



**Human Rights Commission
Meeting Minutes
Regular Meeting
August 20, 2026
Virtual/Electronic Meeting conducted on Zoom
6:00 pm**

1. WELCOME

- a. CALL TO ORDER
 - i. Chair, Heather Roberson Gaston, called the Zoom meeting to order at 6:05 pm.
- b. ROLL CALL
 - i. Present
 - 1. Heather Roberson Gaston
 - 2. Elizabeth Stark
 - 3. Callum McCain von Schill
 - 4. Dawn Lawson (arrived 6:13 pm after review of minutes from 07/16/26)
 - 5. Emily Currier
 - 6. Jessica Cocciolone
 - 7. Suzanne Lynn
 - ii. Absent
 - 1. Mariane Asad Doyle
- c. MISSION (recited by all): Act as a strong advocate for 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.
- b. COMMISSION RESPONSE TO MATTERS BY THE PUBLIC
 - i. None.

3. MINUTES

- a. Review of minutes from July 16, 2026.
 - i. Motion: Jessica Cocciolone moved to approve the July 16, 2026, regular meeting minutes.
 - 1. Second: Heather Roberson Gaston seconded the motion.
 - 2. Vote:
 - a. In favor: 6
 - b. Can live with: 0
 - c. Opposed: 0
 - d. Abstained: 0
 - 3. Motion to approve minutes passed unanimously.

4. BUSINESS MATTERS

- a. CHAIR UPDATE
 - i. Legislative Recommendation Timeline
 - 1. The chair reported that the Chair and staff sought to preserve or extend the usual August 30 deadline for state legislative recommendations.
 - 2. The Commission heard that the City requested recommendations by Saturday, August 22, 2026, so they could be considered during the City's legislative process.
 - 3. The chair suggested submitting a shorter, less granular slate of recommendations than in some prior years due to the compressed timeline and evolving stakeholder input.

4. The chair noted that state legislative recommendations were the immediate focus and that City policy recommendations could be addressed later.

b. **OHR STAFF REPORT**

i. Chief Prosperity Officer

1. Staff reported that Joshua Barr began as the City's new Chief Prosperity Officer.
2. Staff described the new reporting structure: the Office of Human Rights reports to the Chief Prosperity Officer, then to the Assistant to the City Manager, then to the City Manager.
3. Staff noted that the Chief Prosperity Officer has prior human rights office leadership experience and is familiar with official human rights agency work.

ii. Hiring and Staffing

1. Staff reported that the policy and impact analyst hiring process was near completion and that reference checks were underway.
2. Staff anticipated that the selected candidate may attend a future meeting, likely in October if the process proceeds as expected.

iii. IAOHRA Conference and Local Human Rights Work

1. Staff reported from the International Association of Official Human Rights Agencies conference and noted that agencies are discussing limits and uncertainties related to federal work-share enforcement and federal civil rights protections.
2. Staff emphasized the importance of local and state human rights agencies in handling complaints, identifying systemic issues, and maintaining access to protections.
3. Staff distinguished outreach from engagement: outreach focuses on education and sharing information, while engagement involves stakeholder conversations that inform Commission recommendations and policy work.
4. Staff reported participating in Soul of Cville and speaking with approximately 25 community members.
5. Staff noted that the conference reinforced the need for staff capacity, including the policy and impact analyst and potentially future community outreach capacity.

iv. Office Work Plan and Three-Year Goals

1. Staff reported that an Office of Human Rights work plan and three-year goals had been submitted to City management.
2. Staff stated that the office work plan is separate from the Commission work plan and will be shared with the Commission after additional feedback is received.

5. WORK SESSION

a. Annual legislative agenda recommendations

i. Recommendation Timeline and Process

1. The Commission focused on state legislative recommendations because those recommendations were due to the City by August 22, 2026.
2. The Commission discussed using highlighted priorities and stakeholder input to identify a proposed slate rather than drafting full final language during the meeting.
3. Commissioners discussed that the compressed timeline limited the ability to refine language as extensively as in prior years but agreed that a timely submission was important.

ii. Implementation and Sustainable Funding

1. Commissioners discussed a broad theme that recently enacted human-rights-related and housing laws must be implemented effectively, without

weakening, watering down, or creating loopholes before delayed effective dates.

