

City of Worcester Human Rights Commission Minutes
VIRTUAL & IN-PERSON MEETING – Monday, March 7, 2022, 6:00pm

Members Present: Elizabeth O’Callahan, Edward G. Robinson, Charles Hopkins, Guillermo Creamer Jr, LaToya Lewis, Ellen Shemitz, LaToya Lewis, Jorge Lopez-Alvarez, Lillian Chukwurah

Members Absent: Jacqueline Yang

Staff: Jayna Turchek

Guests:

1. Call to order and Introductions

A quorum was established, and Chairperson Yang called to order. The Chairperson welcomes members of the commission and those present and introductions of those in attendance as well as roll call were taken.

Chairperson began with an acknowledgement of the traditional, ancestral, territory of the Nipmuc Nation, the first people of Massachusetts and those who’s land we are convening on tonight. While the Nipmuc history predates written history, records from the 1600s inform us that the original inhabitants of Worcester dwelled principally in three locations: Pakachoag, Tatesset (Tatnuck), and Wigwam Hill (N. Lake Ave). It is important to make this acknowledgment and to honor the ancestors that have come before us. It is all too easy to live in a land without ever hearing the traditional names and the history of the people who first resided and prospered in these lands and continue to reside and prosper.

The Human Rights Commission was established to promote the city’s human rights policies. It is the policy of the City to assure equal access, for every individual, to and benefit from all public services, to protect every individual in the enjoyment and exercise of civil rights and to encourage and bring about mutual understanding and respect among all individuals in the city. Our work requires us to address institutional racism so that as a community we can achieve racial equity. Our work also requires us to make visible the unheard, unearned, and unquestioned privilege enjoyed by some members of our community to the detriment of others. We take time to make this acknowledgement, to educate, so a path can be cleared for healing.

The term “**institutional racism**” refers specifically to the ways in which institutional policies create difference outcomes for different racial groups. The institutional polices may never mention any racial group, but their effect is to create advantages for whites and the oppression and disadvantage for people from groups classified as people of color.

The term “**racial equity**” is the active state in which race does not determine one’s livelihood or success. It is achieved through proactive work to address root causes of inequalities

to improve outcomes for all individuals. That is, through the elimination or shifting of policies, practices, attitudes, and cultural messages that reinforce differential outcomes by race or fail to eliminate them.

The term “**privilege**” describes the unearned social power and informal institutions of society to all members of a dominant group. For example: “white privilege” and “male privilege.” Privilege is usually invisible to those who have it because we are trained to not see it but nevertheless it puts them at an advantage against those who do not have it.

2. Approval of Meeting Minutes

Approval of the meeting minutes for the February 7, 2022, Human Rights Commission meeting.

3. Hearing of Petitioners for a study/resolution for decriminalization of entheogenic plants and fungi

The commission has received over 2 dozen emails from Worcester residents requesting that we take up this for study and action. Last month commissioners discussed their thoughts on how they wanted to approach this request. A handful of residents provided comment during our public comment period. At tonight’s meeting we will open the floor to hear from petitioners and the public.

Before we begin, I want to make sure that the public, everyone out there, understands that this is an opportunity for the commission to listen and take in information. We continue to gather and take in information to gain a better understanding of this issue and the best course of action to take, if any.

Under the authority of Article 6 of Charter the Human Rights Commission was established to promote the policy of the city. “It is the policy of the city to assure that every individual shall have equal access to & benefit from all public services, to protect every individual in the enjoyment & exercise of civil rights & to encourage & bring about mutual understanding & respect among all individuals of the city. It is clear that behavior which denies equal to any of our citizens as a result of their race, color, religious creed, national origin, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, genetic information, ancestry, disability, or source of income undermines civil order and denies persons of the benefit of a free and open society. Nothing in this section shall be construed as supporting or advocating any particular religious view or lifestyle. To the contrary, it is the intension of this section that all persons be treated fairly and equally, and it is the express intent of this Ordinance to bring about the elimination of prejudice, intolerance, bigotry, discrimination, and disorder occasioned thereby.”

Director Turchek previously requested the Worcester Police Department arrest data related to the manufacturing, possession, delivery and use of entheogenic plants and fungi along with the demographic breakdown of those arrested and was told by the WPD that those arrests were not tracked. During last month’s meeting, Chairperson Yang requested that WPD review all of the records of arrest and provide them with data from over the last few years. They wanted to expand this request to identify arrests for all types of illegal drugs. The WPD provided response to us which was included in the packets for members tonight.

