



**Human Rights Commission
Meeting Minutes
Regular Meeting
July 17, 2025
City Space, 100 5th Street NE, Charlottesville, VA 22902
6:00 pm**

1. WELCOME

- a. CALL TO ORDER
 - i. Chair, Heather Roberson Gaston, called the meeting to order at 6:03 pm
- b. ROLL CALL
 - i. Present
 - 1. Heather Roberson Gaston
 - 2. Jason Melendez (attending virtually due to a personal matter pursuant to City Policy No. 100-02 and Va. Code § 2.2-3708.3.B.)
 - 3. Dawn Lawson
 - 4. Elizabeth Stark (attending virtually due to a temporary or permanent disability or other medical condition that prevents the member's physical attendance per City Policy No. 100-02 and Va. Code § 2.2-3708.3.B.)
 - 5. Jayson Whitehead
 - 6. LD Perry
 - 7. Suzanne Lynn
 - 8. Wolfgang Keppley
 - ii. Absent
 - 1. Mariane Asad Doyle
- c. MISSION (recited by all): *Act as a strong advocate to justice and equal opportunity by providing citywide leadership and guidance in the area of civil rights.*

2. MATTERS BY THE PUBLIC

- a. PUBLIC COMMENT
 - i. None

3. MINUTES

- a. Review of minutes from 05/15/2025
 - i. Vote
 - 1. In favor: 8
 - 2. Opposed: 0
 - 3. Abstained: 0
 - ii. Motion to approve minutes passes
- b. Review of minutes from 06/05/2025
 - i. Vote
 - 1. In favor: 8
 - 2. Opposed: 0
 - 3. Abstained: 0
 - ii. Motion to approve minutes passes

4. BUSINESS MATTERS

a. CHAIR UPDATE

- i. Looking forward to updates from Commissioner outreach between meetings

b. OHR STAFF REPORT

i. Outreach Update

1. Outreach Specialist states that outreach data in the Monthly Report is up to date and there are some upcoming events that Commissioners are welcome to attend

5. WORK SESSION

a. Legislative Panel

i. Shayla Washington, Executive Director of Blue Ridge Area Coalition for the Homeless

1. Provides update on demographics of current local unhoused population
 - a. Increase in unhoused senior citizens
 - b. Increase in unhoused families with children
 - c. Increase in need for medical respite beds for those with particularly high medical care needs
2. Supports legislation to allow for statewide rent control to reduce barriers for unhoused community members on fixed incomes that struggle to afford rising rents in Charlottesville and surrounding counties
3. Supports increased eviction prevention and flexible funding to improve housing stability, prevent homelessness, and mitigate harmful impacts for individuals, families, and the community at large
 - a. States that flexible funds with low criteria for eligibility are most helpful
 - b. Another panelist expresses support for this recommendation
4. Supports increase in funding for permanent supportive housing to address funding cuts
5. States concern about potential growth in unhoused and housing insecure populations due to increased financial instability for community members resulting from cuts to food assistance programs, increased unemployment, and higher cost of living
6. Commissioner asks if unhoused people are struggling to access medical care
 - a. Shayla Washington states that an expansion in medical outreach to connect people to care would be helpful
7. Commissioner asks if individuals have lost access to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits
 - a. Shayla Washington states that she has not heard about this happening in the community, but that unsheltered individuals do receive less SNAP funds per month than those that are housed
8. Commissioner asks where people experiencing homelessness in Charlottesville are from

- a. Shayla Washington says that majority of unhoused population in Charlottesville is from the city or Albemarle County
 - 9. Commissioner asks about services available for homeless veterans
 - a. Shayla Washington states that there are currently no locally available rental assistance programs specifically for veterans, and the closest options are in Richmond
 - b. Shayla Washington states that veteran homelessness has increased since the local programs providing services for veterans lost funding
- ii. Laura Dobbs, Director of Policy at Housing Opportunities Made Equal (HOME) of Virginia
 - 1. Provides overview of HOME programs and services and distributes document summarizing recommendations
 - 2. States that there are currently increased barriers to asserting fair housing rights and rollbacks of fair housing protections
 - 3. States that there is an increased need to assist organizations with navigating grant application and award process
 - 4. States that the disparate impact rule is facing challenges
 - a. Supports affirmation of fair housing rights at state level and providing access to fair housing guidance on state platforms
 - 5. Supports continued commitment to the Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing provision of the Fair Housing Act, continued local analysis of barriers to fair housing, and encourages action to address any barriers discovered
 - 6. Supports defense of state fair housing laws
 - 7. Supports amendment to state law to allow class action lawsuits to be brought in state courts
 - a. Another panelist expresses support for this recommendation
 - b. Commissioner asks for more information about this
 - i. Laura Dobbs states that class action lawsuits are useful for addressing systemic problems in cases where not all tenants affected by an issue are willing or able to file an individual case against a landlord
 - 8. States that budget cuts have affected education on fair housing rights, down payment assistance programs, staffing at fair housing offices, and tenant-based rental assistance programs
- iii. Kari Miller, Founder and Chief Executive Officer of International Neighbors
 - 1. Provides overview of International Neighbors programs and services
 - 2. States that a large portion of the population served by International Neighbors experiences food insecurity, housing insecurity, and general economic insecurity
 - 3. States that single adult homes are especially burdened by the

