

Franklin Township Human Relations Commission Meeting

Minutes of April 23, 2025

Present: Gary Rosenthal, Kamla Sharma, John Tibbs, Councilman Alex Kharazi, Nora Catiis, Pete Clark, Samina Sattar, Edna Arguello Hitcher, Rohan Kalidas, Elangkathir Elamaran, Sharon Czabotar

Excused: Ron Poustchi, Shubhendu Singh, Linda Montgomery Williams

Absent: John Samba

Police Officer: Detective Bobby Brown

Guest: Daryn Plummer – Supervisor of Equity & Inclusion, Rania Saba

Meeting called to order at **7:00 pm**

Minutes of March 26th were **approved**.

Police report: Detective Brown spoke for the police department. As a Franklin native, he spoke of his appreciation for being able to connect with the community. Detective Brown has played a major role in the police programs that have taken place at the youth center and around the community. Examples of these include tomorrow's bring your child to work day (8 AM to 2 PM), Saturday's DEA drug turnover day (10 AM to 2 PM where people can get rid of old prescription medications), Sunday's Tour De Franklin (a partnership with the food bank which begins at the high school and carries on down Canal Road). Brown will be at St. Matthias for a special event at the school, where he will promote the programs available for Franklin Township youth. He says that this is a way to ensure that students at St. Matthias recognize that they are also a part of Franklin, along with the public schools, as well as provide adults with information on health and wellness. Many vendors will be at the event. A few big things coming up are the FTPD Youth Academy in July. There have been many positive outcomes from alumni of this program, including the military. One of the junior commissioners, Elangkathir Elamaran, attended this academy in the past. This class is a great way for students to learn more about careers in law enforcement. There will be 30 cadets in the

class. In addition, FTPD is preparing for National Night Out. Last year, due to inclement weather, the National Night Out was cancelled. Recently, there was an expungement event at the Baptist Church held by the Stigma Free organization. An expungement is an opportunity for (small) criminal offenses to be released from individuals' records. Mr. Tibbs commended the police department for all their work. Detective Brown also looks to gain momentum on the police department's podcast, which he sometimes hosts. Their third episode will be out on Friday. While it is not a true-crime documentary, they look to communicate the voice of the police department's thoughts, projects, equipment, and expenses to the public. It is a new venue for the department to be transparent to the township. This podcast was a replacement for their Tuesday Night Talks, which did not catch much traction. This is a great way for residents of Franklin to tune in whenever they are available and take in reliable, useful information on the go. During the next episode, they plan to feature two individuals from the food bank and shed light on the food bank. They want to reduce the stigma around it and tell people that it is for anyone who is experiencing food insecurity. Through this podcast, residents of Franklin can find resources in the township and utilize them. Captain Brown reiterated that all the programs are preventing students from being at risk of negative influence. If they do not come to the youth center, they need a way to reach the youth and ensure that they are above the influence. He stated that one of the reasons why young people do not come to the youth center is due to the police presence and the metal detectors at the door. He wants youth to view police as educators and someone they can look up to. This way, they can create a positive influence. If a student is expelled or has committed a violent crime, there is a road to success program that targets such students. Captain Brown, Officer Belvin, and other officers try to reach the youth through this program as well. Officer Brown says that the idea is to invest in kids on a good trajectory and to keep them on that path. He reiterates that these processes take time and are an ongoing process. He is proud of the action being taken by Franklin Township, which is much more progressive than the other townships in the area, such as South Brunswick and Hillsborough. He brings up that Franklin PD had support from vendors, township officials, and more. They are working towards reaching youth through programs such as the My Brother's Keeper program, assemblies in the schools related to drug use, and more. They are trying to expose the harsh realities of drugs and how extended use of them can land a person in jail. The police department also tries to maintain a presence at various events throughout the township. Dr. Kharazi reported that there is a great program related to opioids, open for 8th to 12th grade students. This is open for up to 30 students and is for substance use prevention. This is during the summer, and is a paid program. There are a lot of programs in the works with the opioid settlement funds. A question is brought up on the female-to-male split in the youth center programs. Detective Brown brings up that it is almost always evenly split between genders. He

said that there is a good balance. He expressed regret about past programs, which were scarce. He is proud of the continuity in these programs now and how often they arise. Captain Brown said that their goal is to create longevity and connections with individual students. Some students have done such programs 3 years ago, and still text him and ask for advice regarding careers in law enforcement.