If any member of the public wishes to review that response, please email humanrights@worcesterma.gov

Commissioner Creamer: I would like to acknowledge the organization efforts occurring here. I cannot speak for all commissioners, but for myself, this is probably one of the most organized things that I have seen in local politics, maybe even statewide. Its impressive and I think that deserves credit. You know what you are doing, and you are speaking truth and I think it is really important to remember that this is an official meeting, meaning it will be going on the record, which means that this stuff is really important. Even though we will not be voting on anything here tonight, you are moving the needle.

[open floor for public comment]

James Davis – Resident of Somerville/Worcester
Baystaters for Natural Medicine

I almost lost my brother to opioid overdose last year. I have seen many in my family struggle with alcoholism, other addiction problems and traumatic episodes passed down from generations. This is the first step to making sure that first responders, veterans and the entire public has affordable access to these treatments. These plants, psilocybin mushrooms, a single use is associated with a 55% reduction in risk of opioid abuse disorder. That is not something to take lightly, given it was a study of 4,400 Americans. We know that criminalization does not make us safer, and that education does make us safer. Let's take as many steps as we can, within Worcester and throughout the state, to educate people and make these treatments affordable for many years to come, instead of letting it go the path of cannabis, overregulated, over-licensed, and ultimately inaccessible for those who need it the most.

Jennifer Stell – Worcester County
Registered Nurse (15 years)

I just want to let people know that psychedelics have completely changed and saved my life. I have dealt with cluster headaches and migraines my entire life which led to an addiction to opioids. I did the rehab route which failed me numerous times. Eventually I tried to commit suicide. I was introduced to ibogaine which is a plant that comes from West Africa. It's a hallucinogen that resets the brain to a pre-addicted state. I was able to end my opioid addiction. I did have to go back and have therapy. It is not a quick fix, but it is a huge help. I was jumpstarted a year ahead of where most people would be going to detox and through rehab. While I was there, I was told about psilocybin for my cluster headaches and migraines. I found some and it completely changed my life. For the first time in over 30 years, I went 9 months without having a headache or migraine. It has been completely life changing and has helped me to stay off the opioids because I don't need them, I am not in pain and running from it anymore.

Currently we are in a mental health crisis. COVID has kickstarted that to astronomical numbers. As a nurse working in the hospital, we deal a lot with people coming in who are mentally unstable and we have seen a huge increase in the number of alcohol and drugs detoxes coming in. This puts both the patient and staff at risk because we are assaulted by these people on a regular basis. I have been assaulted 4 different times in the last year. Three were by people who were detoxing off substances.

As far as our first responders and veterans go, the suicide rate is incredibly high, approximately 6,000 veterans a year commit suicide. Our first responders are burning out at astronomical rates and are leaving in droves, leading to a huge healthcare shortage. This leaves those who are sick in an unstable condition because there is no one to actually take care of them.

I believe that now is the time to think outside of the box. I believe that psychedelics are alternative choices for those who have been failed by what is currently offered in the current medical model. I understand that the arrests for this matter are not traced and are probably minimal, but the illegal aspect of these plants makes access difficult and increases the risk of people who are seeking this treatment from being taken advantage of or even injured. They have no way to come forward and report these things. It is important that we start making these accessible to those that need them. If we don't, it is going to create inequitable access where just the wealthy will be able to get them, if big companies get ahold of this and start regulating it in ways that favor themselves and not the little people. There are many, like myself, who have had their lives changed or saved by psychedelics and I believe that anyone who seeks it should be able to access it.

Kathryn Allen – Worcester
Clinical Social Worker

Speaking as an individual, not an affiliate of any organization. The proposal around decriminalization makes a lot of sense. Speaking anecdotally from my experience treating folks with substance abuse disorder, I have not seen people presenting with substance abuse disorders focused on plants and fungi that were discussed. I've done a bit of research since the last meeting, looking into the DSM-V, our diagnostic manual of mental disorders currently used. I looked up what would be considered the diagnosis if someone did have a substance abuse disorder and it would be under "other hallucinogenic use disorder" and was described as the rarest of the substance abuse disorders and it went on to state that little was known regarding the course of other hallucinogen abuse disorders, but it is generally thought to have low incidence, low persistence, and high rates of recovery. It appears our current manual is in line with what I see on a day-to-day basis. In the rare instances where it does become problematic, I don't believe it is worth the city's resources to use legal avenues to address the challenges when we would be better off in supporting folks with better access to treatment.