- local cost of living
- 4. States that funding cuts to SNAP and Medicaid are negatively impacting the population
 - a. Refugees and Special Immigrant Visa holders (SIVs) receive SNAP benefits during the resettlement process, but in the years following their arrival they generally stop meeting eligibility requirements for SNAP
- 5. States that refugees and SIVs are required to pay back cost of flights from their country of origin, which is often difficult to for people to afford
- 6. States that International Neighbors has recently seen an increase in community members interested in volunteering and a decrease in donations and available funding
- iv. Jo Olson, Client Voices Coordinator at International Rescue Committee (IRC)
 - 1. Provides overview of IRC programs and services
 - 2. States that IRC conducted a survey of their clients to understand biggest challenges people are facing
 - a. Thirty eight percent of participating clients reported that expensive housing is their biggest challenge
 - b. Fifteen percent of participating clients reported experiencing language isolation
 - c. Fifteen percent of participating clients reported challenges in navigating the immigration process and filing for green cards
 - d. Five percent of participating clients reported other personal challenges
 - e. An overarching theme in responses was high costs of childcare and challenges around accessing childcare
 - i. Intersects with employment challenges, because without childcare people struggle to get or keep a job
 - ii. Childcare centers that accept childcare subsidies do not have sufficient capacity to meet needs, so people's subsidies are expiring before they find a childcare option
 - 1. Could be addressed by increasing number of childcare centers that accept subsidy or by extending deadline to use subsidy
 - 2. These subsidies are administered by the Department of Social Services
 - 3. Supports rent control legislation
 - 4. Supports legislation to address rental agencies charging application fees for every adult in a household even when there is little or no likelihood that the applicant will be able to rent a unit
 - 5. States that clients struggle with Section 8 voucher waitlists
 - a. Landlord education programs about vouchers would be

helpful, because landlords tend to be reluctant to accept vouchers

6. Supports extending deadline for attaching housing vouchers because people who receive vouchers struggle to attach them before they expire
7. States that language barriers often require skilled workers to take entry-level positions in the hospitality industry, which often have low wages and minimal opportunities for income growth
8. States that SNAP benefit eligibility will likely be revoked from refugees, asylees, and parolees that do not yet have legal permanent status
 - a. States that process for applying for green cards has become very slow, which prolongs period of time that people are ineligible for SNAP food assistance benefits
 - i. Without SNAP benefits, people must choose between paying for food and other critical expenses
- v. Victoria Horrock, Senior Supervising Attorney at Legal Aid Justice Center (LAJC)
 1. Provides overview of LAJC programs and services
 2. States that evictions are a large challenge in the community
 - a. States that Virginia is historically a high eviction state and does not have strong legal protections for tenants
 - b. States that there are 115 cases on the combined Charlottesville and Albemarle eviction docket this month
 - i. Largest evicting agency in the City is Charlottesville Redevelopment and Housing Authority
 - ii. Majority of evictions are due to non-payment of rent following childcare expenses, healthcare expenses, etc
 1. Short window of time to catch up on rental payments when people get behind
 2. Court system favors landlords with low filing fees for eviction cases, lack of procedural protections, difficult appeal process for tenants, and quick eviction process as a whole
 - c. States that there is stark racial inequality in distribution of property rights in Virginia
 - i. Black Americans are 8% of renters and 51% of people affected by evictions
 - d. States that an adult with children is twice as likely to face an eviction as an adult without children
 - i. Intersects with economic instability, lack of access to childcare, and other issues
 3. States that housing conditions are bad in this area, with many units having structural issues, leaks, malfunctioning utilities,

