

OPEN LETTER
October 14, 2022

Re: Seattle Human Rights Commission

As volunteer members of the Seattle Human Rights Commission, we devote our time and expertise to ensuring that Seattle upholds its status as a Human Rights City through not only thoughts and sentiment, but through action. Through a series of events, the role of the Seattle Human Rights Commission is felt as not one of collaboration but of gross contention by default. Under these circumstances, the Commissioners named below make the difficult decision to leave the Commission, effective immediately, for our own personal and professional well-being.

As Commissioners, our very identities represent those most affected by inequity in all of its intersections. As marginalized residents of Seattle ourselves, the given task of bridging between community and the City of Seattle is one of great importance - to bring authentic voices to those in power. Yet, instead of fulfilling our named duty to inform and guide elected officials through gathering of community voices, we find ourselves in the sole role of Human Rights Day event planners. Annually, the City allocates a mere \$2,000 for the Commission to do work related to all human rights in the City, and \$12,000 a year to host the Human Rights Day event in December. If a budget is any moral indication of priorities, this cannot be interpreted any other way than a literal performance of a commitment to human rights. To illustrate our experience, we offer the following:

Refusal to Confirm Commissioners in a Timely Manner

The average time between selection of a Commissioner and their confirmation is approximately nine months. Until then, yet-to-be confirmed Commissioners cannot vote and are not required to attend; thus creates a two-tiered membership. The longest a Commissioner waited for City Council confirmation is nearly two years (of a two year term). This shows an absolute disregard for our day-to-day logistical operations and essential equality amongst Commissioners.

Lack of Response / Last Minute Responses from City Officials

Starting in the world of budgets, one day at 10:30 am the Seattle Office of Civil Rights (SOCR) demanded our proposed annual budget by 4:30 pm the same day. We provided, yet with no response. As advisors to officials, we've received not a single confirmation to multiple meeting requests via multiple avenues from any Councilmember or Mayor for over a year. The one meeting scheduled with Councilmembers Herbold and Morales (and the Community Police Commission's Rev. Harriet Walden) was scheduled with less than 24 hours notice and was cut in half as we waited for Rev. Walden to arrive. The time was spent with Councilmembers and Rev. Walden (who met the night before to discuss the Human Rights Commission) chastising the Commission for "not communicating" with regards to amicus status.

In the summer, the Mayor scheduled an in person meeting with all SOCR Commissions to listen to him; he was 10 minutes late and talk about himself for 30 minutes before he left 10 minutes early to attend a play "about a shark named Bruce". It's obvious that our time and expertise is not valued.

Marginalization

As Commissioners, our duty is to inform. We chose to do so with compassion, yet whatever we propose is met with default distrust and blatant vitriol. With every interaction with the City of Seattle (whether through the SOCR leadership, the Mayor's Office, the City Council, or the City Attorney's

Office) , as people most affected by inequity ourselves, we recognize immediately the feeling of marginalization. Meetings are held in our absence to discuss issues with our work without involving us and falsely assuming our incompetence (see “Lack of Response” above). Additionally, we feel our absence when being represented without our consent or knowledge within the Seattle Office of Civil Rights via documents, hiring decisions, and budget allocation.

Lack of Institutional Support

Even with *multiple* full time support staff in the Seattle Office of Civil Rights, we lack meaningful support. From the refusal to provide us with City emails (for personal safety reasons), the refusal to provide internal meeting notes as promised, the refusal to update the most basic functions of the website (providing a consistent recruitment link as an example), refusal to provide us with business cards, we tangibly feel our lack of value.

A Culmination

In April, after listening to multiple community voices of those most affected by police violence for five months in our monthly public meetings and attending every CPC meeting since November 2021, the Commission discovered a lack of consistency in data collection. We sought to explore the *option* of amicus status with the federal court overseeing the police monitor to share our position. Within 24 hours of our April amicus option vote, the City’s Attorney’s Office violently silenced the Commission in every conceivable manner culminating in a personal threat of ethics violation legal action against us as individuals, not as Commissioners. Our lack of independence became clear. Through this traumatizing experience, we lost three amazing Commissioners, one a Co-Chair. Since that time, we’ve heard nothing from the City until September 28, requesting a meeting the following day with the CPC (see “Lack of Response” above).

Do Better

Structurally speaking, the formula to achieve consistent human rights requires more than unpaid volunteer hours. The magnitude of issues posed (human trafficking, the unhoused, police accountability) all require consistently available resources to support this volunteer-led work.

Let us not be afraid of truth, it sets us free. Work done in advocacy of others must be done with transparency and compassion, or we are all at a great loss. By leaving the Seattle Human Rights Commission, we relieve ourselves of protecting the City’s narrative, one riddled with personal and systemic harm.

We urge the members of the Seattle Office of Civil Rights, the Mayor, the City Attorney, and the Seattle City Council, and any other government agency to radically divorce their ego from this work of protecting the most vulnerable. We retreat from the City’s battlefield back into the community, where our expertise, wisdom, lived experience, and intellect are welcome again.

Julia Ismael (Administrative Co-Chair)

Tyrone Grandison (Interim Communications Co-Chair)

Guneeta Chadha (Justice Reform Task Force Co-Chair)

Allan Nyaribo (Former Justice Reform Task Force Co-Chair)

[REDACTED]