Steve Waters, PsyD. – Millbury
Clinical Psychologist

Medication Assistance Program - Edward Kennedy Community Health Center

The program I work for is mainly an opioid treatment center though we do work with people who are presenting with all different substance use conditions. I have been in the mental health field as a counselor or psychologist for over 20 years, around the nation, specializing in substance abuse settings. Maybe once or twice over the thousands of people I have worked with in substance abuse settings have I come across someone with substance abuse problems with psychedelics and that was when it was usually complicated with multiple other problems, so it was not the initial presenting concern, and it was not the sole issue. In all sorts of other situations that really doesn't happen. We don't see that. In fact, we tend to see the opposite fairly regularly, being that people who use psychedelics, especially in an intentional process, tend to experience

resolution, to some extent, of substance use problems. Addictive patterns tend to unravel and become a lot easier to work with. Also, other problems that really underlie substance abuse which tend to most often be rooted in some sort of traumatic event or a complex history of multiple traumas. I would love to talk about the research. If anyone wants to please contact me.

I am passionate about the research on of psychedelics ever since I got into the field of psychology. My driving passion in this is to stop the thriving drug war which is profoundly destructive across all domains of society. There is no real substantive benefit of the drug war to society. What we know is that this ultimately ends up disproportionately hurting . . . [internet connection interrupted]

I was just thinking about my experience with patients every day. I see anywhere from 8-15 patients a day, most of which are struggling with opioid addiction, having overdoses, and dying. The drug war only amplifies that problem ten-thousand-fold for reasons I am sure all of us here can understand. Once there is a felony then there are barriers in society. Once one goes to prison, there becomes the likelihood of complex traumas added on to the likelihood of their already historical complex traumas. What we know, from solid research over decades, is that the vast majority of people who have problems recovering, after developing a dependency on something like opioids, have been traumatized profoundly. Repeated childhood traumas are exceptionally common. By promoting a drug war, we are further traumatizing, further relegating people of color and severely traumatized people. No good comes of it. Families are destroyed. People's opportunities to thrive are destroyed. Our economy is hobbled. We really need to end this archaic approach and shift focus on public health. This is health issue. Health professionals need to be involved, not criminal justice.

Devin Dickinson – Worcester

I am here to give my testimony and support behind the decriminalization. I am here because nothing else has really had a substantial positive impact on my life as entheogens has. Since being introduced to them I have found purpose in life. I am mentally and physically the healthiest I have been, and I feel more connected to myself than others like before. They have helped me overcome mental throws and traumas while simultaneously revealing the beauty of our human experience. From one experience I have been able to grow for multiple years without panic attacks or anxiety. Entheogens have helped me to open my heart and see through more empathetic, altruistic, and loving eyes. They helped to swing open the floodgates of passion, which is fundamentally wonderful but, as anyone who has been in a low place knows, a sense of connection to life and to a sense of being can be absolutely crucial in getting your way out of it. They have helped me to become more passionate about nearly every aspect of life, from the physical reality to social environmental justice, to philosophy in the arts. I simply welcome every moment and experience what this life has in store and I, personally at least, have ascribed these benefits to entheogens.

Entheogens are currently helping with unparalleled success for PTSD, depression, cognitive impairment, and end of life anxiety, just to name a few. A study co-conducted with John Hopkins University examining treatment for trauma related psychological and cognitive impairment among veterans found staggering results. From the study, most participants rated the psychedelic experience as a top 5 personal meaningful, spiritually significant, and psychologically insightful. 84%, 86% and 88% of all volunteers said this. They then proceeded

to conclude with “U.S. special operations forces veterans may have unique treatment needs because of their sequela of problems associated with repeated trauma. Psychedelic assisted therapy might hold unique promise for this population.” Other studies investigating the relieving benefits for terminally ill patients were able to show that psilocybin therapy is effective in relieving emotional and existential distress at the end of life for 65%-85% of terminal patients in the clinical trials.

