



Arlington Human Rights Commission

Report on April 2024 Listening Sessions

Background

During the Arlington Human Rights Commission (AHRC) meeting on March 20th, a number of community members attended and spoke in person or via Zoom about the ongoing destruction of life in Gaza, the widespread impact on children, reports of large-scale starvation, and the deaths of humanitarian aid workers. People spoke about the impact they felt due to personal connections, the increase in hate and rhetoric due to this war, and the importance of presenting a humanitarian viewpoint. Many appealed to the AHRC to respond appropriately and urgently, stating doing so makes people feel included and welcomed.

To consider a response, the AHRC scheduled a Special Meeting on April 1st to discuss this appeal from members of the community as well as to discuss the co-signing of a statement by another community affirming the rights of Palestinian, Arab & Muslim members of the community.

At that meeting, it was decided to hold listening sessions to gather feedback from the broader Arlington community, to answer two questions specifically:

- As an impacted member of the community, how might *other community members* make you feel more welcome, safe, and valued in Arlington?
- How might the *AHRC itself* take action to make you feel more welcome, safe, and valued in Arlington?

The intent was to identify ways the AHRC could help respond to the impact here in Arlington due to the humanitarian crisis continuing to unfold in and around Gaza.

Listening Sessions

The listening sessions were organized with the goal in mind to collect as much feedback as possible within a short period of time to be able to review, assimilate, and discuss feedback before the next AHRC meeting on April 10th. In an attempt to accommodate as many individuals and schedules as possible, we planned four separate sessions at different time slots: Thursday, 4/4, Friday, 4/5, Saturday, 4/6, and Monday, 4/8. Each session was attended by multiple members of the Commission as facilitators and notetakers. Members of the DEI department - Jillian Harvey, Teresa Marzilli, and Colleen Leger of Health and Human Services (HHS) - were also in attendance for technical coordination. Additionally, the AHRC asked people to submit written submissions to let their voices be heard if they could not attend any of the time slots listed above. These sessions were advertised via Town notice emails, the AHRC distribution list/website, and social media channels, including a variety of Arlington Facebook groups.

Feedback

The AHRC is grateful to the approximately 100 community members who spoke at the listening sessions, and those who sent over 100 emails to the AHRC before and immediately after the listening sessions, to share their stories at emotional and personal risk to themselves.

There were several notable and inspiring ideas for our community, including the following:

- Establishing a sister city in Palestine and Israel
- Hosting forums to encourage discourse and harmony
- Hold teach-ins to discuss history and increase tolerance
- Host food festivals to bring people together with a focus on unity and to promote cross-cultural understanding
- Create reading lists with input from libraries
- Create a “welcome to the town” packet that includes information about town government, civic participation and welfare programs, and promotion of local businesses.

Some common themes that were mentioned during the listening sessions were:

- Urgent calls to draft a ceasefire resolution based upon the severe humanitarian crisis in Gaza that affects a wide number of residents who are of different religions, ethnicities, and racial identities; due to the historical marginalization of Palestinian people, linked to the extensive US military & diplomatic support, and the need to speak up in a participatory democracy.
- Urgent calls to not draft a ceasefire resolution due to issues related to personal safety within Arlington, targeting of the only Jewish nation-state, linking to the traumas of the

Holocaust and pointing to the October 7 attacks as the reason for the crisis, and questioning if this falls within the purview of the AHRC.

- A number of residents requested the need for a balanced proclamation highlighting victims in Israel, destruction in Gaza, victims of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian faiths, and a call to release all hostages and prisoners and to appeal to humanity.
- Forums to respond to Islamophobia and antisemitism incidents in the town.
- A need for the AHRC to focus solely on local issues.

Many within the community were thankful to the AHRC for providing listening sessions, and some of the positive comments included:

- Appreciation for the effort involved in scheduling and hosting the listening sessions.
- An appreciation of past statements released by the AHRC on local and foreign human rights issues that make people feel included.
- Being responsive to calls from the community to respond to the crisis in Gaza.
- The opportunity to have a forum for comment, a place to be heard.

