



Somerville Human Rights Commission

New Commissioner Onboarding

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”

Article 1 of the Universal declaration of human rights

Contents



- History of Human rights
- History of the Somerville HRC
- Our Mission & Priorities
- How We Work
- Who We Serve
- Your Role as a Commissioner

History of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)

*In response to the atrocities of World War II, **world leaders sought to prevent future human rights violations.** The UDHR established a common standard of fundamental rights and freedoms for all people, regardless of nationality, race, or religion.*

The UDHR forms the **foundation of international human rights law** and has **influenced constitutions and treaties worldwide.** It remains the most translated document in history.

Topics in the UDHR

- Civil rights: Life, liberty, and security
- Legal protections: Fair trial and equality before the law
- Freedom of movement, thought, and expression
- Social rights: Work, education, and healthcare
- Economic rights: Property and fair wages
- Cultural participation and community life

1945

UN Charter Signed after WWII, with Human Rights as a core principle

1946-48

Drafting commission formed for the UN Declaration on Human Rights, led by Eleanor Roosevelt

Dec 10, 1948

UDHR unanimously adopted by the UN General Assembly in Paris, France

History of Somerville Human Rights and the HRC

Context

- The HRC was created during **a period of significant civil rights advocacy** in Massachusetts. Similar commissions were being established across the state to address discrimination and promote human rights at the local level.
- The HRC was established around the same time as the **Somerville Commission for Women (1988)**, and the **Fair Housing Commission (1985)** demonstrating the city's growing commitment to equality
- The city declared itself a **Sanctuary City** in 1987 and later as a **Welcoming Community** (2019, reaffirmed in 2024). In 2023, Somerville became the first city in the US to pass an ordinance **protecting polyamorous and other non-nuclear families**.

History of Somerville Human Rights and the HRC

Purpose

According to the city ordinance, the Human Rights Commission is charged with working *"toward mutual respect and understanding among all individuals and groups in the city by improving the quality of public discourse and eliminating unlawful discrimination."*

The HRC's responsibilities include:

- Investigating human rights issues and concerns affecting the community
- Promoting public discourse on issues of discrimination and equity
- Educating residents about their rights under federal, state, and local law
- Working collaboratively with other city departments and commissions to advance equity

History of Somerville Human Rights and the HRC

Founding & Evolution

- The Somerville Human Rights Commission (HRC) was **established by city ordinance** as part of the city's commitment to protecting civil rights and promoting equality for all residents.
- The ordinance establishing the commission was passed in 1993, with partial updates in adopted by the City Council in 1994, 2014 and 2019
- The Somerville HRC is part of a **network of human rights organizations** in Massachusetts, connected through the **Massachusetts Human Rights Coalition (MAHRC)**, which provides support, resources, and networking opportunities for municipal human rights commissions across the state.

Our Mission & Priorities

Adopted October 29, 2025

Our Mission

"The Human Rights Commission shall protect the constitutional, civil, and human rights of all people in Somerville. We shall strive to end discrimination and promote universal access to basic needs, improved quality of life, mutual understanding, and elevated public discourse."

2025-2026 Priorities

- Immigrant & Community Protection
- Basic Needs (income, food, housing)

How We Work : Community Agreements

This is a living document meant to reflect our aspirations for engagement with each other and our broader community. We pledge to:

Recognize systemic and structural oppression

- Remember that we all benefit from *and* we are all harmed by these systems.
- Be humble because regardless of our experiences and identities, we are all capable of unconscious bias.
- Own our mistakes because we are all capable of causing harm, even if it is inadvertent.
- Courageously stand against injustice, even when it is hard.

Communicate across difference with empathy and compassion

- Practice mindful speaking and listening.
- Refrain from blaming or shaming.
- Practice both/and thinking (not either/or thinking).
- Understand that conflict can be generative and lead to deeper connection, and be aware of our conditioned tendency to avoid conflict.
- Give clear feedback to each other, even if uncomfortable, to prevent resentments and misunderstandings.
- Talk to each other instead of about each other.