2. Discussion included the need for implementation structures, guidance, sustainable funding, staffing, and capacity so new laws do not become unfunded or unsupported mandates.
3. Commissioners discussed distinguishing between state-level legislative asks, City-level implementation questions, and issues requiring further investigation before a recommendation can be made.
4. Staff encouraged the Commission to frame recommendations with a concrete “by” statement, such as by increasing funding, enacting legislation, or creating enabling legislation, so City Council can understand the requested action.
5. Commissioners discussed moving some implementation questions, such as local use of property tax exemptions, right-of-first-refusal tools, LIHTC or property registry issues, and rental property registries, into City-level recommendations or an items-to-investigate category.

iii. Tenant Protections and Habitability

1. Commissioners discussed supporting implementation of recently enacted housing and tenant-protection laws, including tenant assertion reforms, anti-retaliation protections, ability to pay rent with legal tender, and habitability defenses.
2. The Commission heard that implementation of the 14-day pay-or-quit requirement appears to be proceeding smoothly based on available tenant-facing experience.
3. Commissioners discussed that habitability protections should cover safe and healthy housing conditions and not only immediately life-threatening conditions or fire hazards.
4. Discussion included examples such as severe pest infestation, mold, and other unsafe conditions that may not fall within a narrow survival-based standard.
5. Commissioners discussed that a recommendation could support implementation of enacted protections while also seeking to strengthen or clarify the habitability defense.

iv. Housing Affordability, Deeply Affordable Housing, and Housing Stability

1. The Commission discussed state support for deeply affordable housing, including housing affordable to people at or below approximately 30 percent of area median income and to workers earning minimum wage or low hourly wages.
2. Commissioners discussed the distinctions among permanent supportive housing, public housing, site-based subsidy, LIHTC-supported housing, and other forms of affordable housing.
3. Discussion included the need to protect recent housing funding increases and extend funding beyond single-year appropriations so localities and providers can plan for capacity, development, and service delivery over multiple years.
4. Commissioners discussed continued funding for eviction-prevention and housing-stability programs, including the Virginia Eviction Reduction Program, noting that recent funding increases should be sustained beyond the current cycle.

v. Junk Fees and Housing Cost Burdens

1. Commissioners discussed junk fees as a state legislative priority because mandatory fees can function as rent increases and worsen affordability.
2. Examples discussed included trash collection or delivery fees, water delivery fees, alarm system fees, mandatory internet packages, and other charges that residents may not be able to avoid.

3. Commissioners noted that recent disclosure requirements are helpful but do not eliminate the underlying burden of mandatory or predatory fees.
 4. Discussion emphasized that voucher holders and lower-income tenants may be especially affected when subsidies do not cover fees labeled as utilities, services, or add-ons.
- vi. Wage Theft and Access to Recourse
1. Commissioners discussed wage theft and enforcement barriers raised by immigrant-community stakeholders.
 2. Proposed language focused on strengthening enforcement mechanisms and ensuring workers have access to recourse regardless of language barriers or immigration status.
 3. Commissioners noted that existing federal protections may apply in some circumstances but that practical access to legal help and enforcement remains a significant concern.
 4. The Commission discussed that this issue may require additional research to identify the best state-level legislative mechanism.
- vii. Access to Counsel and Legal Aid Capacity
1. Commissioners discussed access to counsel as a recurring theme across eviction, habitability, wage theft, and other civil legal issues.
 2. Discussion included stakeholder input that right-to-counsel enabling authority may already exist but that funding restrictions may limit when legal aid attorneys can appear in eviction cases.
 3. Commissioners discussed the need for attorney access at early eviction stages, including first-return hearings, where tenants may need help understanding whether to admit the debt, contest the case, or request a trial.
 4. Staff agreed to follow up with a stakeholder at a statewide human rights gathering regarding legal-aid funding restrictions and representation at first-return hearings.
- viii. Anti-Rent-Gouging and Good-Cause Eviction Protections
1. Commissioners discussed whether to include anti-rent-gouging legislation even though prior bill language may require revision.
 2. Commissioners noted that rent increases and nonrenewal of leases remain significant tenant-stability issues.
 3. Discussion included support for including good-cause eviction or nonrenewal protections among the issues reflected in the recommendation slate, even if a current bill sponsor is uncertain.
- ix. Proposed Slate and Final Draft Process
1. Commissioners agreed that the final recommendation document should synthesize highlighted items, remove or park items better suited to City-level recommendations, and present a focused state legislative slate.
 2. Commissioners agreed that the Chair and Vice Chair would prepare final language after the meeting and circulate a draft for commissioner review.
 3. Commissioners discussed sharing a draft around 5:00 pm the next day, accepting comments or suggestions, and finalizing the submission by Saturday, August 22, 2026.
- x. Motion: Jessica Cocciolone moved to adopt the proposed slate of legislative recommendations and authorize the Chair and Vice Chair to create a final draft for submission to City Council.
1. Second: Heather Roberson Gaston seconded the motion.
 2. Vote:
 - a. In favor: 7
 - b. Can live with: 0
 - c. Opposed: 0
 - d. Abstained: 0
 3. Motion passed unanimously.