These plants have been explored and have benefited us for centuries. The earliest entheogenic uses in America can be traced back to the first peoples, around 3700BC, with peyote usage. The only reason they were criminalized in recent times was to target the political efforts of people of color and hippies. Although it was glaringly obvious to people involved in the beginning, this was confirmed by Nixon’s own policy advisor in 1994. The Nixon administration criminalized people of color, hippies, or anti-war activists however, they realized they could criminalize the medicines used as a trojan horse to disrupt the political efforts of those involved and imprison them. This plant medicines have been denied for those who need them or deserve them by an authoritative state acting out of aggression, selfishness, and misinformation. “Entheogen” is derived from the word “enthusiasm” which comes from the Greek word “enthousiasmos” meaning “the essence of the God that lives within.” Are we going to deny access to spirituality, thousands of years of ancestral use and ignore the science of modern-day academia and research to uphold the archaic values of a patriarchal dominator imbedded in consumerism and tribalism or are we going to be the loving conscience change the world needs us to be?

David Slatkin – Worcester

Research Technician – UMass Medical School

2018 Volunteer – Central Mass Addiction Consortium

Entheogenic fungi added my recovery from PTSD, panic attacks, and chronic lyme disease. The work I do was inspired by the loss of a good friend of mine to heroin addiction. He had been in a private school, doing well, when he got a record for having had other substances on him. That led him to using harder drugs that would not show up in drug screenings, which led to homelessness and becoming addicted to heroin and other drugs. Eventually he succumb to his illness. When I talk about drugs, I think about the people who have been lost around us. Everyone knows someone, or has a family member, who has suffered with some sort of addiction.

At a time when I was not familiar with psychedelics, I was working on a study for External Qigong Therapy which is a form of energy healing. The fact that this type of treatment was awarded hundreds of thousands of dollars from the National Institute of Health for cocaine dependent subjects going through withdrawal speaks to the fact that there are few treatments for cocaine withdrawal. A lot of the treatments we have for those withdrawing from heroin are really just to prevent seizures and die from the process of withdrawal. The same can be said different issues with alcoholism.

I think the fact that we know there is a growing body of empirically reviewed data and research showing these treatments, like Ibogaine, Ayahuasca, psilocybin mushrooms, can be used to eliminate individual suffering from substance addiction, withdrawal and the associating mental patterns speaks to the crisis we are at with the war on drugs and addiction. We are losing

them both and they have been going on for a long time. We know, from an equity basis and fact, that all they are doing is keeping our prisons very full of the next generation of black and brown people.

We know that less than 5% of people who seek treatment for heroin addiction achieve full, long term, recovery. We are in a health crisis with these issues. It is important to seek out other methods to treat and address these issues, one being decriminalization of the personal use of drugs so that folks can not have to experience the long-term effects of criminalization and the exacerbation of the symptoms of addiction. These entheogenic plants can save lives and help people to overcome their addictions, either on their own or with therapists.

My own personal experience includes spending over \$100K a year in treatment for PTSD and chronic Lyme Disease without getting all the way better. It was not until I used these plants, in a place of desperation, unable to work for years, getting by on family support. I don't want others who are struggling with addiction or other health issues to be fearful of the negative stigma of these drugs or have a fear of criminal charges for use.

Carolanne Sabol – Worcester

I am the wife of a disabled Marine Corps Veteran and the daughter of a retired Worcester Firefighter who has PTSD. My dad served for around 20 years as a first responder, mostly on the busiest trucks in the city. He responded to 911 calls and structure fires on off of Park Ave. Hundreds and hundreds of first responder calls. As a deeply compassionate person who just wanted to help his community this deeply affected him. He was witnessing people in their times of crisis over and over at high volume with this kind of population density. The Worcester Warehouse Fire happened in 1999 which was devastating. Several of his close friends passed away in that fire. The toll of this accumulated over two decades eventually causing him to be retired several years early with PTSD. He got all the best care available, seeing many therapists over the years. He was suffering unnecessarily for those years. It wasn't enough.

In my firsthand experience, main-stream mental healthcare wasn't adequate to handle this type of suffering. I consider first-responders to be our home front veterans. I see many parallels. There is no doubt in my mind that entheogenic medicines are helpful. A lot has changed for both my father and my husband since gaining access to plant medicines. First cannabis, and now that psychedelics are being talked about, there is a bit more willingness to experiment with it. I know that, at least in my father's case, he would feel much more comfortable getting the full benefit of this. If this was decriminalized, he and his friends would not be suffering, and their families maybe would not feel so desperate.

David Webb – Worcester

It is well established that these treatments can be beneficial. These plants medicines are not often abused, and it has been thoroughly demonstrated that the current laws are systematically affecting generations of people. Let's take the next step and decriminalize.