Bring a growth mindset

- Be open to new perspectives.
- Recognize that we all have different dimensions of expertise and we can all learn from each other and our community.
- Affirm that discomfort is necessary for growth.

Model a restorative justice approach to accountability

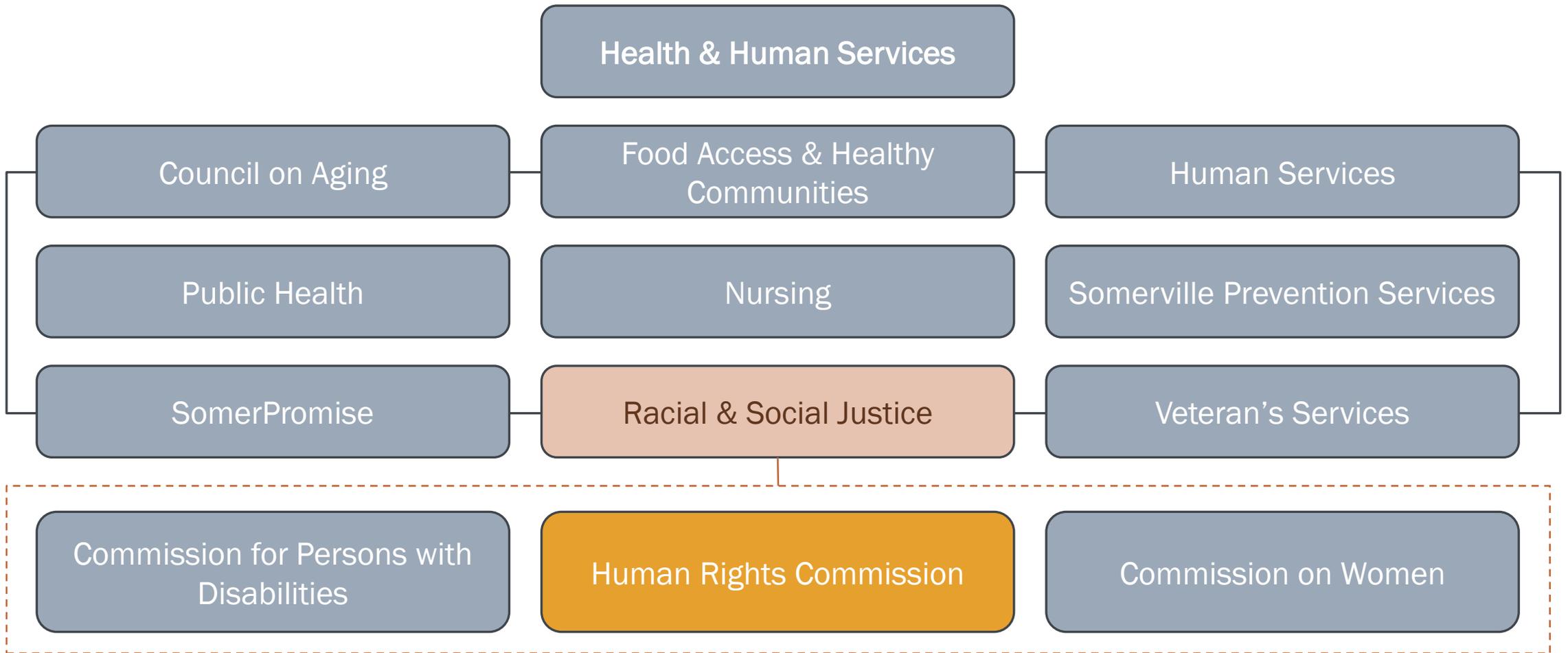
- Seek to repair / make amends if harm or an “ouch” occurs.
- Trust that the goal of accountability is to repair harm, not to punish nor throw people away (embody a non-carceral, abolitionist mindset).
- Be gentle with each other, because we will all make mistakes.
- Understand that impact > intent, although we will trust that by default we all come with good intent.

