



**Somerville Human Rights Commission
(HRC)**

Monthly Meeting

Proposed Meeting Minutes

Date: December 17, 2025

Scheduled Time: 6:30 PM – 8:00 PM

Location: Zoom (Recorded)

Note Taker: Primrose Chareka

1. Call to Order

Co-Chair **Elyse Best** called the meeting to order at **6:37 PM**. Roll call was conducted, quorum was confirmed, and the meeting was noted as recorded.

Co-Chairs' Summary

The December 17, 2025 meeting of the Somerville Human Rights Commission focused on year-end business, Martin Luther King Jr. Day programming, administrative matters, and review of community focus group findings. The Commission approved prior minutes, finalized decisions related to the MLK Day Essay Contest and Day of Service, discussed governance and planning items including commissioner recruitment, social media access, wage theft coordination, ordinance amendment challenges, and strategic planning logistics, and received community input to inform priorities for 2026

2. Attendance and Quorum

Commissioners and Co-Chairs Present

- Elyse Best (Co-Chair)
- Salma Kazmi (Co-Chair)
- Primrose Chareka
- Brian Sokol
- Christopher Spicer-Hankle
- Suelin Chen
- Jovana Calvillo
- Jenny Bonham-Carter

Commissioners Absent

- Pao Mendez
- Lauren Chapman
- Jason Mackey (previously noted as a possible late arrival; did not attend)

City Staff / Liaisons / Guests

- Elijah Booker, Office of Racial & Social Justice (RSJ)
- Elizabeth Ronan, former RSJ Analyst (Guest Presenter)

Quorum

Quorum was confirmed with **seven commissioners initially present**.

3. Approval of Prior Meeting Minutes

November 19, 2025 Meeting Minutes

The Commission reviewed the minutes from the November 19, 2025 meeting. No errors or inconsistencies were raised.

- **Motion:** Elyse Best
- **Second:** Salma Kazmi
- **Vote:** Unanimous — **Approved**

4. Old Business

A. Open Commissioner Seat

Elijah Booker (RSJ) reported that the vacant commissioner seat posting would be delayed until January so it could be released alongside Commission for Women recruitment and align with the new city administration's oversight of boards and commissions. Commissioners were encouraged to consider volunteering to serve on the interview panel once applications open.

Action:

RSJ to open the posting in January and coordinate outreach; commissioners to volunteer for interview panel participation.

B. Legal Restrictions on Accessing Social Media Accounts

Salma Kazmi reported that consultation with City Solicitor David Shapiro confirmed there are no legal prohibitions preventing commissioners from having administrative access to social media accounts. RSJ is developing internal policies to ensure coordinated posting across city commissions. Training and a formal policy are expected in January.

Discussion emphasized current workflow constraints, with posts routed through RSJ, and raised concerns about balancing coordination with commission autonomy and public engagement.

Action:

RSJ to provide social media training and policy guidance in January; HRC to continue drafting content internally for RSJ posting in the interim.

C. MLK Day Essay Contest & Day of Service

(Discussion and Decisions)

The Commission discussed the structure, timeline, eligibility, award, and review process for the Martin Luther King Jr. Day Essay Contest, incorporating recommendations from RSJ.

Award Structure

Commissioners reviewed the proposed award, consisting of a **scholarship for a human rights training course**. RSJ confirmed it would **match the value of the originally proposed scholarship**, resulting in **two student winners**. While no dollar amount was stated on the record, both awards were intended to be of equal value.

Eligibility

RSJ recommended adjusting eligibility due to the level of the training course. After discussion, eligibility was limited to **9th and 10th grade students**.

Submission Deadline and Review Timeline

The Commission agreed to extend the submission deadline to **January 12, 2026**, allowing additional time following the holiday break. Review was scheduled to conclude by **January 15, 2026**, in advance of the **January 17 MLK Day event**, during which winners would be announced.