Guest Speaker: Mr. Plummer thanked everyone for their time and thanked Pete Clark for always being a liaison. He wants to specifically talk about things about his (and his colleagues') role in actions for the district. He said that he believes that down to the HRC and the classroom, learning is the number one priority. He claims that an educational climate is one he continually works to offer to the township. He said that he will wrap up talking about FT's diversity night, which is something that celebrates Franklin's diversity in cultures and languages. Dr. Rania Saba teaches fourth-grade math at one of the Franklin elementary schools. She recently got her doctorate. She serves as an equity leader in the district and has been collaborating with other equity leaders for around 4-5 years to guide and support teachers throughout all of the content areas included in making classrooms inclusive. Her main responsibility is to facilitate professional development sessions in which she provides educators with resources. A lot of students come from different cultures, and they are expected to follow mainstream cultural norms. Unfortunately, it is not possible to impose these norms on students anymore. Learning about students' cultures and diversities helps bridge the gap. They need to feel like they are seen, heard, and active participants in the learning environment. Their ultimate goal is to not only make them feel like they belong, but also help them achieve a lot both in and outside school. Mr. Plummer said that it has been 5-6 years since they have had district-wide equity training. They switched to specific content areas. He said that he orchestrates the outcomes of these sessions and has seen growth in the percentage of outcomes of these sessions. He looks forward to exceeding this baseline once more. Over 5-6 years, raising this bar is the ultimate goal. He said that this is an important ongoing process as classrooms become increasingly diverse. He said that students being able to see themselves being represented helps their academic achievements. He also wants to highlight the climate culture efforts, which incorporate the sciences of building a community, and have been packaged towards the educational system. It is about a proactive approach to building relationships throughout our district and involves handling conflicts when they arise. He said that a lot of times, as adults, we take conflict with young people. He brought up an example of two young people arguing over a toy, and one snatches it. He said that a parent would orchestrate an apology. He used this example to show how the sense of community can be brought about by this leadership. He wants to ensure there is a specific set of practices to deal with

these tensions. He stated that there has been an overall decrease in tensions and conflicts in the middle school, which showcases the effectiveness of these programs. He said that overall, we have seen an over 60% decrease in discipline incidents and an overall 70% decrease in suspensions. This is attributable to the application of conflict de-escalation practices and experts. As more people train together in these environments, the discipline improves. He does this to maintain the end goal of academic achievement. A question comes up about whether or not the program has measured the way students feel about these programs. Plummer states that they have deployed a survey, which showcased a 6% increase in student belonging over 3 years. They have switched to NJ SCI, in which they have a different measurement. This platform employs a 4-point scale, in which Franklin's index was 2.8. Panorama had a measure in which they could see a national average as well as a global average, while NJ SCI did not have this. They want to strive for a higher index, showing that the students have a greater sense of belonging. Councilman Kharazi asked a question relating to the role of parents in this process. He wondered how they impact the society around these students and what challenges come from home. Plummer stated that the partnership with parents is a key element in improving student experience. He has helped to develop a parent advisory where they take input from parents to bring the data to the family and parent equity advisories. He said that talking to individuals in person gives more examples and humanity in comparison to a survey. In-person meetings broke barriers between the program and the parents, opening a wider door for improvement overall. When someone comes to a family engagement program, there is something for everybody, despite age. The challenges that they face are time, competing commitments, and funding. There is only a certain amount of time they have to get everything accomplished. They also experience competing commitments on the school level, district level, and classroom level. Being able to build coherence on all of these levels is always a challenge. Funding, especially this year with budget cuts, it is necessary to be laser-focused on what they need to achieve. This is something that can be addressed with coherence. Kharazi asked what the end goal is with these programs for Mr. Plummer. Dr. Saba stated examples of what has been done in the classroom, such as elementary teachers building relationships with parents through surveys and meetings, and surveying kids on their wants/needs. If a problem arises or something good needs to be communicated, the teacher takes the time to communicate this to the teachers. She spoke about how challenging it was to implement these strategies in math. Initially, she taught literacy, but later transitioned to math. If she learns that one of her students celebrates a certain holiday through a survey, she can create a work problem in class that relates to it. This way, she can make sure that students feel recognized and like they belong in the classroom. This is seen in test scores, as

