

ALEXANDRIA HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION
MINUTES OF THE MEETING TUESDAY, APRIL 21, 2026
Charles Houston Recreation Center, Multi-Purpose Room,
901 Wythe St, Alexandria, Virginia 22314
7:00 P.M

Members Present

April Breslaw, Vice Chair
Iulia Fratila
Matt Harris
David Parker
Kara Pitek
Elisabeth "PJ" Palmer Johnson
Megan Prince, participated in the Phone
Tom Reeder
Sam Schwartz, Vice Chair

Staff Present

Paul Valenti, Director
Miladis Martinez Gutierrez, Adm. Support

Members Excused

Marc Bendick
Lisl Brunner
Manisha Maniyar
Jon Thompson, Chair

Guest

Cassandra Lewis, ARHA Board member
Annette Santiago, ARHA Resident Association President
Darnella McGuire Nelson, Vice Chair of the ARHA Board
Ricky Jefferson, Resident Representative on AHRA Board

1. Call to Order/Introductions

Vice Chair Schwartz called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m. Introductions were made, and he acknowledged the passing of former Commissioner Susan Kellom. Commissioner Harris provided a brief background, noting her long tenure as Chair of the Alexandria Democratic Committee, and requested a moment of silence in her honor.

2. Approval of March Meeting Minutes

Upon a motion by Commissioner Harris, seconded by Commissioner Pitek, the March minutes were approved with a minor change. Nine Commissioners present voted aye, and one abstained.

3. Old Business & New Business

ARHA Review

Vice Chair McGuire Nelson

She reported that the Board members are relatively new and are in the process of acclimating, noting that they have recently added their final member. Additionally, they are examining various issues that require attention.

Ms. McGuire Nelson reported that Alfred Street Baptist Church stepped up and has cleared all the books for tenants with back rent, raising over 1 million dollars, so their ledgers are being cleared, and it lifts a burden off those residents. She said that ARHA is working with residents to help them get into programs and build financial literacy. She said that she looks forward to collaborating with the Human Rights Commission. She stated that her doctorate is in Conflict

Analysis Resolutions and said that she is familiar with the voucher program and how to work with different counties.

Ricky Jefferson

Mr. Jefferson was a candidate for Sergeant-at-Arms within the Alexandria Redevelopment and Housing Authority (ARHA) Resident Association, which has recently demanded improvements to housing management and tenants.

Cassandra Lewis

Ms. Lewis praised the Board for their effective response to recent challenges and noted ARHA's improvements with staff and resident issues. She emphasized her commitment to advocating for residents' housing concerns and acknowledged the positive impact of having Ms. Santiago as president, highlighting their goal to rebuild trust within the community.

Annette Santiago

Ms. Santiago, the ARHA Resident Association President since March 31, 2026, is also a member of the ARHA Board of Commissioners. She emphasizes her commitment to the residents and advocates on their behalf. She reports significant ongoing changes within ARHA and notes the hard work being done by both the organization and the Board of Commissioners, expressing her happiness in her presidential role.

Ms. Santiago addressed the Commission's inquiries about complaints from ARHA residents concerning the absence of a grievance process for those facing retaliation. She stated there are currently no issues, as improvements are underway, and noted that the Board of Commissioners will be forming three Committees: Engagement and Operation, Development, and Budgeting and Financing.

Commissioner Parker inquired about residents' mechanisms to address concerns. Ms. Lewis explained that the association serves this purpose, guiding residents to resolve issues and escalating them to the Board if necessary. She also clarified that maintenance requests are being addressed by the new staff, contradicting previous experiences. Ms. Santiago highlighted the need to assist residents who lack computer access, emphasizing her support in managing work orders. Additionally, Ms. McGuire Nelson noted the importance of reporting emergency repair issues and stated that ARHA staff are now required to work onsite five days a week.

ARHA representatives, including Ms. McGuire Nelson, addressed questions regarding issue resolutions for residents. She highlighted Rose Boyd as the independent communicator for ARHA and emphasized the importance of regular reports to the Board, mentioning that interim CEO Ms. Rickie Maddox provides updates on issues through a detailed Excel spreadsheet.

Ms. McGuire Nelson addressed concerns about individuals barred from reapplying for housing and explained that such situations are evaluated case by case, largely due to compliance requirements from both the City and HUD. Non-compliance could prevent a return for five years.

Ms. McGurie Nelson also raised concerns about funding cuts to HUD programs, indicating that they are now focusing on renovating the Ladrey building rather than demolishing it. Ms. McGuire Nelson mentioned that affordable and market-rate units would share the same amenities and noted the upcoming opening of a list of residents over 62 at The Alate, contingent on HUD approvals. Furthermore, she announced that she heard that the building on Mt. Vernon Avenue is opening up its list, and for those interested in getting a unit, they can put their name in the lottery. She stated that ARHA is doing some nice upgrades to its buildings for the residents, and they are also upgrading the vacant units.