Essay Prompts

The Commission reviewed draft prompts and agreed to retain and refine **two primary prompts** aligned with Dr. King’s work and contemporary human rights themes.

Prompts:

- **Option 1: Dr. King and/or Other Civil Rights Leader.**

- Students write about Dr. King alongside other influential civil rights leaders—such as John Lewis or Claudette Colvin or Jo Ann Robinson—whose work reflects courage, justice, and sustained commitment to social change. Students could also reflect on how the selected leader has inspired them personally.

- **Option 2: Building the Beloved Community**

- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. believed in the idea of “Beloved Community,” a society rooted in justice and equal opportunity for all its members. He worked towards the vision of a “Beloved Community” through a variety of nonviolent campaigns, such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott, intended to advance civil and human rights. Where do you see evidence of people around you building the Beloved Community? How are people around you, such as teachers, parents, business leaders or others working towards this community?

Submission Process and Review:

RSJ confirmed that essays would be reviewed by **three HRC volunteer reviewers** and that **identifying information would be separated from submissions prior to evaluation**, ensuring an **anonymous review process**. RSJ will manage submission intake and winner notification.

Outreach and Promotion:

RSJ reported that finalized materials would be distributed through Somerville Public Schools and supported by coordinated MLK Day promotional materials.

Formal Actions

The Commission:

- Approved the MLK Day Essay Contest write-up (pending final rubric edits)
- Confirmed the scholarship award structure
- Noted RSJ's matching commitment
- Confirmed eligibility and submission deadline
- Confirmed winners would be announced during the MLK Day event
- Approved HRC participation in the MLK Day of Service

All motions were approved **unanimously**.

D. Wage Theft Initiatives

Brian Sokol provided an update on the City's Wage Theft Committee, noting limited publicly available information regarding membership and activity. RSJ is coordinating with Intergovernmental Affairs to determine potential collaboration or gap-filling.

Action:

Brian Sokol to continue follow-up with RSJ and IGA.

E. Ordinance Amendment Process (Administration Subcommittee)

Ordinance Amendment Process: Elyse Best noted that the process for amending the HRC ordinance remains complex and convoluted. She canceled the most recent subcommittee meeting on 12-17-2025, but is currently compiling unedited notes into a condensed format. This information will be presented to the Administration Subcommittee to educate members on the legal requirements for future changes.

Action:

Elyse Best to present condensed ordinance-amendment notes to the Administration Subcommittee.

F. Strategic Planning Meeting

Possible HRC "Offsite" and Meeting Requirements: Primrose Chareka reported that "executive session" terminology is legally restricted to specific scenarios like contract negotiations, which the HRC does not meet. Furthermore, city facilities are generally unavailable on Sundays. The group discussed holding a "special meeting" for strategic planning on a Saturday or a weeknight to comply with open meeting laws.

G. Narrative 4 Training

Commissioners discussed Narrative 4 training as a relationship-building tool. Elyse Best reported plans to attend additional facilitator training. The goal remains for full commissioner participation in future training.

Action:

Continue planning for expanded Narrative 4 training participation.

5. New Business

A. Presentation: Summer 2025 Community Focus Group Findings

Elizabeth Ronan, former RSJ Analyst, presented findings from **community focus groups conducted during Summer 2025**, which were designed to gather resident perspectives on human rights concerns, lived experiences, and trust in local systems. The focus groups included participants from diverse racial, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Key Community Concerns Identified

Liz reported several recurring themes that emerged across focus groups:

- **Fear related to immigration enforcement**, including anxiety about ICE presence and uncertainty regarding residents' rights and available protections.
- **Housing insecurity and affordability**, with participants describing displacement pressures, rising costs, and limited access to stable housing.
- **Wage-related exploitation**, including concerns about wage theft and lack of clarity regarding reporting mechanisms and enforcement.
- **Disability access and inclusion**, including barriers in public spaces, city services, and information accessibility.
- **Lack of trust in City systems**, particularly regarding how discrimination complaints are handled and whether reporting leads to meaningful outcomes.

