

PRELIMINARY REPORT & RECOMMENDATIONS

Holmdel Ad Hoc Committee on Human Relations

January 28, 2021

Introduction

On July 28, 2020, the Holmdel Township Committee (HTC) approved the creation of an Ad Hoc Human Relations Committee (HRC) to address the public's concerns about racism and discrimination. On September 8th, after reviewing applications from interested participants, the Ad Hoc Committee was established and members were appointed. Members include the following Holmdel residents: Sarrah Buker, Francine Campis, Hannah Friedman, Carey Goldson, Michael Nikolis, Robert Shearer, and Rev. Dr. David C. Bocoek; Deputy Mayor Cathy Weber, appointed as a Township Committee member; Captain Frank Allocco, appointed by the Chief of Police; and Holmdel Township Administrator, Ms. Cherron Rountree. The HRC was tasked with providing the HTC with recommendations for policies, procedures, and practices that "will aid in the prevention and elimination of all types of discrimination including discrimination based on race, creed, color, national origin, age, sex, sexual orientation, ancestry or marital status."

We, the members of the HRC, have taken this charge seriously. This report is intended to update the HTC and the residents of Holmdel on the activity of the committee thus far and to share our preliminary recommendations. It begins with a brief explanation of the process we followed to arrive at this set of preliminary recommendations and the key findings that informed our decisions along the way. We end this report with our intended next steps.

Our Process

Our objective is to advise our local elected leaders on ways to create a more inclusive community devoid of discrimination. The catalyst for reinstating this ad-hoc committee was the public disagreement over the blue line painted down the middle of Crawfords Corner Road. Current feelings about the Blue Line in Holmdel range from believing it to be a tribute to fallen law enforcement officers to believing it to be a graphic representation of institutional racism. In order to thoroughly and respectfully navigate these diverse and conflicting beliefs, we established ground rules to develop trust and ensure productive civil discourse essential to fulfilling our objective. One of these rules is that the content of our discussions will remain confidential. We collectively acknowledged that members may need to share deeply personal experiences if we wanted to have honest discussions that would lead to genuine unpretentious recommendations. Some of these experiences include personal interactions with law enforcement and neighbors (both in and out of Holmdel), family dynamics, and our personal encounters with racism, sexism, bigotry, ableism, poverty, etc. We need members to feel comfortable asking and answering difficult questions while also giving each other room to learn and grow. We could only engage in these necessary conversations if we agreed to safeguard each member's privacy. Other expectations we set for ourselves include: maintaining mutual respect and trust; practicing self-discipline; assuming good intent; respecting the impact of words; being open and considerate; exercising professionalism.

Our information-gathering began by asking Captain Allocco, Deputy Mayor Weber, and Ms. Rountree to share valuable information about rules, regulations, training, and other aspects of governance and policing relevant to human relations. We agreed that our first priority would be to focus on the issue of racism in Holmdel. We divided our weekly discussions on race into three categories: (a) educating ourselves and

defining the problem, (b) possible recommendations for action by the HTC, (c) and possible recommendations for community engagement. Integral to all our conversations is active listening which includes asking clarifying questions, resolving disagreements, and/or agreeing to disagree.

In addition to our weekly meetings, individual members devoted many hours to understanding and learning more about policing, racism, local history and politics, community relations, civil discourse, and activism, both local and national, current and historic. We did this through reading various literature, viewing films, attending local events, visiting an abandoned cemetery in Holmdel, and participating in local outreach. One example of our outreach activity was attending a meeting with Rev. Dr. Bocock and the Bayshore Ministerium, an interfaith collection of local religious congregations, to learn about their local community engagement activities and approach.

