

Human Relations Commission  
Meeting Minutes  
November 17, 2016 5:00 p.m.

**Attendance:** Justin Carbonella, Brandie Doyle, Henry Fernandez, Richard Kagan, Rev. Thea Racelis, Howard Thody, and staff, Faith Jackson, Director of Equal Opportunity and Diversity Management

**Excused Absence:** Dr. Marcia McIntosh, Debbie Ruimerman, Jeanette White, and Angel Biney, Youth in Government Representative

**Absence:** Tamika Browne, Youth in Government Representative

**QUORUM:**            *Yes:*   X          *No:*       

**Call to Order:** Justin Carbonella, Chairperson, called the meeting to order at 5:15 p.m. He asked the commission members to state their names for the record.

**Public Session:** None

**Guest Speaker:** The commission welcomed Doug Clark of the Middletown Refugee Resettlement Coalition. Justin Carbonella said that everyone in the room would agree that this effort is an important one, and the commission would love to know more about what is happening, what the successes have been, and the challenges, both getting to this point and in moving forward. Also, collectively as a group the commission would love to see how as a group or as individuals they can support the work of the coalition.

Doug Clark thanked Justin Carbonella and started by providing a quick history. He spoke on the picture that surfaced last fall of the Syrian toddler who drowned. A number of people in churches and other faith communities came together and asked what could be done. What resulted was a meeting in Middletown in December of last year of a number of interested people and a representative from IRIS in New Haven who helped explain to the group what's involved in co-sponsoring a refugee family in the United States. From that point on, the group called themselves the Middletown Refugee Resettlement Coalition. They are not incorporated as a 501(c) nonprofit. They depend on other 501(c) nonprofits to help with the financial aspect. They went through the process outlined by IRIS. They organized themselves into what's called a core resettlement team, which has ten areas of responsibility. Once prepared, the group communicated to IRIS that it was ready to welcome a refugee family. The coalition didn't know until a week or two before the family's arrival the composition of the family, and there was last minute scrambling to find an apartment. Doug Clark described the composition of the family and the type of apartment needed for them. He then detailed the process of getting the lease signed and the rent and security deposit paid to the landlord.

Doug Clark explained how the coalition then welcomed the family and had prepared for them a culturally appropriate hot meal. The family was absolutely thrilled to be here and so appreciative of everything done for them. He went on to tell the commission more about the family, their circumstances, and how they qualify as refugees, which allows them to receive assistance from certain

State agencies. He also explained how other needs were met and how the community assisted in getting them settled. Middletown has been a very welcoming community.

He further explained that there is a difficult and thorough vetting process to qualify an individual as a refugee. The hardest way for anyone to cross the borders and come into the United States is as a refugee. This family wants to make its home here; whereas a lot of refugees do not want to be resettled. Many are content to stay in refugee camps until they can go back home. The qualifying process is complicated. Justin Carbonella asked about the general timeline of that process. Doug Clark answered that it was about 18 to 24 months. Anyone who applies for refugee status has already been living in a refugee camp somewhere.

However, the main struggle the coalition is having with this family is securing employment. Rev. Thea Racelis added that this issue will continue to be one in the future with other families, as well. They're on a tight timeline and a tight budget, and the need for employment is the most pressing one. There was further discussion on this issue.

There was discussion on how the new administration could affect these families. However, Rev. Thea Racelis explained that they are permanent legal US residents, and that cannot be revoked. After a certain point, they can apply for citizenship.

The discussion returned to the issue of finding employment for refugees being a crucial need. Doug Clark elaborated that this particular person's resume was impressive, so the difficulty is a surprising one. Also, it is a concern going forward being that other refugees may not be as qualified or skilled in English as this individual.

Doug Clark went on to say that Connecticut has been receptive to receiving refugees when other states have refused them. Additionally, Middletown has been especially accommodating. Faith Jackson added that Middletown is a diverse community.

Justin Carbonella said considering the resources of the commission and the social capital of the people around the table, the best resources to meet this need would be the individual networks of the members. Possibly, the commission members could collectively mobilize their networks and get some traction in connections or assist him with his resume. As a commission, in support of this effort, they could send a note of praise to Governor Malloy and Mayor Drew. Recognition can bring attention to the cause.

Justin Carbonella also asked if there were specific needs for the younger family members. Doug Clark answered that the school system is doing a great job addressing the kids' needs. There was further discussion about the family and the children. Rev. Thea Racelis said that helping the family with gifts, and such for Eid al-Fitr, which is a celebration at the end of Ramadan would be beneficial to them and demonstrate a cultural sensitivity.

There was further discussion with the focus returning to the issue of employment. The commission thanked Doug Clark for his time and information. Justin Carbonella praised the hard work of the Middletown Refugee Resettlement Coalition.

**Regular Meeting:**

**Approval of Minutes:** Rev. Thea Racelis motioned to approve the Meeting Minutes of September 22, 2016. Brandie Doyle seconded. Rev. Thea Racelis said the minutes were great and very thorough. The chairperson called for a vote. The motion properly carried with one abstention.

