

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

2021 ANNUAL REPORT

TOWN OF MANSFIELD, CONNECTICUT
DECEMBER 10, 2021



Your place to grow

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2021 COMMISSION MEMBERS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The town of Mansfield Human Rights Commission was established by the town council in January, 2020. The commission consists of 7 regular members and 2 alternates. The council required that the commission include “members of protected classes” in its membership. This document is a report of its activities in its first year.

- In response to a request by a middle school student, the HRC recommended to the council that celebrations of Columbus Day be replaced with Indigenous People’s day in October.
- June was declared Pride month for LBGTQI persons. An educational resource page on this subject was established on the town website.
- The HRC staffed a table at the annual Celebrate Mansfield festival in the summer.
- The HRC supported efforts to maintain maternity services at Windham hospital in response to the efforts of the Hartford Hospital to close the unit. This unit primarily serves families of eastern Connecticut many of whom do not own personal transportation. On-going efforts to keep the unit open are continuing, led by the Windham/Willimantic chapter of the NAACP.
- The commission advised the town council on efforts to support resettlement of Afghan refugees in northeastern Connecticut.
- The HRC partnered with conversations on racism (COR) Mansfield and the Windham/Willimantic chapter of the NAACP to create a mural commemorating Juneteenth and the relationship between The Reverend Martin Luther King and our state. The mural was unveiled in a ceremony that involved music, dancing and speeches from community members and town officials. It was installed on the wall of the community center facing route 195 and is painted on panels so that it is portable. The artist was also present.
- The HRC created and distributed a survey on human rights issues to the town. It was available on paper and electronically. 231 people responded.
 - **Quantitative findings** : 63.4% of respondents reported no experience of discrimination in Mansfield; 36.5% reported some experience with discrimination. The predominant locations were in school and at work. (E.O.Smith students did not receive the survey so the implied location of issues was the middle school.)
 - **Issues**: 16% needed access to affordable housing; 20% needed access to public transportation;15.6% reported no access to work;20% reported no access to mental health services. Overall, 42% of second language speakers and 29% of people with disabilities reported lack of access to mental health services.
 - **Qualitative findings**: 18 respondents mentioned lack of affordable housing; in several forms respondents mentioned lack of diversity and

inclusivity in the community, tokenism, discrimination and a sense of elitism. This attitude was specifically mentioned with regard to the Latinx community; several respondents also mentioned lack of enforcement of ADA regulations in public buildings and bullying in the middle school.

BACKGROUND

The Mansfield Human Rights Commission (HRC) was established by the Mansfield Town Council in January, 2020. The charge of the HRC was adopted in 2020, and stipulates that the HRC will consist of seven (7) community members serving as regular members and two (2) community members serving as alternates. The Mansfield Town Council requested volunteers and interviewed potential HRC members. The current commissioners were chosen and will serve for a two-year term. The Mansfield Town Council aimed to reflect the community and to have protected class representation. The first HRC meeting took place in August, 2020.

The mission of the Mansfield HRC, as adopted, is to promote implementation of universal human rights values and principles in all Town of Mansfield programs and throughout the wider Northeastern Connecticut community. To accomplish this mission, the HRC encourages and initiates programs and services within Mansfield and the wider Northeast CT community, placing priority upon protecting, respecting, and fulfilling the full range of universal human rights, as enumerated in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In addressing the mission HRC actions include:

- Provide human rights education
- Be proactive in human rights efforts
- Make recommendations for how to address human rights violations
- Ensure active public participation
- Be transparent and open
- Be publicly accountable for human rights progress

INITIATIVES

Following the formation of the HRC and the acceptance of the mission, the HRC began taking action within Mansfield and the neighboring areas. One of the early actions was a response to Windham Hospital's closing of their Labor & Delivery/Maternity services. Windham Hospital serves an underrepresented community and the services are vitally important to the community. HRC members acknowledge that health care is a human right, and wrote a letter to Hartford Hospital, the owners of Windham Hospital, to encourage the re-opening of this vital health care service. The HRC's letter was unanimously supported by the Town Council, and the letter was sent to Hartford Hospital. Members of the HRC continue to support the initiative to re-open maternity services at Windham Hospital. On November 10th, Hartford Healthcare formally requested permanent closure of the maternity unit at Windham Hospital at a CT Office of Health Strategy hearing. A member of the HRC testified at this hearing, supporting the reopening of services.