Key Findings

- While the HRC membership represents a range of perspectives and diversity in terms of age, personal and professional experience, years of Holmdel residency, religion, culture, ethnicity, and race, we recognize that we do not represent every subgroup or identity in Holmdel.
- The impact of national (and even international) problems does not dissipate at the borders of our township. We are both influenced by and engaged in statewide and national discourse on many levels. As Americans, we share common concerns. Still, the HRC recognizes that we cannot use a cut and paste approach to resolving these problems or concerns. We need solutions that specifically address the dynamics of our community.
- The history of racism and discrimination in Holmdel has deep roots. Sadly, Holmdel is not immune from our nation's history of slavery. However, by understanding that history and acknowledging past harms, we can take steps towards preventing future harm and creating a stronger community.
- NJ law requires that law enforcement undergo various trainings that address community policing issues. Holmdel Police Department has fulfilled these training requirements and has established policies that, if executed properly, protect citizens from discrimination by law enforcement. Other than official arrest records, that do not indicate racial discrimination, the only way to gauge discrimination is through citizen complaints. There are no official complaints on record. The lack of formal complaints is not proof that there has been no discrimination. There are real obstacles to making formal complaints. It would be difficult for the Township to address issues of which it is not aware.

Recommendations

Recommendation #1: Sign the “Stand Up for the Other” Pledge

The HRC recommends that the Township institute an initiative to encourage all Holmdel residents, starting with the HTC Members, to sign the Stand Up for the Other Pledge which states: “While interacting with members of my own faith, or ethnic, or gender community, or with others, if I hear hateful comments from anyone about members of any other community, I pledge to stand up for the other and speak up to challenge bigotry in any form.” This pledge was initiated by Dr. Mohammad Ali Chaudry during the quarterly meeting of an Interfaith Advisory Council of the NJ Department of Homeland Security and Preparedness (OHSP) held at Drew University in March 2015. In 2016, members of the New Jersey Senate, led by Senator Raymond Lesniak and Senator Linda Greenstein, took the pledge in an effort to challenge all actions and expressions of hatred. Go to <https://www.njifc.org/take-the-pledge.html>

to take the Pledge online. We would like to thank the Holmdel resident who suggested the Pledge at an HTC meeting.

Recommendation #2: Create and Publicize a Summary of Holmdel's Current Relevant Policies to Increase Awareness and Encourage Reports

Holmdel Police Department has very extensive and explicit policies to combat retaliation and bias-based policing. These include policies on:

- Reporting employee misconduct
- Witnessing a civil rights violation, taking action to cease the violation, and reporting the violation up the chain of command
- Stopping and preventing illegal or inappropriate use of force by other officers
- The prohibition of bias-based policing
- Reporting violations of laws or rules to the Chief of Police and bypassing the chain of command if it is of such gravity

In addition, Holmdel Township has an extensive "Whistle Blower" policy to protect those who report violations.

Internal affairs handles any complaints of discrimination. If an investigation reveals an Officer committed a crime, the Police Department must immediately report the incident to the Monmouth County Prosecutor's Office. There were no complaints in 2020. There was one in 2019 that was investigated and deemed unfounded and one in 2018, after which the officer was exonerated. Because of these investigations, no charges were filed. The law requires that personnel files always remain closed, only to be viewed with a Judge's order after showing cause.

With respect to training, twice a year every officer participates in trainings on use of force and de-escalation tactics. Officers attended nearly 4,000 hours of in-house and outside training in 2018, over 5,700 hours in 2019, and over 2,500 hours in 2020 (note pandemic limitations).

There is a policy prohibiting membership in any organization that advocates the violation of the law or which professes hatred, prejudice, or oppression against any racial or religious group or political entity except when necessary in the performance of duty and at the direction of the Chief of Police.

The HRC found the policies, procedures, and reporting of the police department to be comprehensive and proactive. Holmdel police are expected to serve and protect the community, to uphold the constitution, and to apply the law impartially to all.

Given our review, we found the department to be at the forefront of best policies. That said, there is always room for improvement and we encourage continued awareness and reporting of all interactions with citizens. The recently approved body cameras should aid in this effort.

Based on our review of Holmdel Police and Township policies and statistics with respects to civil rights, bias, violations, and reporting, we recommend a summary of the key points be provided for ease of understanding to the public with a link to more details and information on how to report an incident.

