

FROM THE STONEHAM HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 8, 2020

Last year, Stoneham took a step toward a healthier, more inclusive community: it created a Human Rights Commission. We, the members of the Commission, are your neighbors, appointed as volunteers to help improve Stoneham. And though we wish the circumstances were better, it is time we introduced ourselves.

Stoneham is a unique community, and in creating the Commission, that community was not content just to copy the work of our neighboring towns. Your Commission is different. We are an advisory body, working through the Select Board and Town Administrator. Our mandate, available on the Town's website, encompasses a broad range of social justice and human rights concerns. But we act through the Town.

That means the Commission functions best as a conduit for information, a channel between residents and Town government. One directive in our mandate speaks to that function more than any other: "to identify and advocate for the protection and preservation of the civil and human rights of all people in the town of Stoneham[.]" First *identify*, then *advocate* – because meaningful advocacy depends on information, on understanding. We have to hear each other before we can help each other.

Now, Stoneham faces crises that challenge our very ability to understand.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused more deaths in the U.S. than any tragedy in decades, leading to unprecedented disruption and desperation. The sadness of those deaths, particularly the ones that could have been prevented, is crushing. If there is any consolation to be found in them, it might be that their root cause – a virus – is at least impersonal, like an earthquake.

The violent murder of an unarmed black man by a white police officer in Minnesota was anything but impersonal. George Floyd's death was an act of almost indescribable hate. And it was only the latest. These incidents have left many Stoneham residents, especially those of color, in profound grief and pain. Many more are seeing – perhaps for the first time – the deep, longstanding racial injustices and institutional rot undermining our communities and jeopardizing the lives of people of color.

The notion that people of color should have to fear being murdered by the authorities sworn to protect them is unspeakable.

And yet speaking about it is exactly what we – the Commission, the Town, its residents, *everyone* – must do. It is the *very minimum* of what we must do. Talking about the hurt is the only way to even begin to heal it. People of color in pain need to be heard. And white people need to hear them, no matter that being white means never truly understanding the scars only a person of color can bear. The point is not to understand the scars. The point is to understand the white privilege that made them.

We on the Commission will do our best to hear every resident who needs to be heard, and to make sure the Town hears you. If you want help learning to hear others, we will do our best to point you to resources that can educate you. We are *your* Human Rights Commission, and we invite all residents' input going forward as we work to foster the dialogue Stoneham needs. We can be reached at hrc@stoneham-ma.gov.

On behalf of the Stoneham Human Rights Commission,
Kevin C. Merritt, Chair.