How We Work : The HRC Ordinance

The HRC is established as part of the City of Somerville Code of Ordinances : Chapter 2, Article V, Division 6, found [here](#).

- Sec. 2-237. Human rights policy.
- Sec. 2-238. Human rights commission.
- Sec. 2-239. Human rights commissioner qualifications.
- Sec. 2-240. Human rights commission chairpersons and bylaws.
- Sec. 2-241. Human rights commission executive director.
- Sec. 2-242. Human rights commission functions.
- Sec. 2-243. Human rights commission duties.
- Sec. 2-244. Human rights commission records.
- Sec. 2-245. Human rights commission advisory council.

How We Work : Relationship with the City of Somerville



How We Work : Subcommittees

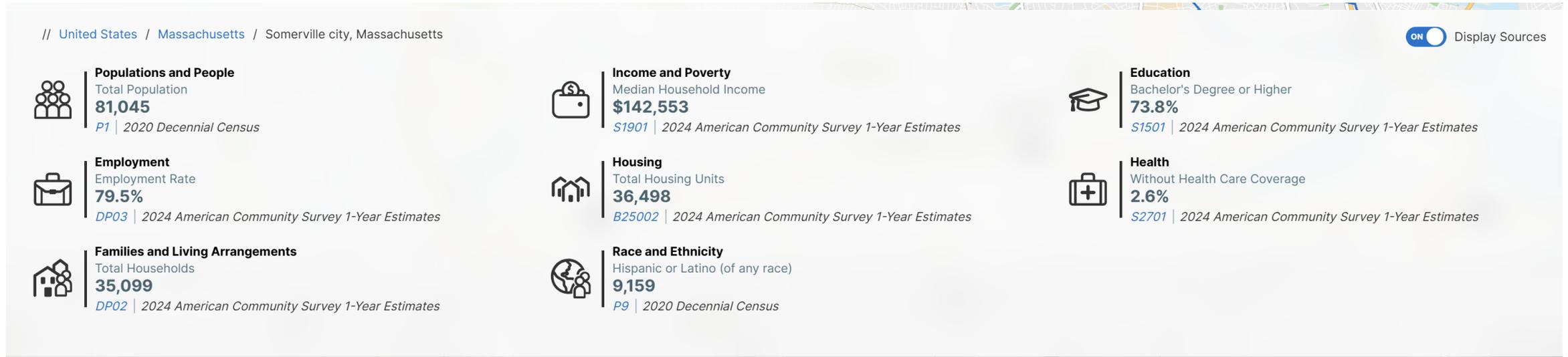
In 2025, the HRC Adopted the following subcommittees to facilitate its work:

<p>Administration</p> <p>Chair: Elyse Best Members: Brian Sokol Primrose Chareka Salma Kazmi</p> <p>Goals: Enhance the HRC's ability to make an impact by providing tools, processes and standards that drive action and transparency</p>	<p>Compliance & Training</p> <p>Chair: Brian Sokol Members: Christopher Spicer-Hankle Pao Mendez</p> <p>Goals: Enhance the capacity of the HRC and residents of Somerville through training programs and by ensuring compliance with all relevant statutes</p>	<p>Information, Advocacy & Engagement</p> <p>Chair: Christopher Spicer-Hankle Members: Elyse Best Salma Kazmi Pao Mendez Suelin Chen</p> <p>Goals: Share information through digital and other channels, develop and implement advocacy campaigns and foster engagement of residents in HRC initiatives</p>	<p>Promotion of City Diversity</p> <p>Chair: Jenny Bonham-Carter Members: Lauren Chapman Jovana Calvillo</p> <p>Goals: Develop and implement events and campaigns that showcase the diversity of Somerville in line with Public Holidays and Commemorations if appropriate</p>	<p>Rights Violation Response</p> <p>Chair: Jason Mackey Members: Jenny Bonham-Carter Jovana Calvillo</p> <p>Goals: Partner with relevant agencies at the city and state level to structure investigation and responses to Human Rights complaints, report on statistics and trends and recommend systemic responses</p>
--	---	--	---	--

How We Work : Bylaws

To be written / added

Who We Serve (more to be added here)



Somerville, with a population of about 80,000 people, is a richly diverse city that's home to many languages. Nearly a quarter of residents are foreign-born, and more than one in four households speak a language other than English at home. The city is home to large groups of renters, immigrants and residents with disabilities who may all encounter obstacles concerning access or housing stability or employment or public engagement.