Recommendation #3: Restore the Holmdel's Historic African American Cemetery

In the course of our meetings, members of the HRC began researching the Township's history in terms of race and slavery. We found reference on the [Holmdel Historical Society](#) web page to an African American Cemetery in Holmdel and to Holmdel's history with slavery:

The African American Cemetery

1845-1888 - [The African American Cemetery](#) (Also known as Old Slave Burial Ground and Colored Peoples Burying Ground) is located behind the houses on Canyon Woods Court cul-de-sac, east of the Roman Catholic Cemetery. There are public access easements from Canyon Woods and Grandview Ave.

Existence of this cemetery is documented in Monmouth County Property Deed Book No. 347, page 338, March 7, 1882, referring to Theodore Thorne's property, which specifically refers to it as a colored cemetery.

As of August 13, 2013, there are 10 visible gravestones with 11 names, and 35 unmarked burials. The unmarked burials are from information gleaned from obituaries and death certificates. This cemetery is also referred to as the African American section of the Pleasant Valley Cemetery.

Civil War

During the Civil War, most of the farmers in newly formed Holmdel Township opposed freedom for slaves. New Jersey was the last northern state to abolish slavery. The Holmdel farmers used slave labor to work the land, but a few families were against it. Quakers in the area were particularly intolerant of slavery.

We also found historical records in Monmouth County and academic research documenting an extensive history of slavery in Monmouth County and specifically in Middletown and Holmdel. (*Slavery and Freedom in the Rural North: African Americans in Monmouth County, NJ 1665 – 1865*, Graham Russell Hodges).

Our community's recent discussions of systemic racism have at times sounded as though race, racism, and intolerance are things apart. The Township is not apart from the US history of slavery and discrimination. The community was built on land worked for centuries by slaves. Just like America's, Holmdel's history includes slavery as well as racism encoded in law and tradition. Just like the wider country, we are a community of transplants. Like the country, this beautiful, prosperous community we now call home wasn't always inclusive. Holmdel still has work to do to become all it aspires to be. We shouldn't shy away from that work.

The HRC recommends that:

1. The easements to the African American Cemetery be clearly marked with historical markers
2. The HTC seek funding and volunteers to rehabilitate and maintain the cemetery
3. The HTC promote the historical location to residents

Recommendation #4: Additional Township Committee Training

The HRC believes the newly elected members to the HTC should be guided and coached in leading municipal government. In concert with our Township Administration, Human Resources, and NJ League of Municipalities, we recommend online or in person diversity and inclusion training for the HTC.

Communicating and working with residents of different ethnicities, cultures, and backgrounds is an essential skill for anyone who is elected to represent the people of Holmdel. Promoting respect and acknowledgement of our differences while avoiding assumptions and stereotypes can be challenging.

It is our understanding that Township Administrator, Cherron Rountree is preparing an on-boarding process for Township Committee members. This recommendation for consideration is in addition to Ms. Rountree's work.

Recommendation #5: Institute Regular Town Hall Meetings

The HRC is aware that we were reconvened, at least in part, as a response to public comments made at the bi-weekly HTC meetings in the summer of 2020. It became clear that the format of public comment was a difficult way for members of the community to connect with each other and the HTC on topics about which they are passionate. In an attempt to facilitate more productive conversation and better reserve the bi-weekly HTC meetings for the HTC's regular conducting of business, the HRC recommends that the HTC establish regular Town Halls.

We suggest that the format be specifically designed to allow freer exchange of ideas while also maintaining the respect and decorum we expect of all of us. We intend for these Town Halls to increase the residents' access to the HTC and allow the HTC to better understand the desires and concerns of its constituents. These regularly conducted meetings must be open to all Holmdel residents.

