

Somerville Human Rights Commission
Monthly Meeting Notes
May 21, 2009

Commissioners in Attendance

Barry Rafkind, co-chair
Ashraf Hegazy
Cesar Urrunaga

Commissioners Absent

John Robinson

Other Attendee(s)

Sunila Thomas-George, MCAD Commissioner

Membership Update

- Our co-chair, Ify Mora is stepping down from the commission for personal reasons. We appreciate all her service to the HRC and her leadership and energy, especially during our difficult staffing and membership transitions over the last 18 months or so.
- We now have just 4 active commissioners on the HRC. That means there are 8 open seats!
- We need to work on recruiting more members to the HRC. Publicity will be important - one idea would be to publicize our activities in the Somerville Journal's community notes section, perhaps using press releases. We also need to better utilize our city webpages.

Visit with MCAD Commissioner, Sunila Thomas-George

- Sunila *enthusiastically* presented an overview of the work of the MCAD :
<http://www.mass.gov/mcad>
- MCAD has offices in Boston, Springfield, Worcester, and is opening a new office in New Bedford
- MCAD has over 100 employees including 24 investigators operating on a budget of \$4 million which is small relative to other agencies
- MCAD receives about 4000 new cases per year
- Most complaints are received by walk-ins to their in-take offices with a small fraction coming through email and phone
- MCAD's case load is about 80% employment-related, 10% housing-related, and 10% education-related
- MCAD has a 300-day statute of limitations for complaints dating back to the last act of discrimination in a case
- MCAD publishes an annual report called the "MA Discrimination Law Reporter" which is available at law schools such as Harvard.
The 2009 edition is not yet available, but should be soon.
- the HRC can refer cases to MCAD

- MCAD periodically holds trainings for Human Rights Commissions and can train staff
- MCAD is reaching out to the Human Rights Commissions around the state to see how we can better work together and learn about each other
- Sunila left her card with us and invited us to stay in touch

Applicants for HRC Investigators

- Of four candidates, we prioritized two : (1) one who speaks Spanish, is an MCAD trainer, and has extensive investigative experience, and (2) another who speaks Arabic and is currently shadowing an MCAD investigator. We will ask Sonja to see if one of them can start immediately looking into the pending complaints received over the last year.

Immigrant-Police Dialogs (Cesar)

- Sonja is now organizing these meetings and she may appreciate extra help from the commission.
- The meetings are very good, but more effort needs to be made on following up with the chief between meetings to make sure promises from those meetings are really kept and carried out.
- It would be helpful to have more SPD officers at the meetings besides just the chief.

Police Surveillance Cameras

- Ashraf asked what the significance was for the HRC. Barry responded that there are concerns over privacy and free speech.
- On our behalf, Sonja has invited Chief Holloway and City Solicitor Gannon to our June meeting to answer questions about the surveillance program
- We agreed to invite someone from the ACLU also to the June meeting because they presented strong concerns at the recent BOA's Public Health&Safety Cmte public hearing on this subject
- We want to find out if there are new developments in Cambridge with the city council's attempt to dismantle the surveillance cameras there

Annual Retreat

- We agreed to postpone this until we can boost our membership further.

Next HRC Meeting :

Public meeting of the Somerville Human Rights Commission

Thursday, June 18, 2009

6:30pm-8:30pm

2nd Floor social hall, Tufts Administration Bldg, 167 Holland St., Somerville