

ALEXANDRIA HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION
MINUTES OF THE MEETING TUESDAY, MARCH 17, 2026
Charles Houston Recreation Center, Multi-Purpose Room,
901 Wythe St, Alexandria, Virginia 22314
7:00 P.M

Members Present

April Breslaw, Vice Chair
Lisl Brunner
Iulia Fratila Manisha
Matt Harris
David Parker
Kara Pitek
Megan Prince, participated by phone
Tom Reeder
Sam Schwartz, Vice Chair

Staff Present

Paul Valenti, Director
Miladis Martinez Gutierrez, Adm. Support

Members Excused

Marc Bendick
Elisabeth "PJ" Palmer Johnson
Jon Thompson, Chair

Guest

Daniel Altman, NOVA RAFT
Melanie Gray, Christ Church of Alexandria
Amanda Dombach, Women for Afghan Women

1. Call to Order/Introductions

Vice Chair Breslaw called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m. Introductions were made, and Vice Chair Breslaw welcomed new Commissioner David Parker. Commissioner Parker said he has been on the Economic Opportunities Commission for just over three years now and he is interested in homelessness.

2. Approval of February Meeting Minutes

Upon a motion by Vice Chair Schwartz, seconded by Commissioner Prince, the February minutes were approved with a minor change. All Commissioners present voted aye, and one abstained.

3. Issue Confronting Afghan/Refugee Communities

Vice Chair Breslaw welcomed guests Daniel Altman, Melanie Gray, and Amanda Dombach.

Daniel Altman, NOVA RAFT

Mr. Altman emphasized Alexandria's welcoming history for Afghan refugee families, highlighting its rich tradition of accommodating refugees. He noted that the apartments on Van Dorn Street and Beauregard Street have served as a long-standing refuge for many, while also pointing out that securing housing for newly arriving refugees remains a significant challenge.

In 2011, Virginia welcomed 7,600 Afghan refugees, with 20% settling in Alexandria's West End. There are currently 1,200 Afghan students at Alexandria City High School, but this figure is declining as families relocate to more affordable areas like Manassas, Stafford, and Winchester due to housing issues.

Families who arrived during the Biden administration are now facing challenges as available resources have diminished; the latest arrivals were just four weeks ago. Their visas are valid for only 90 days, and they received minimal support for job placements and school registration, exacerbated by a general lack of English proficiency among the families.

Mr. Altman stated that in the first year, 300 families were relocated to the City with help from resettlement agencies. Since 2022, the focus has shifted to educational support, enrolling 130 students in adult ESL classes. An adult education program was set up at William Ramsey Elementary, attracting teens who need writing skills. In 2023, a partnership with ACPS created a literacy program, supported by 60 volunteers, with seven kids graduating this year and receiving scholarships.

He raised three major concerns: 1) ACPS lacks the resources necessary for basic literacy instruction, hindering student potential; 2) Poor housing conditions need attention from landlords, particularly on Beauregard Street, where apartments are infested with bed bugs and rats; 3) Employment issues for refugees, who are legally allowed to work but often end up in minimum-wage jobs with disrespectful treatment, excessive hours, and non-compliance with Virginia employment regulations.

Vice Chair Schwartz inquired about the commission's potential contributions to address the issues presented. Mr. Altman responded that the Commission would identify the challenges and opportunities by the conclusion of the presentation.

Melanie Gray – Christ Church of Alexandria

Ms. Gray shared her experience working in the City of Alexandria since 1992 and praised the city's collaboration with various organizations. She oversees thirteen outreach ministries at Christ Church, including the refugee ministry. Over the past ten years, they noticed that people with special immigration visas, like doctors and engineers who worked for the armed forces, were seeking financial help. Although these individuals received resettlement benefits, the three months of support were often insufficient. This ministry was established to provide extra support to families in need, resulting in over 140 families benefiting from its services. It has witnessed remarkable outcomes, including a family starting their own business and their children receiving scholarships for college education.

She said that when Afghanistan fell, they were told that no new refugees would arrive in Northern Virginia because it was too expensive, but they added a lot of families to the ministry. She wanted the Commission to know that people have arrived here with no resettlement benefits, and no one is helping them, other than Mr. Altman. She stated that over the past eight months, they have raised significant funds to keep these families' homes safe and help them acclimate upon arrival. She indicated that SNAP benefits are being stolen from families because they are not securing their cards, leaving them without money for groceries.

She mentioned several families have crossed the border, highlighting one family housed at Virginia Theological Seminary. The father, a pediatrician, received certification, which was paid for by their program, and secured a job at CVS while taking classes. However, after attending an

immigration appointment, he was put in an ankle bracelet, which now prevents him from working at CVS.

She stated that their ministry has been facilitating financial support for individuals sending money home to ensure family safety, funding the relocation of family members from Afghanistan to previously secure Pakistan, and currently working on their exit from Pakistan.

Mr. Altman indicated that families who entered the U.S. under the Biden administration applied for asylum but were unable to obtain a work permit during the first six months of their asylum application. He added that almost every family that falls into that category has been granted asylum.

Ms. Gray emphasized the importance of collaborating with Restoration Immigration Legal Aid for legal representation within the Afghan community, highlighting their pro bono services. She also invited the commission to their community dinner on April 25th at the Virginia Theological Seminary, an event held once or twice a year.

Amanda Dombach highlighted that her organization offers traditional resettlement services, which are done within the initial 90-day period after arrival. However, with the administration change and stop work orders, that programming was cut across all the resettlement agencies, so they have had to abandon the traditional refugee services that they were providing. They have employment support services, women's circle, and sewing classes.

