



**Bloomington/Monroe County  
Human Rights Commission**

**May 19, 2025 Meeting Minutes  
Hooker Conference Room, City Hall  
5:00 p.m.**

The Bloomington/Monroe County Human Rights Commission met at 5:00 p.m. on Monday, May 19, 2025, in the Hooker Conference Room of Showers City Hall.

**Commissioners Attending:** Sharon Baker, Katie Bensberg, Stephen Coover, Amy Jackson (online via Zoom), Ryne Shadday, Emma Williams (online via Zoom), Lilliana Young.

**Staff Attending:** BMCHRC Liaison Michael Shermis, BMCHRC Assistant Annabelle Vosmeier.

**Public Attending:** Melanie Vehslage, Youth Services Bureau.

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**Call to Order**

1. Shadday brought the BMCHRC to order at 5:00 PM and presented the Land and Labor Acknowledgment. Commissioners introduced themselves and welcomed Commissioner Bensberg.

**Approval of Minutes of April 21, 2025 Meeting**

1. Coover moved to approve the minutes from April 21, 2025. Baker seconded. Passed unanimously by roll call vote, 6-0, Bensberg abstaining.

**Report from Staff**

1. **Quarterly Report:** The quarterly report was passed out for review. Staff noted a continued high number of inquiries. Young moved to approve the report, Jackson seconded. Passed unanimously by roll call vote, 7-0.
2. **Contract Compliance Committee:** Members of the committee reported back from a meeting the Legal department called with them for May 5, 2025. This involved changed wording regarding equal opportunity agreements for contractors. Young stated that it did not seem like it would affect practical applications. Jackson recognized Legal's openness and their desire to remove language that could hurt our contractors while keeping the spirit of anti-discrimination, but emphasized that she remained uncomfortable with complying in advance. Bensberg appreciated Jackson's sentiments: executive orders and EEOC investigations are not laws. Williams mentioned Legal's desire to protect the City from future lawsuits influenced by Students for Fair Admissions. Shadday stated that the City can choose to give money to other contractors who have not removed DEI principles and disapproved of complying in advance. Jackson stated her belief that the committee will have no part in this discussion or decision but was informed as a note of respect since it affects our work.
3. **Fourth of July:** Commissioners approved of proposed swag: Tootsie Pops with existing BMCHRC stickers taped to them. Baker moved to approve a \$250 budget for candy and

- additional materials. Bensberg seconded. Approved unanimously by roll call vote, 7-0.
4. **Newsletter on Hold:** The Legal department and department director are “reviewing” newsletters for potentially problematic content; thus, all newsletters are on hold until further notice. As of May 19, we have had no word about the newsletter that would have gone out on May 1. Staff expressed disappointment and frustration. The HRC newsletter is very different from other City newsletters: since 1999, it has reported on national civil rights issues to inform a local audience. Jackson thanked Vosmeier for the work on the newsletter.
  5. **Freedom Agenda:** Byron Bangert, former HRC commissioner and longtime chair, shared an ACLU resource. Commissioners discussed the possibility to take actions. Shadday expressed concern that the City would have legal perspectives contradicting any advocacy efforts that the Commission might undertake. Bensberg argued that many noncontroversial actions could be taken in the form of public engagement and connecting people to resources. She is connected with the National Lawyers Guild, which could provide a Know Your Rights discussion or tabling event. Jackson pointed out that the HRC is already engaging with Exodus and the trans community and suggested highlighting those efforts. Williams referred to the resource being created by If When How, which the HRC can help distribute. Bensberg suggested thinking broadly about the ways our values are present in other programs. For example, All Options is closing and their core programs are being shared among other organizations like Tandem.
  6. **PrideFest:** The date for PrideFest has been set for August 23; Shermis has applied for a space for tabling, which costs \$175. Young moved to approve \$250 for tabling fees and additional swag. Coover seconded. Approved unanimously by roll call vote, 7-0.
  7. **Backstreet Case (1977):** Vosmeier is guest curating an exhibit at the Monroe County History Center on Bloomington’s 1975 gay rights ordinance, which briefly added sexual orientation as a protected class in the Human Rights Ordinance. Only one case was tried before the HRC: In 1977, commissioners ruled against six complainants who had been kicked out of a local disco because of their sexual orientation, arguing that the business’s policy to ban same-sex dancing was fair because straight patrons were also forbidden from same-sex dancing. Only one commissioner, Tobiatha Eagleson, refused to sign and added a dissent in favor of the complainants. Staff distributed the 1977 HRC final order for commissioners to look at.

