

Franklin Township Human Relations Commission
Minutes of October 23rd, 2024

Present: Gary Rosenthal, John Tibbs, Pete Clark, Nora Catiis, E.Poustchi, Councilman Alex Kharazi, Linda Montgomery-Williams, Elangkathir Elamaran

Excused: Shubhendu Singh, Rohan Kalidas

Absent: Edna Arguello Hitchner, John Samba, Kamla J. Sharma, Sam Velu

Police Officer: Not Present

Guest: Phyllis Beals, Michelle Petersen, Donna Sozio

Meeting called to order at 7:03 PM.

Minutes of September 25, 2024 approved

Guest Report: Ms. Beals will be talking about the stigma regarding mental health. She is a licensed clinical social worker. Ms. Beals is retired but still has her license. 3 or 4 years ago, she started serving on the county's mental health board and started learning about stigma. She couldn't believe the power of stigma preventing people from seeking the help they need. It is extremely hard to make sure that everyone is receiving the same amount of help due to insurance and other factors, but we can improve this by awareness and addressing stigma. Stigma is a sense of shame due to various factors which include social class, race, disability status, etc. Stigma is the main reason why people who need help do not seek it. 1 in 4 people live with a diagnosable mental health condition or substance abuse disorder. Less than half seek help due to stigma, lack of knowledge, and availability. The mayor's health and wellness campaign stated that one of the major problems in our community is the difficulty of accessing mental health treatment and finding where to go for

mental health help. Anxiety disorders have really been going up among youth. NJ has far better services for mental health than other states in the country. One of the members of the mental health board's nephews died of suicide in Georgia, and it was difficult for them to find resources to address this issue. People of various races and social backgrounds do not have access to mental health resources evenly. 1 in 2 of white adults have sought mental health resources. 39% for black community, 36% for the Hispanic community, and members of the South Asian community are very reluctant to seek mental health. This is largely due to stigma, as people tend to keep mental health issues as a secret in this culture. Donna Sozio when she was around 6, says that her elder sisters noticed a difference in how she was acting. She cried a lot, was depressed, expressed anger, and there was something wrong. Her mother approached her father and her father said no, he will not find the help that his daughter needs. He wanted to keep this issue a secret, so he did not get the help for Donna. Due to this, her mental health got worse. At the age of 17 Donna got the help of a pastor. He was good to talk to, but he could not get her the help she needed. Her mother asked her father to get her professional help, but he refused due to the stigma. Now, she realizes that if she got the help she needed, her life could have been far more enjoyable. There are statistics that state that 5 year olds commit suicide due to mental health issues. Donna received a mental health diagnosis in her mid 30s. When she found out, she didn't know what to do and wanted to commit suicide again. She was unsure what coping mechanisms to utilize. She states that she mentally felt like a child when she was in the hospital, despite physically being an adult. She learned, while in the hospital, that her roommate was a cutter. She suffered a lot of trauma while in the hospital. She did not understand why she was in the hospital. She felt like a caged animal, and did not know how to survive it as she

didn't have the adequate tools. Being put in such a situation is detrimental for everybody as everyone needs support systems. She came out of the hospital needing even more additional help. She felt like she was a 5 year old, despite being in her mid 30s. While going through her divorce, she was placed under supervised visitation with her children by the judge. The only reason was due to a diagnosis of a mental health issue. Nothing else mattered, to the judge, for that decision. As soon as she got diagnosed, her life changed. Throughout her life, she was in a lot of denial of her mental health issues. Her father stated that her condition is a lot like physical conditions, such as diabetes. She stated that she had people telling her that she isn't any good due to her mental health disorder. She realized a year ago that there is a place where she is valued and where she will receive comfort. She states that prior to this, she lived knowing that she didn't receive equality and was mistreated due to her mental health diagnosis. She says that the stigma-free council saved her and provided her with the help she needed. The stigma-free council is associated with the Girl-Scouts, and they are working by partnering with the school system to make schools stigma free. The school district has requirements, in the law, that if students are in danger of hurting themselves, there is a certain set of protocols they need to follow. There are therapists and psychiatrists that are in partnership with these schools to provide services to students. If there is any evidence that a young person is going through mental health issues, school districts provide the necessary services for them. Despite this, stigma is still apparent in these schools. In Franklin of 2022, the town council passed a resolution to promote a stigma-free campaign. The mayor's mental health campaign also promoted this. Saffie Kallon, the special events manager, is also in support of stigma-free. The mission of the Franklin Township Stigma-Free Council to reduce the stigmas associated with mental illness and substance

