



Human Relations Advisory Council (HRAC)
County of Lehigh

MEETING MINUTES
September 5, 2023

The meeting of the HRAC was held at 12:00 p.m. by Zoom video conference. A recording of this meeting is available at <https://www.lehighcounty.org/Departments/Community-Economic-Development/Human-Relations-Advisory-Council>.

ATTENDING

Maryanell Agosto (MA), Carmen Bell (CB), Liz Bradbury (LB), Tony Branco (TB), Commissioner Zach Cole-Borgi (ZCB), Nagi Latefa (NL), Guillermo Lopez Jr. (CHAIR), Luis A. Perez Jr. (LP), Paschall Simpson (PS)

Staff: Yorman De La Rosa (YDLR), Frank D. Kane (FK), Cyndi King (CK)

Absent: Angela Baio (AB)

CHAIR called the meeting to order.

Roll call. Quorum obtained. Meeting is being recorded. Public will have access to that recording on the department's website (see opening paragraph above).

CHAIR asked for a motion to approve the minutes of the July 3 and August 7 meetings; LB made the motion; seconded by TB; with no questions received and upon unanimous voice approval, the minutes of the two previous HRAC meetings were approved.

There being only committee members and staff at the Zoom meeting and no citizens to share input, CHAIR suggested that, if a citizen joined, he would take a moment from the meeting to hear what was on their mind. Hearing no opposition to the suggestion, the meeting continued.

OLD BUSINESS

CHAIR asked for updates on the proposed ordinance. ZCB said the ordinance would be presented at the September 13, 2023, Board of Commissioners (BOC) meeting. LB said that members of the press are likely to contact ZCB to talk about the proposed ordinance and she offered ZCB to refer them to her after he has spoken to them if they require any further clarification or have technical questions. LB reminded that the entire committee worked on this ordinance but that she worked closely with the county's staff attorney to put this legislation together. In addition, LB talked about information that Attorney Catherine Roseberry circulated concerning state law and communities within a county that have a similar nondiscrimination law. If the nondiscrimination law is already in place and the law being proposed by a county is similar, the city (such as Allentown or Bethlehem, in this case) could opt to follow their own existing law rather than follow the county law. This [state law] does not have any negative impact on Lehigh County's proposed ordinance. What it does for the City of Allentown and the City of Bethlehem is allow them to choose to only follow their own law and to not allow people who have been discriminated against in those communities to additionally file within the county if those cities are actively running their respective Human Relations Commissions. LB cannot imagine why [a city] would want to do that but [that provision does] exist in state law. LB continued that after the ordinance is passed into law, the decision must be made by the cities of Allentown and Bethlehem as to whether they will allow people to also file with the county or if they will only allow people to file with the city. LB observed that it would be a good idea, once the ordinance has passed into law, for LB and ZCB to talk with those cities' commissions and explain what the ramification of that [state] law is and then [those commissions] can decide how they would like to proceed. ZCB asked for clarification and LB offered to discuss it further either after the meeting or at another time. ZCB agreed. Next, LB offered her opinion on the clip from Yusuf Dahl's Elimination of Background Checks for Renters (link included in the agenda). LB apprised the group that Lehigh County's proposed ordinance has a specific provision where a person cannot be asked on an employment application whether they have been convicted of a crime or a felony but a person may be asked [those questions] when they are interviewed beyond the application. Discussion ensued.

YDLR suggested meeting with Mr. Dahl to look at his advocacy in Pennsylvania's cities versus the cities located in New York and California which are featured in the clip. YDLR would be looking for information and data specific to Lehigh County. LB would like to meet with Mr. Dahl; YDLR is meeting with Mr. Dahl on 9/7/2023 along with the

Public Defender which County office created the Pardon Project. LP would also like to be included in meeting with Mr. Dahl. More discussion ensued.

CHAIR suggested the ordinance move forward to the 9-13-2023 BOC meeting; MA agreed. Discussion ensued.