The HRC recommends that these regular Town Hall meetings have a set, consistent procedure and include the following:

- Opportunities for community members to engage in dialogue with HTC members, rather than be limited to statements
- Time limits greater than 3 minutes per speaker but have a limit set
- Guidelines for decorum (ex. a speaker's time can be cut off for obscenity)
- Invitations to specialists and experts when appropriate

Further, we recommend that this Town Hall forum be an available tool that the HTC uses in response to future contentious issues, either proactively ahead of predicted debate, or reactively in response to concerns raised by the community. We have seen this tool effectively used in the past to discuss issues such as JCP&L, recreation, and flooding. We would be interested to see special Town Halls devoted to specific topics as a timely way of gathering community feedback to guide the HTC actions. We hope that this will offer the community a more structured, yet specific, forum to advocate for the changes they wish to see in Holmdel.

Recommendation #6: Establish a Series of Community Education Events Aimed at Raising Awareness and Facilitating Discussion

The HRC further recommends that the HTC establish a series of speaker events addressing race, religion, gender, etc.

It is our belief that through education, the HTC can further address biases and discrimination, whether conscious or unconscious, and thereby create a more welcoming, inviting, and safer Holmdel Township for residents as well as visitors. Through awareness education, residents of Holmdel can become more enlightened and examine their own actions and those of their neighbors. By holding ourselves accountable, we can set the standard for an inclusive Monmouth County Township.

The HRC is fully cognizant of 1) a need to work with individuals with direct, specialized knowledge, while also 2) being mindful of budgetary constraints. We believe that grant-funded resources, self-advocacy groups, and pre-established speaker seminar sessions would be the best approach. The recommendation is to truly inaugurate a series of events.

Given that the HRC was founded based on the public response to the matter of the blue line on Crawfords Corner Road, our proposal is to kick off the series with topics that pertain to race, specifically the black experience in NJ and/or the country. Additional topics can and should revolve around biases and experiences based on national origin, language, religion, sexual orientation, disability, age, and gender.

While the Administration, as directed by HTC, would decide the content and frequency of the events, below are examples of topics and/or resources that might be utilized:

- Speaker events sponsored by the Monmouth Center for World Religions and Ethical Thought on a variety of topics such as racism, bias, and civil discourse
<https://interfaithmonmouthcenter.org/events/list/>
- Speaker Series through organizations such as the Princeton Civil Rights Commission
- Garden State Equality, who was scheduled to host an Equality at Work Symposium right at Bell Works on 12/31/20 (which has been postponed) may have speakers available (Bell Works event carried a charge, linked here <https://www.gardenstateequality.org/calendar>)
- Disability Rights NJ also hosts events and promotes awareness of disability rights
[\(https://www.drnj.org/\)](https://www.drnj.org/)

Recommendation #7: The Blue Line

In early November 2016, a quarter-mile long blue line was painted down the center of Crawfords Corner Road in front of Town Hall-Police Headquarters. Permanent road paint was accidentally used instead of temporary paint, which is why the line remains today. Regardless of the town's original intent, it is clear that the line means something different today to many. The symbol has been appropriated by white supremacists groups and the Blue Line now has the effect of making some members of our community feel unwelcome, and even threatened, in Holmdel. The HRC finds this impact unacceptable. It should not be ignored that the Blue Line flag was carried alongside Confederate flags and Nazi insignia by the insurrectionists who breached our Nation's Capitol on January 6th, 2020.

The HRC therefore recommends that the HTC abstain from maintaining Holmdel's Blue Line. When it comes time for the section of Crawfords Corner Road that contains the blue line to be repaved, we recommend to the governing body that the Blue Line not be replaced. We advise that our roads only be marked for the purposes of traffic safety.

Closing

The HRC is thankful for this opportunity. We emphasize that this document only represents our preliminary report and recommendations. We now seek feedback from the community. This is especially important since the limited number of seats on this committee means that we cannot possibly represent all

the viewpoints present amongst our neighbors. We hope that community members will use [this form](#) to submit both specific reactions to what we have presented here as well as offer suggestions for further discussions and recommendations. We intend to thoughtfully consider all feedback and look forward to hearing different perspectives on our work thus far.

When we do submit our final report and recommendations to the HTC, there will be an opportunity for public comment. No recommendation can be effectuated without the votes of at least three HTC Members.