**Old Business:** None

**New Business:**

**2017 Meeting Schedule:** Brandie Doyle motioned to approve the 2017 Meeting Schedule. Howard Thody seconded. The chairperson called for a vote. The motion properly carried.

**Review and Discussion of Miscellaneous Articles:** Faith Jackson advised that there was an error in the package. One article was supposed to be included. By mistake, the article was duplicated a number of times in everyone's package. She explained that the article outlines a case of racial discrimination and settlement for the plaintiff against the Mansfield Housing Authority. The complaint alleged that the defendant's policies and practices discouraged equal access to the Housing Choice Voucher program. There was further discussion on this article and how the information could be useful.

**2016 Attendance:** There was review and discussion of the attendance, and Faith Jackson said the commission was doing well. Only one meeting was cancelled this year, and all the other meetings had a quorum. Justin Carbonella noted that traditionally Youth Services appoints Youth in Government Representatives in November. However, the department has been understaffed. Formal appointments will follow shortly.

**Announcements:** The next regularly scheduled meeting will be **Wednesday, January 18, 2017**, in conference room 208. For the record, Brandie Doyle advised that she would not be able to attend the January meeting.

Justin Carbonella asked if there was an agenda item the commission would like to focus on during that January meeting. Rev. Thea Racelis said that the commission may want to discuss topics such as warming centers, homeless outreach, etc. There are budget issues and sometimes harassment issues. Justin Carbonella asked for clarification on harassment issues, and Rev. Thea Racelis said that the homeless are experiencing harassment as they wait outside the warming centers or wait outside St. Vincent DePaul. Faith Jackson asked if the warming centers had written procedures. Rev. Thea Racelis answered that there may or may not be written rules and guidelines; however, there are monitors at each site, and the monitors receive training and have procedures in place. As discussion progressed, she explained more about warming centers. They differ from shelters. They are supported by St. Vincent DePaul and work with several churches. The case managers are the St. Vincent case managers. The warming center is for people to escape the cold. They can sleep in the church. They open at 9:00 p.m. and close at 7:00 a.m. There's hot water for tea. People sleep in their own sleeping bags or on yoga mats. Some bring their own snacks. It's not an attempt to create a shelter, and it rotates between different churches. Unlike shelters, there's no requirement of sobriety. There are expectations for behavior, but people can come in when they are under the influence of drugs and or alcohol but just need a place to sleep without risk of freezing to death. She added that this population is most at risk.

Justin Carbonella asked Rev. Thea Racelis if she was comfortable organizing an appropriate speaker for January. She asked if the commission wanted a presenter or a guest for commission discussion. There was discussion of St. Vincent's location and the issue of people gathering outside the soup kitchen on Main St. This topic is a contentious one in the community.

Brandie Doyle reminded the commission that the initial pattern agreed upon was speaker, followed by round-table discussion, followed by speaker.

Justin Carbonella acknowledged that plan and asked if the commission would prefer a speaker or someone who could provide and update on community issues. The commission returned to the issue of harassment of the homeless and the fact that this has been brought to the attention of the Police Department. Rev. Thea Racelis said whether the commission desires a report or wants to hear from a speaker, the issue should be on its radar.

Howard Thody said it would be beneficial to have a speaker who could provide some history on the situation. Rev. Thea Racelis recommended Ron Krom or Lydia Brewster from St. Vincent DePaul or possibly someone from NEAT.

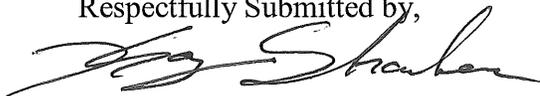
Justin Carbonella said the commission was expressing interest in this issue and a need for ongoing conversation. There could be value in having some of those partners in play or having a more global conversation about what's going on with this population, and if harassment bubbles to the top of that, there could be a decided action or a debriefing. He asked if the commission was in agreement with this direction for January's meeting. There was general agreement from the commission. Henry Fernandez added that he'd like someone from the homeless population to present their side. Rev. Thea Racelis clarified that representatives from St. Vincent or NEAT would be speaking to their side.

Justin Carbonella added that an issue for March's commission meeting could be the use of restorative practices in Middletown and possibly youth justice.

Faith Jackson asked for a recap for the plan for January's meeting. Rev. Thea Racelis said that she would reach out to community members and community partners who will speak to the issues around harassment, complaints, and daily living of people who are interacting with St. Vincent DePaul and or the warming centers.

**Adjournment:** With no further discussion, Justin Carbonella asked for a motion to adjourn. Richard Kagan motioned to adjourn the meeting. Henry Fernandez seconded. The Chairperson called for a vote. The motion was unanimously carried. The meeting was adjourned at 6:33 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted by,



Kasey Shoemaker,  
Administrative Sec. III