Participants expressed skepticism about whether City departments adequately address discrimination and emphasized the need for clearer communication, accountability, and follow-through.

Public Education and Outreach Needs

Liz emphasized that many concerns reflected **information gaps**, rather than lack of services alone. She identified several topic areas appropriate for **public-facing education and outreach**, including:

- Anti-Black racism and Somerville's local civil rights history
- Immigrant rights and available legal protections
- Antisemitism and anti-Palestinian bias
- Disability rights, accessibility standards, and available City resources

She noted that residents expressed interest in **practical, accessible information** delivered through formats such as workshops and webinars.

Disability and Accessibility Focus

A significant portion of the discussion centered on **disability rights and accessibility**. Ms. Ronan recommended that the City expand education around disability rights and ensure residents understand both legal protection and available supports.

She specifically highlighted the importance of **coordinating with existing disability infrastructure**, noting the work of the **Somerville Commission for Persons with Disabilities**, and recommended collaboration rather than duplicative efforts. She also emphasized that accessibility should be modeled in the design of all public-facing programming.

Representation and Commission Composition

Ms. Ronan identified **representation and leadership diversity** as a cross-cutting theme. Focus group participants expressed that the Human Rights Commission should reflect Somerville's racial, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity and visibly model inclusive practices.

She emphasized that representation was discussed not only in terms of membership, but also in how programs are designed, facilitated, and communicated to the public.

Priority Recommendations

Ms. Ronan summarized the findings with **three priority recommendations** for consideration by the Commission:

1. Host a **series of informational webinars** addressing key human rights concerns raised by residents.
2. Facilitate **disability rights and accessibility workshops** in coordination with existing City disability commissions and resources.

3. Prioritize **diverse representation in HRC membership and leadership**, and model accessibility and inclusion in Commission programming.

B. HRC Facebook Page and Public Visibility

1. Salma Kazmi noted the HRC Facebook page has been inactive since 2009. The Commission discussed creating a structured content workflow.
2. **HRC Facebook Page and Visibility:** Salma Kazmi observed that the current Facebook page is inactive, with its last post dating back to 2009. The Commission agreed that the Information, Advocacy & Engagement Subcommittee should develop a content calendar and posting guidelines. This initiative aims to increase visibility for HRC meetings, events, and human rights resources within the community.
 - Co-Chair Salma Kazmi made a motion to authorize the Information, Advocacy & Engagement Subcommittee to develop social media guidelines and a content calendar, and Commissioner Elyse Best seconded the motion. The motion was approved unanimously.
 - **Motion:** Authorize the Information, Advocacy & Engagement Subcommittee to develop social media guidelines and a content calendar
 - **Motion by:** Salma Kazmi
 - **Second:** Elyse Best
 - **Vote:** Unanimous — **Approved**

Action:

Subcommittee to draft guidelines and content calendar for Commission review.

6. Summary of Decisions

- Approved November 19, 2025 meeting minutes
- Approved MLK Day Essay Contest write-up
- Approved participation in MLK Day of Service
- Authorized development of social media guidelines
- Received the 2025 Focus Group Report

7. Action Items

- Suelin Chen: Finalize essay rubric and distribute anti-bias information
- Elijah Booker (RSJ): Provide submission form and promotional link
- Information, Advocacy & Engagement Subcommittee: Draft social media materials
- Primrose Chareka: Circulate strategic planning survey
- Brian Sokol: Follow up on Wage Theft Committee
- Elyse Best: Present ordinance amendment notes

8. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at **8:07 PM**.

Next Regular Meeting: January 28, 2026, at 6:30 PM

Meeting Summary

The December 17, 2025 meeting focused on year-end actions, MLK programming, administrative governance, and community feedback. The Commission approved multiple initiatives, reviewed focus group findings, and identified next steps for 2026 emphasizing accessibility, transparency, and community engagement.