



City Council Staff Report

From: City Manager

Report Type: STUDY SESSION

Lead Department: Community Services

Meeting Date: August 19, 2024

Report #:2407-3243

TITLE

Report from the Human Relations Commission Resulting from the 'Voices of our Community' Listening Sessions on Local Experiences of Islamophobia/Anti-Arab Hate and Anti-Semitism.
CEQA status - not a project.

RECOMMENDATION

Receive the report from the Human Relations Commission resulting from the 'Voices of our Community' Listening Sessions on Local Experiences of Islamophobia/Anti-Arab Hate and Anti-Semitism and provide feedback.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Human Relations Commission seeks to be “eyes and ears” of the community regarding emerging issues. A key format used by the Commission to listen, learn, and understand how these issues affect the community has been through Listening Sessions. This report provides a description of the concept and next steps identified from a series of listening sessions called “Voices of our Community” regarding community members’ local experiences of Islamophobia/Anti-Arab hate and Anti-Semitism.

BACKGROUND

The Human Relations Commission (HRC) has utilized a format called a Listening Session to invite members of the community to share their lived experiences in Palo Alto. The purpose of this format is to provide a venue for community members to be seen and heard, foster a sense of belonging and connection, create a better understanding of their experiences and the societal factors that cause or contribute to the situation and, at times, invite speakers to provide suggestions to address the issues raised. This format has been used by the HRC for the report on

Black & Brown Palo Alto – History & Current Experience (2021)¹, Lived Experiences of Asian American, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders (2023-24)², and most recently with the Muslim/Arab/Palestinian and Jewish/Israeli communities. The details on that most recent listening session are shared in this report below.

In late 2023/early 2024, the HRC hosted a series of community listening sessions to hear from local Muslim/Arab/Palestinian and Jewish/Israeli community members regarding their local experiences of rising Islamophobia/Anti-Arab hate and Anti-Semitism. These sessions were dedicated to understanding these groups' specific, local experiences, reflecting the HRC's commitment to fostering a supportive and inclusive community. The HRC decided to conduct separate listening sessions for the Muslim/Arab/Palestinian and Jewish/Israeli communities to provide a dedicated space where individuals could openly share their personal experiences and perspectives.

The following Listening Sessions were held:

- Voices of Our Community (Listening Session): Local Muslim and Arab Experiences in the face of rising Islamophobia and Anti-Arab hate – December 6, 2023
- Voices of Our Community (Listening Session): Local Jewish Experiences in the face of rising Anti-Semitism – January 11, 2024

During each Listening Session, a panel of three individuals presented greater context to the local issues and concerns of each community and presented recommendations for the City to address the issues they face (see Attachments A & B). This was followed by the sharing of individual personal experiences during public comment time.

Some of the experiences shared include:

- Fear to identify with their culture, religion or heritage, especially in public settings
- Harassment experienced by local students based on their religion or heritage
- Hate incidences
- Feeling unsafe at one's place of worship
- Feeling unsupported by the larger Palo Alto community
- Symbols of hate seen around town in the form of graffiti or other means

¹ City Council, January 19, 2021; Agenda Item #3; SR #11911, <https://www.cityofpaloalto.org/files/assets/public/v/1/agendas-minutes-reports/reports/city-manager-reports-cmr/yr-archive/2021/id-11911.pdf>

² City Council, June 18, 2024; Agenda Item #1; SR #2406-3124, <https://portal.laserfiche.com/Portal/DocView.aspx?id=79664&repo=r-704298fc&searchid=06bd20bc-87ec-485b-b7b5-e28de8ff08e7>. Please note that this item was not heard on June 18, 2024, and has been rescheduled for August 19, 2024.

At its February 8, 2024 meeting, the HRC discussed how best to address the concerns and recommendations brought forward at the Listening Sessions. Since the Commission had previously established ad hoc subcommittees to address issues related to Inclusion & Belonging and Public Safety, they assigned these two subcommittees to bring back recommendations to the next HRC meeting.

At a special HRC meeting on March 6, 2024, each subcommittee shared their rationale and decision-making process used in crafting their draft recommendations for the full Commission's consideration³.

The Inclusion & Belonging Subcommittee (ad hoc) focused on the lived experiences of Palo Alto residents and the ways in which the City could create a more inclusive experience for Jewish and Arab, Muslim, Middle Eastern residents. The subcommittee followed a series of agreed upon principles in evaluating the possible actions to bring to the full commission including: Inclusion, Locally Focused, Legality, Expediency, Complementarity, Tangible Impact and Avoiding Duplication.

The Public Safety Subcommittee (ad hoc) was concerned with escalations of hate incidents nationwide and in the Bay Area. They focused on understanding and taking action on increasing individuals' feeling of safety and security in the community.