test scores have spiked after the implementation of this program. In addition, students seem more engaged and eager to come to school. They can understand the subject on a deeper level. She has also been encouraging other math teachers and showing them the importance of implementing these programs in the classroom. She also takes inspiration from other teachers. She says that teachers must realize that they can make math and make it an inclusive environment, even though it may be just numbers. Dr. Kharazi also spoke on his experiences, saying how he used names from various cultures in problems to allow his students to hear names from other cultures. Dr. Saba spoke on how she creates problems that pertain to the cultures of various students in her classroom. This way, she can increase the diversity in the classroom and make sure that her students feel included. It is brought up that Franklin is one of the most diverse towns in New Jersey, falling second only to Jersey City. Edna asked if any metrics reflect attendance and the engagement levels of students. Dr. Plummer said that they look at the school attendance, feedback from teachers, and the academic performance of students. Dr. Saba said that she has noticed that students are eager to come to school every day. Dr. Plummer spoke on the home aspect of this program. He said that while he cannot affect what happens at home first-hand, they do smaller things to interact and influence parents. He spoke about the diversity night festival on May 2nd, which will be the third annual one of its kind. There will be performers from various grade levels, and staff will be active. There will be "a taste of Franklin," where local food businesses can provide meals to allow the people of Franklin to taste test. This opens the doors for small businesses to thrive. There will also be a PBSIS showcase, and they have also worked together with the Hearts Council to allow cultural line dancing. This night is meant to be a night for every culture and corner of the community to connect. The flyer will be on the township website and will continue to be shared. Mr. Clark exclaimed his satisfaction with the intertwined nature of the councils in Franklin Township. He showcased his appreciation for this activity to communicate with each other. He recognizes the growth of the diversity festival, mentioning how it has grown each year that it has been held.

Other Business: Regarding the HRC brochure, Edna said that she has an outline but doesn't have a printer to print the brochure. She said that she will have to email the outline to the rest of the HRC. She stated that she needs guidance on when the people working on the hometown heroes project need to go to the council and pitch the project. They need to ask the council for an endorsement for the project. In addition, they need to ask Saffie for pricing regarding the banners and funding. In the past, families paid for the banners, but the hardware was paid for by the town. Edna stated that it would be beneficial to launch this project in the Spring, as the town will

take down these banners during the winter months. There will not be a meeting in May due to Memorial Day, and the next meeting will be June 25th. Dr. Kharazi said that tomorrow, there is a meeting in which police will speak on the affordable housing construction in town and how people can attain this housing. Yesterday in the council meeting, there was a discussion regarding the budget and whether taxes will go up. Dr. Kharazi reinforces that taxes will not go up. Taxes will not be proportional to the increase in home equity. Municipal taxes are only 14% of our taxes. The council has tried to keep taxes as low as possible, especially property taxes. Mr. Clark re-emphasized that the Diversity Festival will be on Friday, May 2nd. He invited everyone in the HRC to attend. The flyer for the festival will be sent out to everyone.

Meeting adjourned at **8:01 PM**

Respectfully submitted,

Junior Commissioners Rohan Kalidas & Elangkathir Elamaran