

ST. MARY'S COUNTY GOVERNMENT
HUMAN RELATIONS COMMISSION

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Cynthia A. Brown, *Commission Liaison*



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Human Relations Commission Forum
November 30, 2009
Minutes

Attendees: Jim Hanley, HRC Chair, Theo Cramer, HRC Vice-Chair
HRC Members: Kim Beachy, and Robert Cryer

John Savich, County Administrator; Kathy Reich, Commission on Aging; Norma Pipkin, Commission for Women and Human Services Council; Janice Walthour, Unified Committee on Afro-American Contributions (UCAC); John Roberts, Mediation Center of St. Mary's; Melvin McClintock, St. Mary's College; Wayne Scriber, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); and Cynthia Brown, Dept. of Human Services and HRC Liaison.

County Administrator, John Savich stayed briefly to welcome the group of volunteers and thank them for their participation in the forum. He stated their volunteer service is extremely valuable to the citizens of St. Mary's County and welcomed suggestions on how to increase participation on County appointed advisory boards.

HRC Chair, Jim Hanley convened the meeting at 6:15 and invited participants to introduce themselves and identify their organization. Mr. Hanley stated there has been limited interaction among groups in the county who may share the similar focus of advocating for underserved populations. The purpose of the meeting is to provide a platform for learning about the missions and activities of these various organizations, as well as common challenges and potential opportunities for support and collaboration.

Mr. Hanley gave a brief history of the Human Relations Commission and cited it's most recent activities. The HRC traditionally hosts an awards breakfast recognizing contributions of local citizens toward improved human relations, participates in the planning of the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr Prayer Breakfast at St. Mary's College, and played a significant role in the establishment of the most recent version of Study Circles in St. Mary's County which focuses on race relations.

The HRC was established in the 1960s to protect human and civil rights and advocate for fairness and equality. The local advisory board was founded on Maryland State law and is guided by the Maryland State Human Relations Commission. The SMHRC accepted discrimination complaints and worked to bring involved parties together to mediate their differences. Over the decades, the complaints became more complex and the HRC voted to seek approval from the Board of County Commissioners to cease mediating cases and support the establishment of the Mediation Center of St. Mary's.

John Roberts from the *Mediation Center of St. Mary's* continued the discussion by providing more details about the center. The Mediation Center provides dispute resolution services to the MD Commission on Human Relations. It mediates about 8 to 10 cases per year from the State. It is one of 17 mediation centers in the state of Maryland. Other clients include agencies like the Department on Aging, the Sheriff's Department, District and Circuit Courts, The Family Advocacy Center, as well as individuals and families. According to Mr. Roberts, the role of the Center is not to lead, recommend, advise or make judgments. Its role is to support the involved parties to reach a better understanding of the issues at hand. Training for volunteers interested in becoming mediators is coming up in September 2010 and the Center is looking for participants in a Community Study Circles scheduled to begin January 25.

Norma Pipkin, representing the *St. Mary's Commission for Women*, stated the purpose of the group is to highlight the needs and contributions of the women in St. Mary's County. Each year the CFW acknowledges female residents at the Charlotte Hall Veterans Home and hosts a Women's History Banquet recognizing the achievements of local women. During this past year, the CFW was recognized by the Board of County Commissioners for Women's Equality Day, established a close working relationship with the State CFW, participates in domestic violence community awareness activities and has representation on the Family Violence Coordinating Council. The CFW currently is working on oral history interviews with various local women, establishing a scholarship at the College of Southern Maryland and participating in the Women's Legislative Session in Rockville. Ms. Pipkin reminded everyone that the CFW welcomes nominations from the public for women that should be recognized at their Women's History Month Banquet in March. It was suggested that groups represented at the table could assist in making recommendations.

Ms. Pipkin is also a member of the *St. Mary's Human Services Council* and reported that recently the Council wrote a chapter for the County's Comprehensive Plan. This is significant because it's the first time human service needs were included in the document. The chapter addresses housing, health, behavioral health, employment and transportation needs. Over the past year the Council has also participated in a community health assessment addressing health needs and access to care in St. Mary's County.

Katherine Reitch is the current Chairperson of the *Commission on Aging* and explained that the new Chair, Elfreda Mathis would be in office in early 2010. Ms. Reitch stated the Commission on Aging serves as advocate for all quality of life issues for senior citizens. During the past year, the Commission has been very active in advocating for the improvement of the food at the Senior Center and reduced transportation cost for Seniors traveling to the Center. The Commission is currently focused on the lack of affordable housing for Seniors and the status of the Ripple Center, the adult day care center. St. Mary's County is the only county in Maryland that is running an adult day care center. The County Commissioners has asked the Department on Aging to conduct a study on the possibility of privatization. The Commission produces a newsletter every three months called *New Beginnings* and hosts an annual lunch for Seniors and the County Commissioners, as well as a weekly lunch that brings together Seniors and service providers to discuss issues.