After receiving a powerful letter from a middle school-aged Mansfield resident regarding Columbus Day, the HRC opened discussion regarding the re-naming of this holiday. The HRC unanimously supported the renaming of Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples Day, and sent the recommendation to the Town Council, who voted in favor. A town proclamation was issued on January 25, 2021. In addition to renaming the holiday, several high school-aged student interns, who assist the HRC, helped develop a web page and educational information about the holiday. This educational resource continues to be developed and can be found at <https://mansfieldct.gov/2256/Indigenous-Peoples-Day>.

Continuing to recognize areas for growth in Mansfield, the HRC supported an initiative to declare June as LGBTQIA+ Pride Month. The Mansfield Town Council approved the recommendation and, on June 7th, Mayor Antonia Moran and Town Manager Ryan Aylesworth read the proclamation, recognizing June as LGBTQIA+ Pride Month. The Progress Pride flag was raised and will be flown at Town Hall each June. An educational web page has been developed to educate the public about LGBTQIA+ issues. The website offers a brief history of the Progress Pride flag and it also provides a list of resources for those wanting to explore more about Pride. The website can be found at <https://mansfieldct.gov/pride>.

In an effort to be more visible to our community, the HRC staffed a table at the Celebrate Mansfield Festival. This provided an opportunity for the public to become more aware of our work and for HRC members to listen to community members. We intend to continue to be public and transparent with our work.

The HRC joined this year with community partners Conversations on Racism-Mansfield, and the Windham/Willimantic Chapter of the NAACP, to spearhead the

creation of a mural dedicated to the life and legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Part of RiseUP for the Arts' MLK39 Racial Equity Mural Tour, the Mansfield mural was announced as part of Juneteeth (see below) and unveiled at a community-celebration on November 13, 2021. The mural was designed and executed by Putnam-based artist Emida Roller, with community input and participation from a wide range of stakeholders, including the Arts Advisory Council, Mansfield Public Schools and Region 19, the University of Connecticut, Downtown Partnership, Mansfield Libraries, and the Mansfield Community Center. The mural is located on the Community Center and is designed to symbolize Mansfield's commitment to human rights and justice by featuring a depiction of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. leading a march, local children at study and play, native flora and fauna, and a series of quotes and words over a quilt motif. The mural was supported by generous contributions from the Town, Mansfield Public Schools, Region 19, and over 60 members of the community.

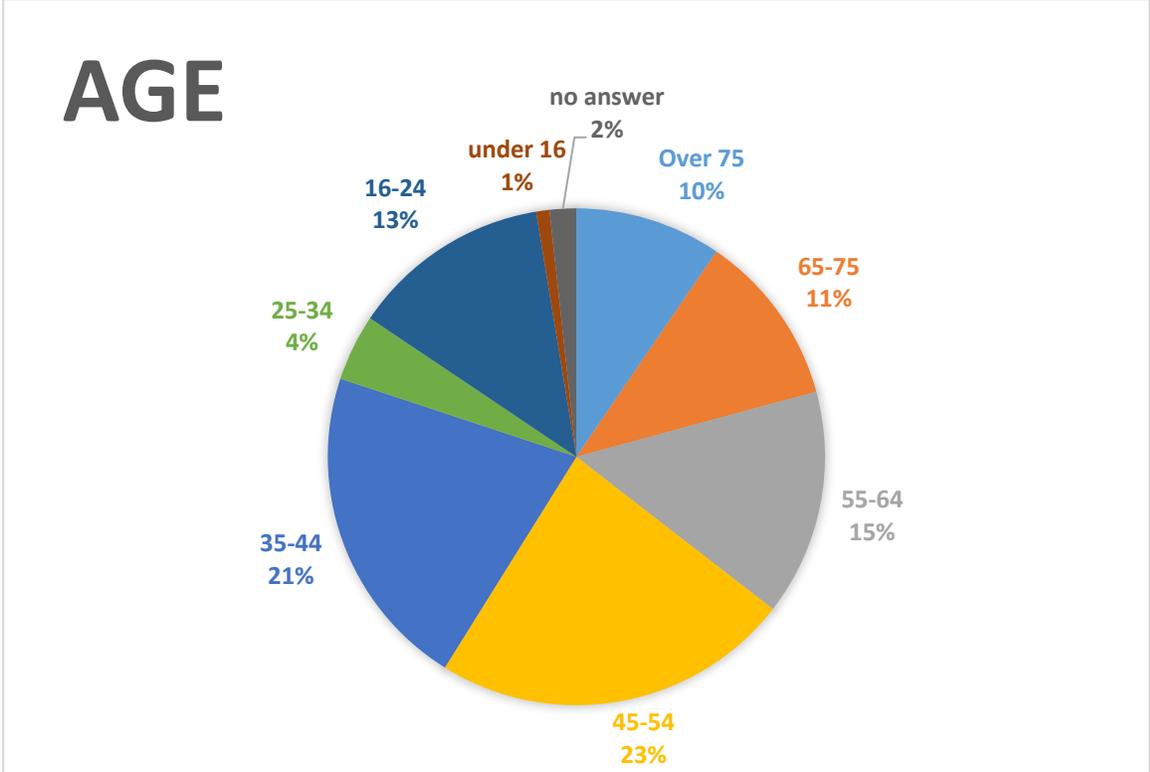
The Mural project was announced as part of the town's commemoration of Juneteenth Independence Day. The HRC was charged by the Town Council with reviewing recognition of Juneteenth and recommended the Council adopt a resolution recognizing Juneteenth and collaborate with community members on commemorative activities. The HRC worked with the Town on a public ceremony, held on June 19, 2021, where the proclamation was read and members of the community spoke to the importance of Juneteenth, the African American Freedom Movement, and the ongoing work of advancing justice and equity in our community.