Commissioner Responsibilities & Expectations

- **Appointment:** The Human Rights Commission consists of appointed volunteer commissioners who are Somerville residents
- **Terms:** Members serve three-year terms and are appointed by the Mayor with approval from the City Council.
- **Time Commitment:** Commissioners commit approximately five hours per month to the Commission's work, but time required will vary depending on activities and initiatives in progress
- **Attendance:** Commissioners are expected to attend monthly commission meetings. **6** excused absences or **3** unexcused absences, are grounds for being removed from the commission; In no event shall commissioners have more than 6 total absences. Absences must be communicated to chairs at least 24 hours in advance to enable cancellations if quorum will not be met.
- **Responsiveness:** Commissioners are expected to check email and text messages and respond within a reasonable timeframe to requests from other commissioners (1-2 business days)
- **Completion of Tasks:** Commissioners will be expected to commit to tasks based on their skills and interests, and are expected to complete tasks on the date due
- **Subcommittee Assignments:** All commissioners will serve on at least one committee and are required to attend the monthly subcommittee meetings. More than **6** excused or **3** unexcused absences from subcommittee meetings will be grounds for removal from the subcommittee as well as from the Commission. In no event shall commissioners have more than 6 total absences.
- **Promote and represent the HRC** at city and local events, building relationships with residents and local agencies/nonprofits that may help expand the impact of the HRC

Commissioner Responsibilities & Expectations (continued)

Trainings:

- All Commissioners attend a mandatory Conflict of Interest Training annually to maintain compliance with State Law.
- Commissioners are encouraged to attend at least one Bystander Training and one Know Your Rights Training.
- Commissioners are encouraged to attend City Events sponsored by the Human Rights Commission such as the January Martin Luther King Jr. Day Observance and/or Day of Service, the March Women's Month Event, October Indigenous People's Day Observance, December 10 UN Human Rights Day

Meeting Decorum: For our manner of proceeding the Commission adopted **Robert's Rules of Order in 2025**. Often a motion is passed to proceed informally, but please familiarize yourself with the Rules using a tutorial available online.

- Robert's Rules of Order in 30 seconds--Steps to Motion 1:17-1:45 [here](#)
- Chair Responsibility: "Would you like to make a motion?" etc. 21:55 [here](#)
- Commission Member Responsibility: "Point of order" or "Point of Information"

Commissioner Collaboration: All commissioners are encouraged to schedule one-on-one meetings with other commissioners to build relationships that will support ongoing productivity

Subcommittee Chair Responsibilities & Expectations

- **Subcommittee Meeting Focus** – The subcommittees should be used for in depth discussion and working sessions, with a goal of developing recommendations ready for a vote at the HRC meeting.
- **Scheduling Subcommittee meetings** – Subcommittee chairs should schedule a regular meeting cadence in coordination with subcommittee members and their availability. It's strongly recommended to send calendar invites for the meeting time/date.
- **Preparing agendas** – Subcommittee chairs must prepare monthly agendas to guide the discussion of the subcommittee. Agendas should include topics relevant to the mission of the subcommittee and should address any tasks that have been assigned to the subcommittee during the monthly full commission meeting
- **Following up on tasks assigned by the Commission** – Subcommittees may be assigned action items during the main commission meetings. The subcommittee chair is responsible for ensuring these items are added to meeting agendas and addressed
- **Posting Agendas** – In accordance with Open Meeting Laws, the agenda for subcommittee meetings should be shared with the RSJ Staff Liaison in time to be posted to the RSJ website 48 business hours in advance of the scheduled subcommittee meeting. To avoid time crunches, Please send the agenda to the RSJ liaison at least 72 business hours in advance.
- **Taking attendance at subcommittee meetings** – Subcommittee chairs should take attendance at subcommittee meetings and identify any persistent attendance issues to the HRC co-chairs
- **Ensuring that Minutes are taken and posted** – Chairs should ensure that meetings are taken and circulated among subcommittee members and the RSJ 3-5 days in advance of being reviewed for approval. Minutes should include exhibits and documents and should summarize key points of the meeting
- **Updates at the monthly HRC meeting** – Subcommittee chairs should be prepared to provide updates on subcommittee activities at the monthly HRC meeting, with a focus on sharing recommendations that are ready for a vote of the HRC