There was general consensus when the recommendations were brought forward for discussion by the whole Commission with the discussion centered mostly on minor text edits.

ANALYSIS

The outcome of the Listening Sessions was a series of recommendations⁴ from the HRC to the Council on the following topics:

1. Ensuring that training on increasing religious tolerance and decreasing discrimination based on ethnicity and nationality is included as part of the City's Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB) training for City employees, boards and commissions.
2. Increasing messaging of efforts by the City on equity/inclusion and the implementation of a social media campaign on the "Palo Alto Way" highlighting the City's Equity Mission Statement.
3. Ensuring that the Council Calendar includes the major holidays of the faith communities represented in Palo Alto.

³ Human Relations Commission, March 6, 2024; Item 1, Memorandum;
<https://www.cityofpaloalto.org/files/assets/public/v/1/community-services/human-relations-commission/agendas/3-6-24/memorandum-to-hrc-recommendation-from-adhoc-subcommittees.pdf>

⁴ Human Relations Commission, March 6, 2024; Action Minutes, Item 1;
<https://portal.laserfiche.com/Portal/DocView.aspx?id=71709&repo=r-704298fc>

4. Reviewing the legality of sponsoring/co-sponsoring religious holiday celebrations. This recommendation might be added to the work that the City is already doing regarding the holiday framework the HRC previously recommended.
5. Researching the concept of forming an interfaith community advisory group to build bridges within the Palo Alto community, including schools and libraries. The interfaith community advisory group would include a liaison from the HRC.
6. Establishing a Palo Alto Police Department “Liaison” or first point of contact to the Faith Community for non-emergency matters.

Upon review by staff, many of the topics brought forth by the HRC for suggested action align closely to actions included in the City’s 2024-2025 Equity Action Plan⁵, as illustrated below in the following Equity Action Plan objectives:

Cultivating Experiences and Appreciation: (number references are Equity Action Plan numbers)

- Item 1.2 Share information and specific cultural and heritage months and holidays.
- Item 1.2 Review Citywide events through an inclusion and equity lens, identify gaps.
- Item 1.3 Create a process that includes the HRC for annual calendar setting related to holiday and heritage months.

Fostering an Inclusive Environment:

- Item 2.1 Share DEIB values with New Employees at New Employee Orientation in the context of workplace culture.
- Item 2.2 Conduct Quarterly Interactive DEIB Workshop Training for all Employees

Applying an Equity Lens (Strategic Review of the Organization through an Equity Lens)

- Item 3.3. Begin to partner with the HRC to work with other commissions to apply an equity lens to their work (will further define with the HRC).

Updates on Staff and Commission work items included in the Equity Action Plan will be included, as appropriate, in regular reports to the Council via the Policy & Services Committee.

Regarding the HRC recommendations that do not fall within items in the City’s Equity Action Plan, staff has provided the following updates:

5. HRC Recommendation: Researching the concept of forming an interfaith community advisory group to build bridges within the Palo Alto community, including schools and libraries. The interfaith community advisory group would include a liaison from the HRC.

⁵ City Council 2024 and 2025 Equity Action Plan (Workplan),
<https://www.cityofpaloalto.org/files/assets/public/v/1/city-manager/race-amp-equity/equity-workplan-2024.pdf>

Staff Response: The HRC hosted a very informative Listening Session with leadership from eleven faith communities at a special meeting on June 20, 2024. The faith leaders gathered were very appreciative of the invitation and shared ways in which they could partner with the City in the future, challenges with some past interactions with the City and how the City could help support their community. Staff feels that the HRC is the right body in the City to convene future gatherings of the Faith Community⁶.

6. HRC Recommendation: Establishing a Palo Alto Police Department “Liaison” or first point of contact to the Faith Community for non-emergency matters.

Staff Response: Human Services Staff has been in dialogue with the Palo Alto Police Department regarding the concept of a Faith Community Liaison and the Police Department in response will assign this to a staff member as approved by the Chief of Police. Note, these assignments are rotational within the Police Department and would take into account other pressing needs within the department and community at any given time.

FISCAL/RESOURCE IMPACT

At this time, staff does not anticipate a resource impact as staff time associated with the implementation of the City’s 2024-2025 Equity Action Plan is already included in the FY25 Adopted Operating Budget.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

The Human Relations Commission agendaized the Listening Sessions at its meeting on December 6, 2023, January 11, 2024, and March 6, 2024. Outreach was conducted to seek public input at each meeting.

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

This is not a project as defined by CEQA.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A: Rising Islamophobia and Anti-Arab Hate

Attachment B: The Jewish Experience and Recommendations

APPROVED BY: Kristen O’Kane, Community Services Director

⁶ Video Recording of the Human Relations Commission, June 20, 2024; Agenda Item 1; <https://midpenmedia.org/human-relations-commission-3-6202024/>