xi. Key Decisions

1. The Commission adopted the proposed slate of legislative recommendations and authorized the Chair and Vice Chair to create a final draft for submission to City Council.
 2. The Chair and Vice Chair will synthesize the highlighted recommendation items into a final draft, with commissioner review by email before submission.
 3. City-level policy questions and items requiring additional research will be set aside for later local policy work or follow-up investigation.
- b. Work Plan check-in
- i. Tabled.
- c. New Business
- i. No new business was recorded.
- d. Decision regarding next Work Session on 09/03/2026
- i. Key Decision
 1. The Commission decided not to hold the September 3, 2026, work session.

6. MATTERS BY THE PUBLIC

- a. PUBLIC COMMENT
- i. None.
- b. COMMISSION RESPONSE TO MATTERS BY THE PUBLIC
- i. None.

7. COMMISSIONER UPDATES

- a. Free Bridge Encampment and Emergency Shelter Update
- i. A commissioner reported that the Free Bridge encampment was scheduled to be cleared as of September 1, 2026, and that community providers and advocates were closely monitoring the process.
 - ii. Emergency Shelter Capacity and Related Housing Resources
 1. The Commission heard that the emergency shelter is expected to have 120 beds, compared with 54 existing Salvation Army beds in the community.
 2. The commissioner reported that another shelter option may add capacity later in the fall and that Vista 29 is expected to provide repurposed hotel housing for people experiencing chronic homelessness beginning in January.
 3. The Commission heard that 42 of the 80 Vista 29 units are expected to have vouchers set aside for people experiencing chronic homelessness.
 - iii. Encampment Assessments and Outreach
 1. The commissioner reported that, as of June 8, 2026, approximately 118 people were at the encampment, though fewer people remained by the meeting date.
 2. The Commission heard that intakes had been completed with 42 people and that assessments were expected to continue.
 3. The commissioner stated that four outreach workers were being hired to support the transition.
 - iv. Shelter Access and Harm Reduction Concerns
 1. The Commission heard concerns about accessibility and shelter rules, including top-bunk limitations, pets, couples, gender-separated sleeping arrangements, respite beds, and access to bathrooms and showers during renovations.
 2. The commissioner reported that one pet is expected to be allowed per person and that sleeping areas would be gender-separated, while day space would allow mixed-gender use.
 3. Concerns were raised about harm reduction, including whether the shelter would have an amnesty box or secure process for drugs,

paraphernalia, needles, weapons, and tools that residents may not be allowed to bring into the shelter.