use disorder, dedicated to creating an inclusive culture wherein all residents feel supported by their community, knowledgeable about where and how to seek treatment, and resources are available for all. It is important to recognize when people are undergoing mental health issues and assuring them that it is okay for them to seek the help they need. Be empathetic to others and allow for people who need support to know you will listen to them. Do not be afraid to refer someone if you are concerned about their mental health and well-being. There are both a chat line and hotline available. There is one another county-funded mental-health center in New Jersey, located in Scotch Plains. Our community is not getting full use of the mental health center that is available for all residents. Therapists are available on a website called psychology today. The Stigma-Free Council is having a big event on November 20th for teens and their parents. The program is called "Our Turn to Talk", and it will feature a short movie, a young adult guest speaker, and food. The council is attempting to outreach to the public schools and charter schools in order to get teens to attend this event. Overall, the stigma-free council's goal is to educate and raise awareness. Tibbs was wondering how social media would have affected Ms. Donna during her mental health episodes, and how social media can help reduce stigma and improve mental health awareness. He also asked a question about bipolar illness. There are multiple different mental health illnesses that occur due to various types of trauma. If Donna received the help she needed early on, her life could have been very different. Regarding social media, there are many people calling social media bad, but it can also help youth be more connected and reduce stigma regarding mental health. Social media can help kids receive the help they need and get connected to mental health services. There is a page for the stigma-free council on the township web site, and it is being regularly updated with events

and meetings. Councilman Kharazi stated that there is a great nonprofit organization called the center for great expectations. They have an information session on November 7th which is free and starts at 11:45. They focus on pregnant women with fitness and mental health problems. He asked if there are groups in Franklin that support those suffering from mental health issues. The guests answered no, but residents can go to Bridgewater for a group. There may be plans to create a group in Franklin Township to address these issues. Franklin's South Asian community may be more willing to come to mental health programs if it is stated that it will help them better support their neighbors and others around them

Other Business: Chairman reported of a new commissioner replacing Stan Rozario which has been approved by Township Council , by the name of Samina Sattar. She will be in attendance and introduced at the next meeting.

There might be another opening after the Chairman speaks to John Samba who has now missed the recent fifth meeting

The K-Mart shopping center Zoning Board meeting has now been postponed until January 9th, 2025

The project that Edna is still working on the Flags on other Town project. Township Manager has suggested to speak with Saffie Kallon at Township.

Alex reported that This Sunday, a cultural event will take place at Colonial Park. This event will be focused on Palestine. There will be free giveaways, free workshops, and free activities for children. It is a great example that reaffirms that in our township, we respect each other and reassure each other. This event shows that Franklin is a place where everyone is valued and respected. It is important to note that this is not an event to promote any specific political agenda. Hopefully there is a committee that is formed to organize such events and promote the cultural diversity of Franklin. A statement has been posed; it is impossible for everyone to attend multiple different events, so it would be great if an event is organized where many different cultural groups can be brought together. A committee can be formed that can organize such events and can address issues related to culture in the township.

There is a Halloween Party happening at the Youth Center this Saturday, and there is also an event called Halloween on Hamilton on the same day.

There has been a proposal via Council meeting to limit the number of cannabis dispensary stores in the township to 18. Right now, there are 10 such stores open.

At Council meeting it was reported that the police department gets a lot of complaints regarding noise. In order to measure this, they measured decibels of noise. This wasn't practical, so a new ordinance said that beyond 200 feet of proximity, if the noise is able to be heard then it is regarded as noisy.

Linda reported there have been a lot of complaints about mail delivery trucks parking on the wrong side of streets to make deliveries. For issues like this, the best course of action is to call the police so the police can ticket them.

There is no HRC meeting in November due to Thanksgiving, so the next scheduled meeting will be December 18th.

The new subcommittee (Edna ,Peter and Nora) are working on a new HRC brochure. This brochure will hopefully be completed soon so it can be submitted to the township.

Guest Michelle Petersen questioned with a discussion following re how the Township post openings on committees.

Meeting adjourned at 8:12 PM

Respectfully submitted,

Junior Commissioners Kathir Elamaran