

# **Commission on Disabilities - Meeting Minutes**

Virtual Meeting via Zoom

**July 8, 2024**

**Present:** Tricia Palluzzi, Annie Harper, Billy Huang, Lena Esposito, Carmen Correa-Rios, Bobby Berriault

**Absent:** None

**Staff:** Gretchen Knauff

**Guests:** Rebecca Miller, Beverly Kidder, Donna Golden, Hossna Samadi, Misty Maza

## **I. Call to Order**

The meeting was called to order by Chair B. Huang at 6:10 PM.

Beverly Kidder, who has applied to be a Commission member, introduced herself and her work. She has a PhD in Social Work, and her work has focused on the needs of older adults. Everyone in the room introduced themselves.

## **II. June 2024 Minutes**

B. Huang made a motion to accept the minutes from June 2024 and A. Harper seconded. B. Huang confirmed that someone had responded to Esther Rose Wilen. The minutes passed with Bobby Berriault abstaining.

## **III. Conversation with Donna Golden and Hossna Samadi from the Collective for Refugee and Immigrant Women's Wellbeing (CRIW).**

D. Golden and H. Samadi introduced themselves. A. Harper also briefly mentioned her work with CRIW (she partnered with them to conduct a co-design activity with the population they serve and is now a board member). They presented slides about CRIW, which serves a population of Pashto speaking mostly preliterate women who came to New Haven as refugees from rural Afghanistan. They provide programming to the women, mostly at the Wilson library which is in the neighborhood where many of the women live. The first project, funded by the Community Foundation, involved having the women identify their priority needs through a community based codesign process, after which a leadership group was formed that met weekly. They also met with relevant service providers in the City of New Haven, including New Haven Legal Association (NHCLA), Havenly (Sisters of the Diaspora), Adult Education, New Haven Public Schools. Then they got a grant from New Haven Arts Culture and Tourism to do a photovoice project and a fabric arts workshop, including an exhibit in Westville as part of the Festival of Arts and Ideas. There will also be an exhibit at the Wilson library in the fall. There has been very little focus on disability issues among the refugee community in New Haven, despite there being a relatively high number of people with disabilities, including one family that has 3 children who use wheelchairs. Key issues include stigma and shame, lack of understanding of their conditions, and reliance on spiritual or herbal resources for treatment. This population has experienced trauma at many stages— before leaving their country, being forced to leave, and during resettlement. Once they arrive, IRIS assists newly resettled refugees to access healthcare, education, helping getting housing, jobs etc. This population cannot use translated materials because they do not read or write, are unfamiliar with using computers, lack knowledge of ADA rights, and rights re. housing, education and employment. They often have no family here to help, and struggle with

transportation, particularly medical transportation. CRIW aims to find funding to do research to understand more about this population's experience with disabilities and form support and advocacy groups. They are also part of a coalition of refugee and migrant-serving organizations in New Haven.

L. Esposito mentioned that she does twice monthly workshops with Havenly, helping them to understand disability benefits. B. Kidder – is there any role for men? D. Golden, we focused on women because their voices often aren't heard, also in this culture they usually have gender segregated activities. H. Samadi – in this rural culture it is primarily the women who look after the children, the men are the breadwinners. As children get older then men play more of a role. Also notes that in Afghanistan there is a lot of family support for the women so it is easy, it gets very difficult when they are in the US and do not have that support. B. Kidder expressed empathy, given how difficult she found it to raise a child with disabilities and she and her husband both have PhDs! B. Huang – what are their main priorities? D. Golden – safe and affordable housing – e.g. a family with children with wheelchairs were housed in a 3<sup>rd</sup> floor walk-up. Lots of problems with interpreters, often the dialect is different. She gave an example of a family that did not have a working refrigerator for 2 years, then when NHLA found out about it it was fixed in one week. C. Correa-Rios – do women find their voice when they are here? H. Samadi – the main problem is knowing their rights so that they can express themselves – many have been here for years and never got what they needed (IRIS cannot provide language education for more than 2 years, and adult education does not offer childcare, nor women-only classes). Also it is very difficult for people who have never lived in a city. The women's leadership group is successfully addressing much of this – eg Adult Ed offered a women's only ESL class at Wilson library with childcare provided. B. Huang – are there community groups within the community? D. Golden – there is a group of male elders who we had to speak with to get approval for the project.

G. Knauff – how can we be helpful? D. Golden – we need funding to do our work. CRIW staff are currently unpaid but we need \$ for childcare and stipends. H. Samadi – listen to what people say is important. A Harper – education around ADA, disability benefits etc. G. Knauff – could offer training for IRIS so that they know what to do when there is a family affected by disabilities. B. Huang – suggests connecting with Women's Council on Women and Girls and showcasing CRIW's work at the state legislative level.

#### **IV. Old Business**

B. Huang has heard nothing significant about East Rock access, though Alder Tanbee has an idea for a 6-8 person accessible golf-cart which would be free to people with disabilities (others would pay a fee which could cover costs). G. Knauff noted that the City of New Haven now has 4 beach accessible wheelchairs.

#### **V. Summer/fall get-together**

G. Knauff has some dates that could work. Discussion about what location would be the most accessible location to meet.

#### **VI. Adjournment**

The Meeting was adjourned at 7:44 PM.