### Reports from Commissioners

1. **Williams** returned to volunteering at the New Life New Life re-entry program after eight months off during law school. The atmosphere and sentiment toward leadership at the county jail has changed completely. Previously, there were activities, movie nights, and a touch of humanity. Now incarcerated people feel that they are being treated like animals and are barely permitted to go outside. They did not mention a root cause leading to the issues. Commissioners discussed that jail leadership have focused publicly on making physical conditions more livable.
2. **Young** interacted with Stand for the Silent, an anti-bullying organization fundraising downtown today.
3. **Coover** tabled at Harrodsburg Heritage Days and brought some BMCHRC brochures (although it was so windy that some blew away). He will be tabling at a Health and Resource Fair at an apartment complex on Pete Ellis Drive.

4. **Shadday** walked to the meeting along the B-line and saw an increased number of unhoused people sleeping outside along the trail. Wished to involve the BMCHRC in efforts to assist the unhoused community. Commissioners discussed possibilities, particularly bringing in representatives from the City and Beacon to learn about existing initiatives.

### **Open Cases**

1. Baker: Sex discrimination in housing. A new case; reviewing affidavit before interviewing complainant.
2. Coover: Race discrimination in public accommodations. Complainant suggested they would refuse the settlement offer and has 30 days to make a decision before withdrawing and seeking a private lawyer.
3. Young: Disability discrimination in housing. A no probable cause finding was issued. The complainant has not appealed.
4. Jackson: Disability discrimination in employment. The respondent is reviewing the affidavit and has been granted an extension.
5. Shadday: Disability discrimination in employment. The respondent is reviewing the affidavit.

### **Assignment of New Cases**

1. Three potential cases. The gender identity complaint continues to be negotiated back and forth. Two racial discrimination in housing complaints continue to be developed. The next case will be assigned to Williams, then to Bensberg.

### **Unfinished Business**

1. **Municipal ID program:** Young proposed this program several months ago. The Commission on Hispanic and Latino Affairs (CHLA) is not currently interested. Shermis summarized two problems: 1) The Office of the Mayor will likely not consider it without CHLA interest; 2) The Office of the Mayor is currently prioritizing existing services, which raises the question of who in the City would work on and fund the project. Young stated that she sees it as giving people a new option, while not mandating it. ICE is already present in Bloomington; this would not increase the risk. The program would benefit other communities (criminal backgrounds, unhoused, trans community). Giving an option is better than not giving an option. Jackson echoed Young's sentiments and mentioned other vulnerable populations like people with developmental disabilities and seniors. Emphasized that it not be mandated. In favor of putting forth a proposal, with the knowledge that staffing and finances would be an issue. Bensberg is a huge proponent of city ID programs and referred to NYC's ID program, which was hugely beneficial to all kinds of people in terms of access to healthcare, etc. Williams stated that she saw some benefits, but underlined that in Indiana, not even a student ID could be used to vote. Who would accept the ID? Would it actually help with access to resources? Young said that within cities that recognize them, they are fully legal IDs accepted by anyone. Shadday asked whether Bloomington would need to pass legislation mandating their acceptance. It seemed that that would be necessary. He asked Young to do some more research on what other cities do. The issue was tabled to be discussed at the next meeting.
2. **Bylaws:** Commissioners reviewed drafted bylaws, particularly discussing how to define

abstention in voting and majority votes. Decided on a passing vote being a majority of voting persons, if a quorum is present and voting. Thereby, a 3-1-3 vote would pass, as a majority of those commissioners choosing to participate vote in favor. Commissioners also decided to define acceptable reasons for abstention: lack of information, not being present for a discussion, or a conflict of interest. Otherwise, it is important to have courage in one's convictions. Staff will draft this material into the bylaws for a vote at the next meeting.

### **New Business**

1. **Human Rights Award Selection:** Commissioners reviewed applications for the Human Rights Award. Baker opened the discussion by speaking warmly of the Bloomington Severe Weather Emergency Shelter (B-SWERS). Bensberg concurred, saying that they were a phenomenal organization with no strings attached to their much-needed aid. Jackson moved to select B-SWERS as the recipient and Baker seconded. During discussion, Young pointed out that Hoosier Hills Food Bank (HHFB) does broad-ranging work throughout the year, serving large numbers; their work is especially important as federal aid is slashed. Baker and Bensberg pointed out that HHFB is an established organization and it would be good for public awareness of a new organization to select B-SWERS. They saw a life or death need and mobilized very quickly. Shadday called the vote, and B-SWERS was selected as the recipient unanimously by roll call vote, 7-0.

### **Public Input**

2. **Melanie Vehslage, Youth Services Bureau:** Melanie Vehslage spoke about the upcoming 10<sup>th</sup> annual Childhood Condition Summit on November 13, 2025. The summit will discuss what has shaped childhood conditions. Invited the BMCHRC to consider presenting at a session.

**Adjournment:** Chair Shadday adjourned the meeting at 6:50 p.m.