Budget

Sample Budget requests–

- Blank 1-9 form for contractor to submit for a budget proposal
- Old project "Turtle Island Project" budget proposal and photos
- Old business--budget request of approved antisemitism training resumes of trainers and outline

Communications Channels

RSJ Newsletter -

HRC Facebook -

HRC Instagram -

Tools & Resources

OPERATIONAL TOOLS

- [Agenda Template](#) – to be posted by the RSJ staff to the [HRC section](#) of the Somervillema.gov website.
- [Attendance Spreadsheet](#) – contains one tab for each subcommittee to track attendance
- [Best Practices for Setting an Agenda](#)
- [Best Practices for Running a Meeting](#)
- [Open Meeting Law](#)

RESOURCES ON HUMAN RIGHTS

- **Massachusetts Coalition for Human Rights:** www.MAHumanRightsCoalition.org // [Resources – MAHRC](#) - *To receive email updates and information about meetings from the MAHRC, email your personal address to Adam LaFrance at masshrc@gmail.com*
- A cultural competence handbook (Christopher to link)
- 101 organizing touchstones (Christopher to link)
- slides for 101 on holding an organizing one-on-one for community outreach (Christopher to link)
- Check-in model overview (Christopher to link)

Professional Development Resources

Mel King Institute--Boston's excellent Community Building Training Center see [here](#)

Human Rights Education Associates offer a training on "Introduction to Human Rights Education"

United Nations trainings on Human Rights [here](#)

Understanding the Human Rights Perspective on Migration--A five chapter book [here](#)

TedX Talk - "Migration as a Universal Human Right" see [here](#)

Mapping Human Rights in the local community--elementary school exercise [here](#)

The Council of Europe trainings for Youth Leaders--see their booklet discussing the right to advocate for Human Rights Education p10 [here](#)

Amnesty International offers free courses--such as a 1.5 hour "Introduction to Human Rights"--while others take on various topics.[Here](#)

HelpAge--slides for module of training on Human Rights of Elders [here](#)

US Institute for Diplomacy and Human Rights - <https://usidhr.org/>

Commissioner Contact Information

Brian Sokol – brisokol@gmail.com

Christopher Spicer-Hankle – spicer.christopher04@gmail.com

Elyse Best – Elyse.best@outlook.com (857-243-3374)

Jason Mackey – jdmackey@outlook.com

Jenny Bonham-Carter – jennysusannabc@gmail.com

Jovana Calvillo – jovana.calvillo821@gmail.com

Lauren Chapman – chapmanpl Lauren@gmail.com

Pao Mendez – paopaolamendez@gmail.com

Primrose Chareka – primrosechareka@gmail.com

Salma Kazmi – kaz.salma@gmail.com (617-306-0473)

Suelin Chen – suelin.chen@gmail.com

Events and Key Dates

January	February	March	April	May	June
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MLK Day Event 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Black History Month 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women's History Month (W/SCM) 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pride Month • Caribbean American Heritage Month • Carnival Celebration • Juneteenth
July	August	September	October	November	December
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ArtBeat • Disability Pride w/ Commission for Persons with Disabilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Night Out 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fluff Fest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Latin American & Caribbean Heritage Month • Monster Mash • Trunk or Treat • Domestic Violence Vigil • Indigenous People's Day 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Human Rights Day

Thank you!