There were many critical comments about the listening sessions, and some of the notable points were:

- Pointing to the limits of AHRC's scope.
- Questioning the competence of the AHRC to comment on foreign issues.
- Not responding to antisemitic incidents in schools or in town.
- Hosting 2 of the listening sessions during the Sabbath/Shabbat.
- Questions about who is being heard in Arlington.
- Lack of responsiveness to other foreign crises.
- Concerns about the process, absence of trained facilitators, and lack of widespread publicity.
- Comments leading to an echo chamber of conflicting opinions.
- Comments about ending some sessions earlier than the stated end time.

Specifically related to the objective of the listening sessions, there was an emphasis on how the events in Israel and Gaza have impacted residents' lives in Arlington. The AHRC heard many stories of death, loss, and hopelessness from our Muslim, Arab, and Palestinian neighbors. Also heard were many stories of death, loss, and violence from our Jewish and Israeli neighbors. The AHRC was informed unequivocally that there is a pervasive sense of dehumanization and stigma surrounding religious identities that has affected members of those groups' perception of their safety here in town. The AHRC was also warned about fear of further escalation absent acknowledgement and intervention.

There were mentions of dehumanizing narratives all too common in toxic online discourse being lobbied against other groups, neighbors, and even members of the AHRC. Some of the comments included:

- Dehumanizations of Palestinians with descriptors of being a collection of tribes.
- Dismissal of a pro-Israel viewpoint as Zionist and questioning of the seriousness of antisemitic incidents in Arlington.
- Comments about Israeli victims of attacks being referenced only by people of the Jewish faith.
- Mentions of posters of October 7 hostages being torn down.
- A threat of legal action against the AHRC.
- An accusation of using antisemitic tropes and writing biased statements.
- Mentions of dehumanizing terms towards fellow Arlington residents, such as mob mentality.

After significant deliberation during the public AHRC Special Meeting on April 10th, the AHRC decided not to issue a ceasefire proclamation of its own, since that contravenes recently adopted AHRC policy against issuing statements that do not directly concern issues in Arlington.

As such, in the AHRC's desire to better serve its mission of response and education to human rights-related issues here in Arlington, the AHRC will consider the following in response:

- **Continue to convene and co-sponsor opportunities for community conversation, cultural celebration, and education, such as:**
 - Eid Mubarak event organized by the Arlington High School (AHS) Muslim Student's Association on 4/19
 - Neighbors Eating All Together (NEAT) dinner sponsorship on 4/13
 - Day of Learning, focused on building welcoming communities featuring RefugePoint on 2/10
- **Convene and co-sponsor future opportunities for conversation and education in response to Islamophobia and antisemitism, such as:**
 - Planning for a vigil or an event to address antisemitism
 - Considering cosigning a statement to affirm Arab and Muslim human rights
 - Upcoming educational session
- **Empower a new special working group of the AHRC specifically focused on promoting religious tolerance, safety, and understanding;** joining the AHRC's three other working groups, this team shall meet regularly for the duration of at least the next year to monitor and respond to incidents and the climate of religious hate in the town.
- **Provide education and awareness regarding the 2024 Special Town Meeting warrant articles related to religious violence;** the AHRC routinely provides

commentary on submitted Town Meeting warrant articles related to their impact on human rights. Submitted by community members for the 2024 Special Town Meeting, Article 5 will ask Town Meeting Members to vote on whether to issue a proclamation urging a bilateral ceasefire.

- **Review our bylaws to determine the exact scope of the AHRC in terms of making statements and comments about human rights violations around the globe;** the AHRC will break down and analyze the mission and bylaws to determine scope and purpose to guide future response, events and agendas.

Arlington values equity, diversity, and inclusion. We are committed to building a community where everyone is heard, respected, and protected.