Melvin McClintock, Assistant Director of Human Resources for St. Mary's College, spoke briefly about the college's collaboration with the County Government, the HRC and St. Mary's County Public Schools on the Study Circles Project. Mr. McClintock was the serving as the Chairperson of the HRC at that time and anticipates being re-appointed by the County Commissioners.

Janice Walthour, Vice Chair of the *Unified Committee on Afro-American Contributions*, stated one of the primary missions of the organization is to promote the history of African Americans in St. Mary's County. Some of the UCAC's achievements to date include erecting a monument in 2000 depicting the contributions of African Americans in the all areas of service like the military, education, politics, etc; collaborating with Jefferson Patterson Park and the Smithsonian to publish a book on the History of African American Education in the Tri-County Area; and the establishment of the Juneteenth Festival in St. Mary's County. In previous years, the HRC honorees have been acknowledged at the festival. Currently, the UCAC is partnering with the St. Mary's Historical Society and St. Mary's Library to erect a memorial monument to the colored troops and females who served in the Civil War. Ms. Walthour stated the UCAC currently consists of a small group of volunteers and it's a challenge to handle the research and documentation needed for these projects. She would like to see paid staff and volunteers pool resources and work together.

Wayne Scriber, President of the *St. Mary's County Branch of the NAACP*, presented the mission of objectives of the organization, which is essentially to promote and assure the just and equitable treatment of all people. He explained local branches abide by the policies of the national branch and focus on the areas of housing, criminal justice, health care, employment and education. The St. Mary's County Branch is currently studying the disproportionate number of minority supervisors in County Government and the increase of police misconduct allegations. Mr. Scriber also stated the NAACP supports President's Obama's health care initiative and is concerned about the effects of poverty and unemployment on minorities. The Legal Committee of the local branch addresses complaints of civil rights violations. If a resolution is not met on the local level, the complaint is forwarded to the state, and potentially, the national level. Ms. Walthour, who serves at the Chair of the NAACP's Education Committee, reported the NAACP has a strong working relationship with the St. Mary's County Public School and the Education Committee meets with the Superintendent quarterly about issues of concern. The Education Committee hosts an annual Meet and Greet for minority teachers and has seen the number of minority teachers' increase from 6% to 20%. The Education Committee continues to focus on eliminating the achievement gap between minority students and non-minority students, reducing the drop out rate at Great Mills High School and making diversity training mandatory instead of voluntary. Mr. Scriber reminded everyone that the NAACP meets at SMECO in Leonardtown on the last Wednesday of each month and the meetings are open to the public.

Theo Cramer, HRC member and *Director of Student Services and Academic Support for St. Mary's County Public Schools*, elaborated on the positive relationship between the Board of Education and the NAACP. He went on to state the current relationship between the Superintendent and the county at large is the best he has seen in his 20 year career. Mr. Cramer also spoke to the importance of collaboration among community groups with similar purposes like those represented at this meeting and sees this gathering as a first step in that direction.

Next Steps

Discussion turned to ways these organizations can interact. Suggestions included:

- Develop and circulate a list of events and activities each organization is sponsoring so representatives from other organizations can attend and support;
- Provide contact information on those in attendance, as well as other similar organizations, in order to foster communication;

- Use the previous suggestions in order to avoid date conflicts when scheduling programs and events;
- Collaborate on events. Co-host activities in order to engage more community participation rather than competing for the attendance.
- Make the Dept of Human Services aware of changes in chairpersons and contact information;
- Enlist County Government via the Human Relations Commission to take the lead in diversity issues county-wide;
- Seek membership on the Human Services Council as a broader means to address human service needs and an opportunity to network with agencies;
- Use the local cable station as a vehicle for community awareness;
- Support diversity training at large;
- Recruit more volunteers. Expand recruiting efforts beyond the Enterprise. Think "outside the box". Recruit people in the medium to which they are accustomed;
- Work toward diversity in representation throughout county life---schools, government, ect.;
- Promote/publicize the outcomes from Study Circles. Some of the suggestions from previous sessions were actually utilized with the Board of Education but not many of the participants in the Study Circles were aware of this;
- Establish a Study Circles Newsletter;
- Reconvene this group quarterly and expand representation to include the College of Southern Maryland and others. The purpose of future meetings is to bring success stories, challenges and problems, brainstorm on solutions and promote collaborations.

The meeting adjourned at 8:25pm