CB added that if a renter is served eviction papers and even if the situation with the landlord is satisfactorily resolved and [no one is evicted], what stays [on record] is [an eviction]. CB would also like to see this issue be addressed as a part of the housing equity [conversation]. CB offered hypothetical situations of why an eviction might be served upon a renter and even if the matter is satisfactorily resolved with the landlord and the renter is again in good-standing, might adversely continue to affect them. In CB's opinion, another level of inequity is created [with the renter having to explain what happened and why]. CB brought up several other ways a community might be inequitable for some residents such as females "on their own", single mothers, people of color, people who speak a different language or have a different religion and it is about LGTBQI; there are any number of ways that people seek to keep others out of the community and CB believes [the HRAC] should be vigilant about [housing inequities] because it is not the kind of [community] she wants to live in and she hopes that [our area] is moving toward a place where we are creating a community that doesn't allow that [to go unchecked].

FK clarified the issue CB raised about evictions remaining on people's records. PS confirmed that FK understood the eviction issue CB raised and confirmed her statements as being true and correct. FK suggested that he should talk with the courts and discover for himself whether this is true. PS suggested FK definitely follow-up and then offered his own experience with the situation and suggested that not everyone knows where or how to fight [an eviction notice showing on one's record] so that [an eviction or an attempt at eviction on record] becomes a much bigger issue especially for people who are the "working homeless."

YDLR observed that the HRAC may start to engage some of these topics and not necessarily add to or alter the ordinance but rather begin the education of how does the HRAC engage and support people who are already working towards [equity]; how does the HRAC connect with those people; how does [the HRAC] make sure that [we] learn more and become more informed. YDLR said that the [ensuing discussions] on their own raised new information for a lot of [the HRAC members]. In summation, the more HRAC can make [itself] knowledgeable about [various] topics, the better it can [proceed] and advocate.

CB reiterated the need for research to learn about critical issues throughout the area such as eviction, housing, affordable housing, and rate increases that people can't afford. Discussion ensued. CHAIR recognized that [the HRAC] is beginning to do the work of the commission that it is trying to start. LB concurred.

LP added that the Lehigh Valley Justice Institute has been working on the issues [talked about at this meeting] concerning criminal justice, housing, and evictions. A study of eviction processes in the Lehigh Valley was done. LP confirmed that it doesn't matter if the landlord was at fault or did something illegal or acted criminally, the renter's record still records an eviction. LP is working with state representatives Peter Schweyer and Mike Schlossberg on addressing this issue because it must be addressed at the state level. LP also added that the president judge of Lehigh County confirmed that the issue must be addressed at the state level. LP suggested that those two state representatives be included in the conversation to [enact changes to the way evictions are processed or recorded].

LB asked if HRAC members should attend the BOC meeting on 9/13/23. Several members plan to attend in person. When the Committees Schedule is circulated a few days prior to the BOC meeting, Cyndi will email that schedule to HRAC so that members can decide if they want to attend in person or by Zoom.

NEW BUSINESS

CLOSING AGENDA ITEMS

NL has been appointed to Governor Shapiro's Asian American and Pacific Islander Advisory Committee.

CB announced that Governor Shapiro and the PA Department of Aging are working on a 10-year master plan in Aging and are looking for input from all residents, social workers, healthcare workers, and everyone who is involved in Aging in our community to fill out a survey about what works and what is not working. Four 'listening sessions' have already been held in Lehigh County and two more sessions in September are scheduled in Northampton County. There is a way to fill out the survey online or it can be printed out and mailed in. CB urged everyone to participate because it will affect how the state prepares for and builds the infrastructure and social infrastructure in our communities for the next decade. Go to: [Agefriendly.org](https://www.agefriendly.org) or Google 'Age Friendly Survey'.

MA's employer hosted the PA Secretary of Health Services along with other healthcare provider agencies. For anyone working directly with the community, MA is announcing that COVID emergency medical coverage has ended and the Department of Health & Human Services is attempting to send out enrollment applications. However, many

community members are receiving those applications either after the date for submission or close to the date of submission. MA learned from the Secretary of Health Services that regardless of when someone receives the application for enrollment to submit the application anyway. Please encourage your community to submit their applications even if the date has passed or if the date is close; or, they can receive a new application through the COMPASS website.

CHAIR called for any other citizen's input (none) and any other announcements (none) or anything for the good of the order with there being none, he called for a motion to adjourn. Motion to adjourn by TB. Seconded by LP. Meeting adjourned.

Respectfully submitted,

Cynthia L. King