4. The commissioner stated that pets, couples, and substance-use-related concerns appear to be among the primary issues raised by community members.

v. Community Care, Data Collection, and Follow-Up

1. The commissioner stated that, based on current information, the City does not appear to be planning arrests, although community concerns about police presence and encampment closure remain.
2. The Commission discussed the need to balance intake data collection with trust-building, because intakes are required to connect people to housing subsidies and services but can create fear among people who have reasons to distrust systems.
3. The commissioner planned to attend a Continuum of Care meeting the following day and share any substantive updates with commissioners.

8. NEXT STEPS

a. Key Decisions

- i. The July 16, 2026, regular meeting minutes were approved by a vote of 6 in favor, 0 can live with, 0 opposed, and 0 abstained.
- ii. The Commission adopted the proposed slate of legislative recommendations and authorized the Chair and Vice Chair to create a final draft for submission to City Council.
- iii. The Chair and Vice Chair will circulate draft recommendation language for commissioner review before final submission.
- iv. City-level policy issues and issues requiring more investigation will be carried forward for later City policy work or follow-up.
- v. The Commission will not hold the September 3, 2026, work session.

b. Action items

i. Heather Roberson Gaston and Elizabeth Stark

1. Draft and finalize the annual state legislative recommendation letter or slate for submission to City Council based on the highlighted priorities discussed by the Commission.
 - a. Deadline/timing: Draft to be circulated around 5:00 pm on Friday, August 21, 2026, if feasible; final submission by Saturday, August 22, 2026.
2. Incorporate commissioner comments and stakeholder-informed language, where feasible, before final submission.
 - a. Deadline/timing: Before final submission on Saturday, August 22, 2026.
3. Separate state-level recommendations from City-level policy issues and items requiring further research.
 - a. Deadline/timing: During drafting and before final submission.

ii. Elizabeth Stark

1. Share any substantive updates from the Continuum of Care meeting or other Free Bridge encampment follow-up.
 - a. Deadline/timing: After the meeting as updates become available.
2. Add or provide VPLC/legal-aid notes regarding right-to-counsel funding, first-return eviction hearings, and related access-to-counsel issues.
 - a. Deadline/timing: As available; before future recommendation discussion if needed.

iii. Todd / staff

1. Support final submission of the legislative recommendations to the City process, as needed.
 - a. Deadline/timing: By Saturday, August 22, 2026, or as soon as the final draft is ready.

2. Follow up with Christy Morrow or other appropriate stakeholders regarding legal-aid funding restrictions, right-to-counsel authority, and representation at first-return eviction hearings.
 - a. Deadline/timing: At or after the statewide human rights commissions gathering.
3. Share the Office of Human Rights work plan and three-year goals with the Commission after receiving City management feedback.
 - a. Deadline/timing: In a future agenda packet.
4. Continue the policy and impact analyst hiring process and update the Commission when the process advances.
 - a. Deadline/timing: Ongoing; anticipated update before or at the October meeting if feasible.
- iv. All commissioners
 1. Review the draft legislative recommendations when circulated and provide comments or suggested edits promptly.
 - a. Deadline/timing: After the draft is circulated, with feedback before final submission on Saturday, August 22, 2026.
 2. Continue identifying City-level policy issues and questions that should be moved into the later City policy recommendation process.
 - a. Deadline/timing: Ongoing before the City policy recommendations discussion.
 3. Share any concerns or information related to the Free Bridge encampment transition, emergency shelter access, or community care issues with Commission leadership or staff.
 - a. Deadline/timing: As information becomes available.
- c. Items to verify
 - i. Verify statutory details, effective dates, and implementation status for recently enacted tenant-protection and housing laws before finalizing detailed recommendation language.
 - ii. Verify the appropriate state or local mechanism for junk fee regulation, wage-theft enforcement, legal-aid/right-to-counsel funding, and good-cause eviction or nonrenewal protections.
 - iii. Verify whether local implementation questions related to property tax exemptions, right-of-first-refusal tools, rental property registries, and LIHTC or property registry information should be addressed through City policy recommendations or stakeholder follow-up.
 - iv. Verify updated information regarding the Free Bridge encampment transition, shelter rules, accessibility, harm-reduction practices, and emergency shelter capacity as additional information becomes available.

9. ADJOURN

- a. Meeting adjourned at 8:06 pm.