Alexander Lichtenberg – Worcester

Psychiatry Resident – UMass Medical School

There is a growing body of research and evidence to support the use of psychedelic medicines for a whole range of people suffering from PTSD, depression and the like. It can be

difficult to discuss the use of these medicines with my patients because of its legal status. It may limit people talking to me, as a doctor, a person in a place of power. Even if they trust me, they may not trust what I write in their medical notes which may in turn be seen by an employer of insurance company. This arbitrary legal status has such a hold over the relationship I have with my patients is really inhibiting to a true therapeutic relationship, both in my clinic and patients elsewhere. The criminal status does not serve patients, or doctors, or other care professionals. I am not really sure who it serves but it's not the people invested in the health of the communities. Having Worcester join the other community across the state in decriminalizing would be a great step forward for our city.

Alexsandra Fabela – Worcester
Student at Worcester Poli-Tech

I have occasionally used plants like psilocybin to aid in healing my trauma. My peers have also used them for similar reasons. I know of a peer who has used psychedelics to successfully overcome an eating disorder. In general, these plants have significant benefits for healing, especially during this crucial time where the nation is suffering a mental health crisis. WPI has had 6 suicides alone this academic year and the state of Massachusetts loses 60 veterans a year to suicide on average. This is far above the national average.

The war on drugs has caused considerable damage in this country, especially toward people of color, not for safety or health reasons. Nixon's Domestic Policy Chief said "We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin. And then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course, we did."

The war on drugs needs to be reversed. Allowing veterans to have access to these plants, here in Worcester, would be a crucial first step. I am highly in favor of it.

Commissioner O'Callahan: If anyone wishes to share written testimony with us, please email humanrights@worcesterma.gov by the end of March.

James Davis: Bringing this to a vote in April would put Worcester in line with two other cities we believe will be decriminalizing next month. From an educational standpoint it can be hard to get the media to cover this work at all. There have been almost 400 residents of Worcester who have emailed the city council over the past year and we have, unfortunately, not been able to meet with a single city councilor. It has been frustrating for many residents and volunteers whose lives have been changed by plant medicines and whose lives have been destroyed by the war on drugs. It is helpful for our momentum and for getting word out for us to do this measure in April. I think that would be really optimal timing. I completely understand the desire to have lots of information and discussion too. I want to extend an invite. We have a whole policy team, a whole Worcester team that is happy to talk about this until the cows come home.

We did a Public Records Request of the Boston Police Department for drug possession arrest data from the past 3 years and, similar to WPD, they did not code any type of substances so we are not sure what substances people are being arrested for but they do note the ethnicity of

people being arrested, of the approximately 3000 arrests, there was about a 2:1 ratio of racial disparity between people of color and white residents of the city. To my knowledge, the vast majority of drug possession arrests are not for psilocybin mushrooms but for “harder drugs” with a different harm profile. There will likely be more arrests as cultural acceptance occurs and people begin to view this more as a treatment. We need to protect growers who are providing these addiction treatments, specialists, therapists, guides, and coaches, because destroying their lives will make it difficult to get these medicines produced.

Motion and amendment to discuss and vote in April regarding this resolution. Passed.

4. Planning discussion in preparation for the annual meeting with Worcester Police Department

Additions/Clarifications to existing documents:

Commissioner Hopkins: given the discussion regarding the stats for arrests this evening, I think it would make sense to add something to remedy the lack of information.

Commissioner Robinson: report in June regarding how the Diversity Officer of the WPD feels within the department.

Follow up regarding survey request from last year.

Commissioner O’Callahan: Policy updates? When? Trauma informed care policy.

Commissioner Chukwurah: Does the WPD have a position on the entheogenic plants and fungi? If they are against it, why? Are there statistics or documentation as to why?

[Open to public comment]

Steve Waters: When is that meeting and can we forward in questions? I have a lot of colleagues that would likely have questions.

Commissioner O’Callahan: The meeting is June 6th

Jayna Turchek: We try to give the police a few months notice prior to the meeting so they can get us written responses and then they share a summary at the meeting. There is always additional questions during the meeting and we have had follow-up written responses to questions asked at the meeting. You can send questions to our email and we can make amendments as needed.

Commissioner O’Callahan: Last year we had a conversation about people who are victims of a crime accessing their own police report. The only way to access being through notarized letter creating extra burdens. Have we heard anything back on that?

Jayna Turchek: We can add that as an outstanding concern, if the commission would like.

3. Adjournment

Our next meeting will be April 4, 2022.