The Commission inquired about the geographical scope of services provided by Christ Church. Ms. Gray indicated that their services are available to residents of Alexandria City, while Mr. Altman noted that his organization extends services to surrounding areas, including Fairfax County. Regarding awareness of these services among Afghan families, Ms. Gray explained that Christ Church does not advertise and that referrals primarily come through the Lazarus Ministry's emergency financial services, with roughly 15-17 families being served weekly. She highlighted their success in preventing evictions. Mr. Altman stated that his organization also relies on word of mouth for referrals.

Amanda Dombach, Women for Afghan Women

Ms. Dombach reported that the Virginia Community Center, which opened in 2021, serves Afghan women and has been active in the US for 25 years. Its establishment was a response to the growing Afghan population in the area, particularly due to expected increases in arrivals. The center provides a range of services in the DMV area, including social service support, case management, educational counseling, career support, an immigration legal department, and mental health counseling in Dari, particularly for Afghan students in ACPS, through weekly one-on-one sessions. The organization, led mainly by Afghan women, operates without advertising, relying on referrals from community partners. It also offers assistance to survivors of domestic violence, with a noted increase in individuals seeking services recently. Most of the team members are Afghan, apart from Ms. Dombach and the paralegal.

She stated that there has been some security in the community over the last couple of years, but with the shift in the administration and the ramifications of the changes that they have made are

starting to hit the Afghan community. Recently, they have been told that anyone who has received a refugee status and entered after 2021 is subject to being reinterviewed. This essentially targets the Afghan community, because they are the majority of people that resettle in the US. Community members with that status are now feeling unsettled.

Ms. Dombach discussed recent issues with asylum applications, noting that appointment letters from USCIS have been received, but applications are still on hold. She shared a troubling case of an Afghan man in Texas who died shortly after being detained, causing anxiety among others in similar situations. Legislative changes have led to people losing SNAP benefits and losing access to Medicaid in September. Job opportunities are limited due to expired Employment Authorization Documents and employer misconceptions about hiring refugees. Additionally, difficulties with landlords have emerged, while access to financial literacy and digital skill training remains a challenge.

She emphasized the current challenges facing the community, noting a growing demand for services. However, organizations, particularly resettlement agencies and non-profits serving immigrants, are experiencing dwindling funding, making it harder to meet these needs.

Ms. Gray said they are addressing the issue of Hispanic community members being detained and deported by ICE. She is working to establish a support center for these individuals and has applied for a grant to collaborate with organizations such as Tenants and Workers United, Casa Chirilagua, and Mother of Light to address the challenges faced by these families. She said that she is hoping to launch the program on Monday. Vice Chair Schwartz asked her to return to the commission to discuss this program.

Draft Letter to Mayor Gaskins & City Council

Vice Chair Breslaw discussed the letter directed to the Mayor and City Council, which serves as a follow-up to the prior discussion with Police Chief McGuire regarding the complexities surrounding immigration issues. The letter seeks clear guidance for the Alexandria Police Department on how to handle interactions with ICE. Commissioner Brunner expressed discomfort with the letter's current wording, particularly disagreeing with paragraphs three and four, and emphasizing the need for caution in communicating public policy amid the complexities of immigration issues, noting the city's careful approach and referencing the statement on the City's website about ICE.

Upon a motion by Vice Chair Schwartz, seconded by Commissioner Harris, the Commission discussed the wording of the letter regarding ICE operations in Alexandria. Commissioner Prince proposed an amendment to simplify paragraphs three and four into two clear sentences, which would say, "The City's Status of ICE Operations webpage should provide simple, practical advice about when Alexandrians should contact police if they are concerned about ICE activity, clarify circumstances under which the non-emergency verse the emergency line should be used, how such calls will be handled by dispatchers, and when, how and under what circumstances Alexandria police will respond. Clear guidance is essential to ensure consistency, legality, and the protection of residents' and visitors' rights. It is critical that the city provide a prompt response to the legal issues presented and that a policy be developed and communicated quickly

both to our police and the public. We understand that discussions are underway to develop a city policy addressing ICE's involvement in the community."

Upon an amended motion by Vice Chair Schwartz reflecting the changes proposed by Commissioner Prince, seconded by Commissioner Harris. The letter was approved with the changes. All Commissioners present voted aye, and one abstained.

Vice Chair Breslaw announced tabling with ALIVE on Saturday, April 11th

2040 Housing Plan

The Commission will support what Chair Thompson and Commissioner Fratila drafted to be sent regarding the 2040 Housing Plan.

4 Executive Committee

Vice Chair Breslaw stated that Chair Thompson is working on possibly having the April meeting at ARHA.

5. Subcommittee's Reports

Subcommittee on Outreach to Non-Profit Partners – No Report. Commissioner Fratila suggested following up with tonight's guests for outreach events.

Subcommittee on Community Events- No Report

6. Liaison Reports

Commissioner Reeder reported that the Commission on Aging awards nominations are open and will close on April 3. He said that the Age Friendly Plan is finally going to the City Council.

Commissioner Prince reported that the Commission for Persons with Disabilities has a letter going to City Council regarding with accessibility issues with the recent snow and ice removal and public transportation. She also announced that the ACPD award nominations and applications are now open.

7. Staff Report - No report.

8. Announcements/Adjournment

Commissioner Parker inquired if he could share what happens at another committee meeting he attends. Commissioner Brunner suggested having a session that focuses on homeless issues in the City of Alexandria.

Upon a motion by Vice Chair Schartz, seconded by Commissioner Prince
The meeting adjourned at 9:08 p.m.