Ms. McGuire Nelson identified three complexes where the Commission can share information: Hopkins Tancil, Ruby Tucker, and Princess Square. She noted that Ruby Tucker might be accessible during food distribution and recommended contacting Gaynelle Diaz for more details on the distribution at that location.

Director Valenti will provide a list of the community cookouts that are going to be held in the different communities for the Commissioners so that they can volunteer to participate.

Vice Chair Schwartz thanked the ARHA representatives for coming tonight.

Appointment of Nomination Committee.

Vice Chair Schwartz requested volunteers for the nominating committee and explained that nominees will have the opportunity to speak before the elections. Commissioner Prince inquired if candidates could simply submit written statements via email. Vice Chair Schwartz clarified that historically, nominees speak at the meeting. A discussion arose regarding the eligibility of absent nominees, who can submit written statements that someone else will read, but cannot vote. Schwartz will review the bylaws to clarify the requirements. Commissioner Fratila and Vice Chair Schwartz volunteered to serve on the committee.

4. Public Comment – No Comments

5. Executive Committee

Vice Chair Breslaw provided an update on recent legislative actions concerning immigrant rights. A significant package of bills aimed at supporting the immigrant community was passed and forwarded to Governor Spanberger, who has three options: signing them, allowing them to become law without signature, or returning them with recommended changes. Vice Chair Breslaw noted that the Governor made numerous proposed changes. A reconvening session is scheduled for tomorrow and Thursday to address these recommendations. Vice Chair Breslaw highlighted concerns about two specific bills. One aims to protect sensitive locations—like schools and courthouses—from ICE arrests without judicial warrants. However, Governor Spanberger removed penalty provisions for ICE agents who violate this, leading advocates to criticize the bill as ineffective. The other bill intends to limit local law enforcement's cooperation with ICE through 287G agreements. Although Spanberger maintained the directive against cooperation, she eliminated the requirement for a judicial warrant. This has raised additional concerns among advocates who are pressing the legislature to reject these amendments.

Vice Chair Schwartz reported that the Executive Committee's meeting was brief, focusing on the agenda for the evening. The committee discussed the possibility of inviting Melanie Gray from Christ Church to present additional programs offered by their office to the community. Director Valenti has reached out to Ms. Gray but has yet to receive a response and intends to follow up once more.

6. Subcommittee's Reports

Subcommittee on Outreach to Non-Profit Partners – Vice Chair Schwartz reported that they did a tabling event at ALIVE on Saturday. Director Valenti stated that ALIVE has expressed an interest in continuing a relationship with the Commission and the office and also said that tabling at the West End might be impactful. Director Valenti will send a list of the dates at the West End, so the commissioner can sign up.

7. Liaison Reports

Commissioner Reeder reported that the City Council unanimously adopted the Age-Friendly Plan. Additionally, the city implemented caregiver inclusion for “countable work” towards SNAP benefits. He also mentioned serving as a liaison between an aging group and hospitals, highlighting a growing issue with individuals being discharged from hospitals without a place to go.

Commissioner Parker indicated that the Economic Opportunity Commission received a presentation from the Executive Director of Friends of Guest House and the Chair of Pathways and Opportunities, addressing racial disparities in income, housing, and health. He recommended inviting her to a Human Rights Commission meeting.

Commissioner Palmer Johnson reported on the recent meeting of the Commission for Women, which took place on the 14th. The meeting featured a presentation by Ashley Johnson, Deputy Director of Adult and Aging Services, who stated she would forward the presentation to the Commission. Additionally, the Commission is actively working on a status of women report, but faces challenges due to a lack of funding and difficulty in securing volunteer professionals. They requested that the City Manager include a budget line item for this initiative, but their request was not approved. Commissioner Palmer Johnson also announced the introduction of a new student representative from Alexandria High School, and the Commission is in the process of electing new officers, with her overseeing the nominations committee.

8. Staff Report

Director Valenti reported that April is Fair Housing Month, and that on April 30th, the Office of Historic Alexandria, Housing and Human Rights is conducting a discussion on the history of Black property ownership in Alexandria from 7-8:30 p.m. at The Lyceum.

Vice Chair Breslaw inquired about reporting from the Human Rights office. Director Valenti expressed the intention to present an annual report to the Commission regarding closed cases and filed complaints. To facilitate this, a case tracker has been developed with the help of the internal analytics team, with a report expected by the end of the current fiscal year.

9. Announcements/Adjournment

Commissioner Palmer Johnson indicated challenges in scheduling meetings on election days and proposed that this be considered in future planning. Vice Chair Schwartz advised that if a meeting coincides with an election day, the commission should vote to reschedule it.

The meeting adjourned at 8:32 p.m.