

ALEXANDRIA HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION  
MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 2019  
7:00 p.m.  
Patrick Henry Recreation Center  
4643 Taney Avenue

Members Present

Danielle Beach  
Amy Blackwood, Vice Chair  
Francisco Duran, Vice Chair  
Damien Hammond, Sr.  
Christopher Harris  
Matt Harris, Chair  
Susan Kellom  
David Rigsby  
Scott Schwartz  
Jenny Wade

Staff Present

Jean Kelleher, Director  
David Miller, Investigator  
Anna McClure, Investigator  
Miladis Martinez Gutierrez

Excused Members

Monika Jones  
Michael Kreps

Guests:

Qasim Rashid  
Zeina Azzam, Grassroots Alexandria  
Barbara Wilmer, Grassroots Alexandria

**1. Call to Order/Introductions by Chair, Matt Harris**

Chair Harris called the meeting to order at 7:10 p.m. Introductions were made.

**2. Approval of Minutes of December**

Upon a motion by Commissioner Kellom, seconded by Vice Chair Duran, the Commission approved the minutes of the January meeting. All Commissioners present voted aye and one abstained.

**3. Guest Presenter: Qasim Rashid**

Chair Harris welcomed Mr. Qasim Rashid, who is an expert on Muslim affairs. Chair Harris read a statement that Council member Mo Seifeldein sent apologizing for not being able to be at the meeting. Chair Harris stated that Mr. Rashid is a best-selling, critically acclaimed author, practicing attorney, former visiting fellow at Harvard University's Islamic Studies program and current Truman Project National Security fellow. His work has appeared in Time Magazine, The Washington Post, the New York Times, Fox News, and a variety of other national outlets.

Mr. Rashid stated that what he wanted to accomplish tonight is to share some of the high-level overviews of what American-descent Muslims in general are experiencing in this climate, what are some of the struggles and in general, and what supporting mechanism will be valuable or be helpful. He stated that some of the struggles are the current rhetoric out there and said that he just wrote a piece for the Columbia Journalism Review on how Muslims are portrayed and perceive in the media in general. He said that two years ago the Muslim ban was launched, 97% of the people talking about it were not Muslims and nearly 70% of the media reports on it were

from President Trump himself. There were very few opportunities for a Muslim to get on the air to talk about this, so when you have something that impacts the Muslim community so directly, but Muslims are not given a seat at the table, it can have a very negative impact.

Mr. Rashid stated that nearly 30 States have passed or introduced legislation of what is known as the anti-Shariah movement, where states are trying to pass laws banning Shariah law in the country. This is problematic, because it is infringing on the private civil rights of Muslims, Shariah is our moral code of how we eat, how we married or divorce. If you band Shariah in a Country you are telling a Muslim, “you can’t fast in the month of Ramadan”, because that is Shariah, or “you can’t pray five times a day”, because that is Shariah. He said that providing education on why these kinds of laws that are passed in several different states, why they are problematic and why they result in a discriminatory impact. He added that the 2017 hate crime report from the FBI was released last November and then they saw an uptake on hate crimes around the country. Muslims consist of 1% of the population and suffer about 18% of hate crimes. He said that looking at a survey done by CARE in California a couple years ago, 42% of the students reported that they were being bullied. He said that the second aspect of this is that not only Muslims are suffering racism, it is anybody that looks Muslim. Recently, there was a Sikh man that was attacked because the person said that he hated Muslims.

Mr. Rashid said that there are three main reasons why there is a lack of reporting, one is that there is a lack of knowledge that they can report, they don’t know that is an option; there isn’t enough communication. Second, there is a fear of backlash, there is a fear that if they report something it is going to be backlash for their community and it is going make things worse, trust needs to be rebuilt, and there needs to be transparency. If there is no transparency, you cannot expect the community to come to you when they actually need something. Finally, and not as severe, is language access, so being able to provide access in Urdu, in Arabic, in Farsi, and in different dialects is going to be a valuable resource to be able to provide that kind of support that the Muslim American Citizens need and deserve. He said that these are the general mindset that the American Muslim community go through.

Vice Chair Duran asked if there is anything specific to Virginia in Alexandria that can be shared with the Commission, more detail to what he sees in this area? Mr. Rashid said that Virginia prides itself as the founding State of Religion freedom. He said that there have been incidents of hate, for example, the Mosque that he attends in Chantilly had its window smashed in a few years ago, but at the same Mosque a couple years ago when the Muslim ban was announced, people came out and drew in chalk giant hearts and wrote “we don’t want you to go.”

Mr. Rashid said that every election cycle they see an uptick in anti-Muslim sentiment from politicians. They see examples of politicians sharing articles alleging that Muslims support ISIS. He said that being able to monitor that and being able to push back against that is going to be a significant thing. He said that Corey Stewart made some very inflammatory anti-Muslims remarks. Recently they had a new Mosque inauguration in Manassas and they reached out to Cory Stewart and invited him to come to the Mosque and meet Muslims first-hand, and to his credit he accepted the invitation and since then he has not seen anything anti-Muslim come from Mr. Stewart’s campaign. He said that in Virginia, the most important thing now is that we have elections coming up in November, and we have several Muslims running for office, so it is being

able to monitor the campaign rhetoric that we are seeing and in real time push back against that from a position of authority.