mold, etc

- a. Few options for tenants to address poor conditions through legal means
4. States that rent is high locally, and additional fees are also high
 - a. Many landlords charge pest control fees even though multiple courts have ruled that pest control is a landlord responsibility
 - i. This cannot be addressed through a class action lawsuit and is unlikely to be addressed by individual lawsuits because the pest control fees are less expensive than the costs associated with bringing a case to court
5. States that immigrants are more reluctant to appear in court or assert housing rights in court in current climate of immigration enforcement
6. States that there is fear around future loss of benefits like SNAP and Medicaid
7. States that there is a lack of affordable housing available locally
 - a. Charlottesville residents are being forced to move to County due to unaffordable rent
8. Supports Anti Rent Gouging Bill, which allows localities in Virginia to create rent stabilizing policies
9. Supports Warranty of Habitability, which allows tenants to raise poor conditions as a defense for non-payment of rent
 - a. Another panelist expresses support for this recommendation
10. Supports legislation to allow localities to sue landlords for not maintaining health and safety of rental units
 - a. Commissioner states that when the State Attorney General is not willing to sue large landlords, it could be useful for localities to be able to do so
 - i. Victoria Horrock states that currently localities' ability to help is limited to code enforcement, which is often not a sufficient tool to address the issue
11. Supports legislation to create statewide voucher program to address cuts to federal voucher programs
12. Supports legislation to allow localities a right of first refusal when tax credits expire on properties
13. Supports legislation to create state ombudsman for housing
14. Commissioner asks about vouchers
 - a. Victoria Horrock states that housing quality standards used by federal voucher program seem inconsistent
 - i. Voucher administrator can legally stop paying rent due to poor conditions in rental units, but tenants cannot
15. Commissioner asks about tenant ability to sue
 - a. Victoria Horrock states that tenants must be completely up to date on rental payments to bring a case in court

for maintenance issues

- vi. Latricia Giles, Executive Director of Public Housing Association of Residents (PHAR)
 1. Provides overview of PHAR programs and services
 2. States that PHAR residents are concerned about evictions
 3. States that current policy climate is focused on further criminalizing poverty
 - a. Many residents already must choose between critical expenses like healthcare, childcare, housing, etc
 - b. Many of these issues are intersecting
 4. States that there are increasing concerns in the resident community around mental health, substance use, and violence
 5. States that there are numerous concerns around youth wellbeing and safety
 - a. Commissioner asks if there are former programs that residents would like to see reinstated, new programs that residents would like to see created, or existing programs that residents would like to see expanded to better support youth
 - i. Latricia Giles states that it is most important to talk with youth directly and learn about what they are experiencing while empowering them to advocate for themselves and use their voices
 - ii. Latricia Giles also recommends supporting opportunities for youth advancement like creating access to internships, jobs, and mentoring programs
 6. Supports preservation of affordable housing and funding to support affordable housing
 7. States that strong community building is necessary because when some members of the community's wellbeing is placed at risk, the whole community's wellbeing is at risk
 8. States that eligibility for support programs can be too restrictive and that this makes it hard to exit poverty
 9. Expresses concern about consequences of intersections between potential cuts to supportive programs and benefits, criminalization of homelessness, and expansion of carceral systems
- vii. Javier Raudales, Executive Director of Sin Barreras
 1. Provides overview of Sin Barreras programs and services
 2. States that existing barriers for immigrant community have been exacerbated in recent months
 - a. States that community members are reluctant to reach out for support from human and social service organizations, police, etc
 - b. States that community members are afraid and distrustful of institutions
 - c. Processes for accessing needs-based programs and acquiring necessary immigration papers have become

more difficult to navigate

3. Supports strengthening housing rights and workers' rights
 4. States that funding for adult education programs has been cut
 - a. Another panelist expresses concern about cuts to adult education programs, particularly English learning programs, and expresses support for expansion of these programs
 5. States concern about new uses of personal data and encourages service providers to not collect data that is not necessary
 - a. Commissioner asks about concerns related to Flock camera data
 - i. Javier Raudales reiterates suggestion to only collect necessary data and for service providers to review their data collection policies
 - ii. Other panelists express support for this recommendation
 - viii. Commissioner suggests asking panelists to review the HRC's draft recommendations prior to an HRC vote to approve them
 1. Other Commissioners express support for this idea
 - ix. Commissioner suggests that recommendations should focus on addressing barriers and root causes, rather than focusing on achieving outcomes
 - x. Director states that the deadline to submit recommendations to City Council has been extended to mid-September
 - b. The HRC will hold a Work Session on August 7, 2025
- 6. MATTERS BY THE PUBLIC**
- a. PUBLIC COMMENT
 - i. None
 - b. COMMISSION RESPONSE TO MATTERS BY THE PUBLIC
 - i. None
- 7. COMMISSIONER UPDATES**
- a. Chair elects to skip this section of the agenda
- 8. NEXT STEPS**
- a. None assigned
- 9. ADJOURN**
- a. Meeting adjourned at 8:09 pm