

Mayor's Commission on Reentry Minutes
September 21, 2020 at 1:00pm

In attendance: Kristin Barker, John House, Dr. Michael Forte, Pat Frey, Jeanette James, Waleisah Wilson Gamaliel Torres, and Cathy Robinson.

Keith Mitchell was not able to attend the meeting. Kristin Barker stepped in for the Chair. Jeanette motioned to approve the Minutes. Waleisah seconded that motion. The minutes were approved.

John forwarded an email to the Commission regarding Roy Plummer's plans to open a shelter in January that is certified for 100 beds. The shelter would be able to serve homeless veterans and one wing may be designated for homeless female veterans. He has connected with the Warden at Rutledge to identify incarcerated veterans being released. Pat expressed that there may not be enough homeless veterans in Columbus. She also expressed concern that HUD may not allow the facility to be classified as a shelter if people pay to stay there as they do at the Plummer House. We should keep an eye on how this develops moving forward. The Commission is mainly concerned with shelter that is housing focused. Its purpose should be to provide a short term solution while a more permanent housing solution is identified.

The Housing Subcommittee is preparing to launch with Home for Good as the lead organization. The Commission discussed additional entities who should be involved. It was suggested that we reach out to the new director at Community Reinvestment about sending a representative. Pat explained that a landlord engagement process began earlier this year at Home for Good that encompasses landlord education. A private landlord heads up this committee for Home for Good. He may be willing to serve on the subcommittee.

Pat will add Commission members to the Home for Good weekly newsletter so that we become better educated ourselves and can support these activities. We also need representation from some of the providers throughout the community. We need representation from emergency shelters, programs that offer case management for rapid re-housing program, and longer term facilities. It would also be helpful for someone from the Commission to attend the housing navigation meetings.

The Employment Subcommittee continues to collect information for planning a campaign to influence employers to participate in Ban the Box. The focus will be on generating buy-in and influencing the narrative to generate engagement with employers and hiring managers. The Commission will need the Mayor to become a spokesperson and speak to the community passionately about what the City has done to engage in this way and why it is important. Kristin will be meeting with Marquette McKnight to discuss how we can make this happen effectively. The subcommittee also discussed asking the Chamber to host an event that will allow us to share the message with the business audience. John expressed that he believes the Mayor would be willing to help.

Waleisah shared that the City of Columbus came up in a meeting recently with the Mayor of Atlanta during a discussion about the practice of using inmates to support city services and not paying for the labor. This practice is looked down upon in other communities and does not shine a positive light on Columbus. This needs to be addressed. It could also place a damper on the Mayor's ability to speak to

the Ban the Box issue. We need to be prepared to report how many felons have been hired by the City into and the positions they fill. The City saves about 15 million a year that we would have to come up with if we were to pay inmates for the services they provide. John did share that inmates choose to do the work and are not required to participate.

Waleisah suggested it would help to reward this service to the community by providing a sanitation engineer or other such certificate for service. This could help to eliminate the stigma attached to inmates and begin to change the narrative. Recommendations could also regularly be provided to inmates from supervisors. In short, the City needs to treat these positions and the people that serve in them with dignity.

Kristin met with Larry Dale with the GDC. The Commission will be receiving monthly reports on inmates who are scheduled for release to Muscogee and surrounding counties. This information will be available for consideration during subcommittee meetings. It can be used to support employment and housing. We should consider how it might be leveraged in other ways by the Commission.

Michael Forte has drafted a letter to churches in the community that he will send to the Commission for feedback and editing. We still need to connect with Adrien Chester and Rabbi Schwartz for email lists to distribute the letter to. We also need letterhead. Jeanette will reach out to Alexis Thompson in the Mayor's office about appropriate letterhead to use. Once the Commission approves the letter, Michael will email the information out.

Pat asked if there are some ministerial groups are already having scheduled meetings. It may be best to ask for permission to speak to the church leadership during these meetings. This is a better approach. There may be churches who are already providing services or are ready to participate now. We can ask them about this directly in the letter.

The recent virtual records restriction event has taken the place of the expungement summit we were originally planning this fall. We were able to provide full support for this virtual event, and we will get information on the results once all applications have been received and processed.

Waleisah mentioned that no one in Columbus has planned anything for National Expungement week. It would be good for the Commission to at least share or post information about National Expungement week on Facebook, and we should plan to do something next year. Some organizations in other communities have partnered with others to provide free break light inspections or other preventative measures to help people avoid a possible run in with the law. Also, some of the language has been changed about voting. We should be aware of these changes.

The Commission discussed nominating someone to replace Andrea as Vice Chair for the Commission. Michael suggested that Kristin should move into the Vice Chair position. Kristin agreed to accept the nomination, however, we will need to identify someone else to serve as Secretary.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:57pm. Our next meeting will be October 19, at 1pm.