Jean Kelleher mentioned that that the Human Rights Commission has tried to do outreach events and had no luck reaching the Muslim community. Mr. Rashid said that there is no simple answer, but what he has experienced is that if the Commission did that event and no one showed up, that was just part of the base that needs to be built to get above water. This where the Commission builds another event and announce it again and maybe a couple of people will show up but is the consistency that builds trust and it will take time to rebuild that trust. Mr. Rashid stated that they started a coffee cake Islam event, where they will simply set up at a coffee shop and offer to buy coffee to anybody who came and wanted to meet a Muslim. He said that for the first three to four months no body showed up, but after the word got out on social media, people started to show up, but the amount of time it took was a lot. He suggested to not get discouraged if no one shows up to the first or second event keep trying, use consistency to build trust.

Zeina Azzam asked Mr. Rashid to talked about the portrayal of Muslim in the media, movies and also how the news media frames stories about Muslims. Mr. Rashid said that there is a study done of the New York Times that looked at how the New York Times reported on Muslims over the period of fifteen years and what they discovered was that the New York Times reported more positively on Cancer than they did on Muslims and Islam so, cancer has a better reputation in New York Times. The Director of Green Book movie had some Anti-Muslim tweets that were discover afterwards. Chair Harris thanked Mr. Rashid and his wife for coming before the Commission.

#### **4. Executive Committee Report**

Chair Harris stated that he was not able to make it to Executive Committee meeting. Director Kelleher stated that the Police Chief and John East met with the Executive Committee. She said that all of the reports were involving the use of taser and said that the internal investigative reports were more detailed this time, which was great for the Executive Committee.

Director Kelleher stated that the public issue is with a police-involved shooting and said that in the past there has been a mechanism of reporting it to the Commission. She also stated that there is a Memorandum of Understanding among Police, City Manager's Office and the Human Rights Commission. She said that they had talked about revisiting the MOU and said that Chair Harris was concerned after the latest police-involved shooting that the investigation was being handled by the Virginia State Police. She said that this was done, not just for that incident, that was the policy that Mike Brown implemented when he became Chief, because in many places around the country there is criticism of police departments investigating themselves. The idea was for the administrative investigation to be handled internally by the police department and the criminal investigation to be handled by the state police. The person who was shot was hospitalized but did not die and has been incarcerated for another reason. The state police report is out, and it is being review by Bryan Porter, Commonwealth's Attorney; as soon as he finishes with it and releases it, the Commission will get it and be able to provide comment.

Director Kelleher stated that there was a lunch meeting of the VAHR in Richmond yesterday and said that Commissioner Kellom has expressed interested in it. Chair Harris volunteered to participate in VAHR.

Director Kelleher stated that the Commission had suggested inviting newly-elected City Council Members to the March meeting, but said they have their priorities right now and asked to respect those priorities. Director Kelleher stated that a new designated person has been appointed from Economic Opportunities Commission to the Human Rights Commission. Director Kelleher suggested inviting the Legislative Director to the March meeting. Chair Harris agreed on inviting the Legislative Director.

Director Kelleher said that on the Juvenile Detention Center tour can be scheduled on a Commission night and start a little early. Chair Harris suggested scheduling for the April or May meeting.

#### **5. Director's Report**

Director Kelleher stated that they are moving forward as a City on the Equity initiative and the City has become a member of the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE). She is still chairing the meetings and is hoping that in the budget, that is being introduced tonight, that there will be resources available so that there can be a person who can take the lead on the equity initiative. Director Kelleher stated that she was invited by the Children, Youth and Families Commission to talk about Equity.

Director Kelleher also mentioned that the International Association of Official Human Rights Agencies (IAOHRA) Board of Directors will be meeting in DC this week and are planning their summer conference in Orlando, Florida.

#### **6. Old or New Business**

Chair Harris stated that Canek Aguirre has sent a sample resolution on the 2020 census question on citizenship. Upon a motion by Commissioner Kellom, seconded by Commissioner Hammond, Jr., the Commission will support the resolution on opposing the citizenship question on the 2020 census questionnaire.

Commissioner Wade stated that Arlington County does not have enough money to sustain the body worn cameras for the police; it was the data storage that cost a lot.

Director Kelleher talked about the Universal Representation for individual facing deportation. She said that there is a concerted effort among advocates and progressive Cities and Counties to adopt the Universal representation which is based on the due process argument and to try to find a way for local governments to set aside some funds to give to non-profits who will then do the work. She stated that after a conversation among the City Attorney's Office, City Manager's Office and the budget director, they all agreed that they will support this in principle. She stated that they feel strongly that they need to do their due diligence, but need to make sure they don't have a Dillon Rule problem. Director Kelleher said that Namooode Khan is doing a lot of research for her on this matter.

**7. Liaison Reports**

Commissioner Hammond, Sr. stated that the HIV/AIDS Commission is reevaluating their purpose. Vice Chair Blackwood stated that the ACPD met and elected a new Chair and also stated that a committee was elected to look into the pilot scooter program.

**8. Announcements /Adjournment**

**MOTION:** adjourn the meeting.

Wade/Duran **PASSED** unanimously

The meeting adjourned at 8:47 p.m.