Artic and 19th transfer center once they break ground, so it has been temporary relocated to Parks and 19th. There is no specific start date for the construction, but there will be service alerts when this change happens. The routes at the transfer center will still service the stops at the Oceanfront and they are working to make sure those transfers are minimized from this new location for the transfer center. Her department is also working with the VBPD and the Resort Management Office to address safety and equity concerns with transportation at the Oceanfront.

Megan reported that they are working on a contract for a free, door to door shuttle service where people can ride hail or use an app to order a ride. The service is being subsidized by the City for the first year and data will be collected for funding options to continue the service.

She suggested that using online sites like HRT and Waze are the most accurate way to find the best route for your travels and the ambassadors at the beach can also assist people with bus routes. She reported that HRT and the City of Virginia Beach are working to provide additional shelters for bus stops to protect people from bad weather.

Commissioner Stevens stated that this presentation came from a concern at the Oceanfront during College Beach Weekend when a sign was posted on Artic and 19th notifying people that they had to go to Cypress and 18th to get a bus. He thought it would be beneficial for the HRC to hear about this to advocate for Oceanfront employees who need this transportation.

VI. Chairman's Report

Chair Nery-Strickland reported that Commissioner Stevens, citizen volunteers Michael Cloud-Butler and Arnel Custodio were at the Oceanfront for College Beach Weekend (CBW). Commissioner Stevens reported that everyone was having a good time and there were plenty of VBPD officers present for both Friday and Saturday night. Deputy Chief Adams thanked the commissioners for being out there for CBW and reported that all City entities came together very quickly to come up with a plan for the weekend. The City was very effective in a short amount of time with their messaging to universities and colleges, as well as locals about the weekend and with their signage around the Oceanfront for parking, student outreach centers and restrooms. They worked to keep the restrooms open longer and have Pot-A-Potties on the beach. He stated that from the interactions he had with students and other visitors, everyone had a good time. He reported on the fatal car accident that occurred on Friday night and stated that four officers immediately acted to pull the driver out of the car. He said that they are working on response plans for pop up weekends with the goal for everyone to feel safe without feeling over policed.

VII. Committee/Liaison Reports

Commissioner Amberman reported on the last meeting for the Forums/Dialogues Committee and the determination that the topic of the forum will be Better Together: Conversations About Race. She asked for feedback from the Commission on potential speakers and organizations, and whether it should be a virtual or in-person forum.

Staff Liaison McKinnon reported that the Awards Ceremony is on May 11th at MOCA from 6:30PM – 8:30PM. She clarified that the caterer has prepared a menu where the food will be handled minimally by the guests with items that are on individual skewers or in individual containers. The remaining tasks for the ceremony are to send out invitations next week, organizing the program and drafting the script to be delivered to the commissioners before the ceremony for review.

Staff Liaison McKinnon also highlighted the marketing toolkits that she provided for the commissioners to distribute when they are attending events or other meetings. The toolkit includes HRC brochures, pens and Better Together wristbands.

Chair Nery-Strickland spoke on the proposed by-laws changes that the commissioners received and reported that the Commission will vote on the changes at the meeting next month. Deputy City Attorney Rod Ingram reported that a 2/3 vote is needed to approve the by-laws changes. Commissioner Amberman stated that service of the Chair should be limited to 2 years, but commissioners should have the opportunity to election a Chair every year. She also added that the Nominating Committee shouldn't be appointed, but should be an independent group of people who want to serve on the committee. Deputy City Attorney Ingram clarified that changes to the by-laws that effect the quorum of the Commission have to be approved by City Council. Chair Nery-Strickland spoke on the by-laws changes regarding the student commissioners' voting rights and their membership counting towards the quorum. Commissioner White stated that students have a lot on their plates already and while it is important for them to be part of the HRC, it is not appropriated for them to have the pressure of voting or counting toward quorum. Chair Nery-Strickland reported that reducing the membership of the Commission is being considered and they will review how the Commission operates with the current membership of 15. Deputy City Attorney Ingram clarified that changes to the number of commissioners as well as the status of the student commissioners must be done through a City Ordinance.

Chair Nery-Strickland suggested having a meeting dedicated to the by-laws changes. Commissioner Daniels made the suggestion of using a lottery system to determine who will be on the Nominating Committee. Commissioner Orenca outlined the election process of nominees being presented in May and the election being held in June. It was decided that there will be a special meeting for the by-laws changes and the meeting before the Awards Ceremony at 5pm to discuss the nominations for officers. Staff Liaison McKinnon will send out a doodle poll for everyone's availability for a meeting to discuss the by-laws only.

Deputy City Attorney Ingram gave an update on the General Assembly legislation for virtual meetings. He stated that the bill was signed into law on Monday and will allow for boards such as the HRC to hold virtual meetings. The new law does not take effect until September 1st because the FOIA Council has been directed to come up with best practices to implement virtual meetings. Therefore, it is not possible to hold any event virtually before September 1st. Not all meetings can be virtual – up to 25% of the meetings per year can be virtual and you can't have two consecutive virtual meetings.

VIII. Citizen Remarks

Elisheba Harris, Rachel Walker of Rachel Walker, Inc. and Jay Boone, President of Keeping Us Secure and Prosperous attended the meeting to speak with the HRC and share their story about Deshayla Harris. They asked for support from the HRC on setting better protocols for how victim families are notified by the VBPD. The Commission would like to work with the Harris family to find some resolution and make sure there is a protocol in place so someone else will not have the same experience as the Harris family.

Former Commissioner Thomasine Cubine attended the meeting as well.

IX. Adjournment

Chair Nery-Strickland adjourned the meeting at 6:19 pm.

Next Meeting:
TBD