In September, 2021, members of the Town Council requested the advice of the HRC with respect to the emerging Afghan Refugee Crisis. The HRC provided a series of recommendations to the Council on September 21, inclusive of a range of actions intended to make Mansfield a more welcoming community for all refugees, asylum seekers, and other newcomers. The Town has begun implementing several of these recommendations, and the Council adopted an HRC-drafted resolution proclaiming support for resettlement of Afghan refugees in Mansfield.

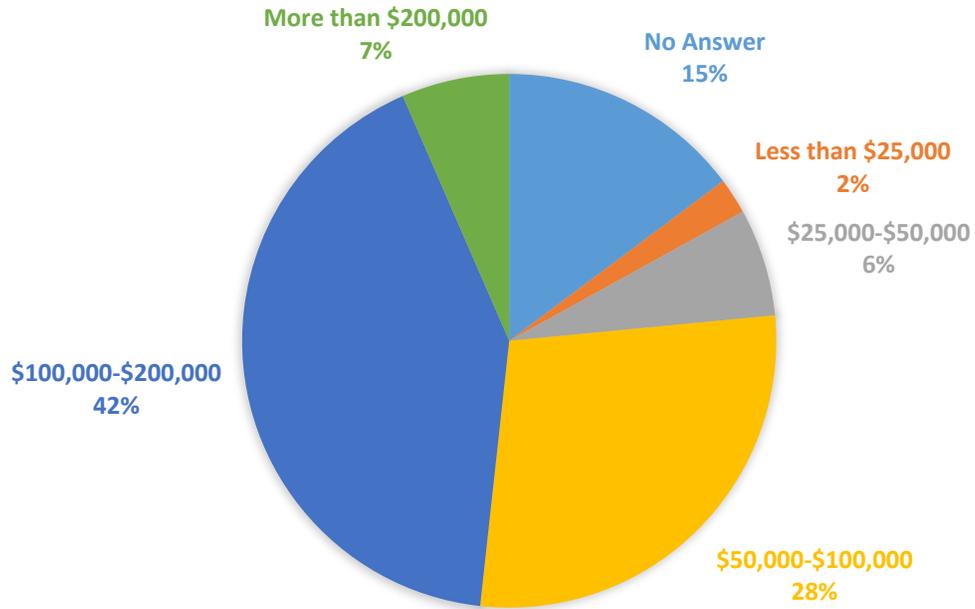
SURVEY

While the issues described above were identified and addressed as the HRC became aware of the need, the main work of the HRC has been aimed at understanding the unique human rights needs of our Mansfield community. As such, the HRC worked to develop a survey to assess the status of human rights in Mansfield, as perceived by our residents. The survey was disseminated in May and June of 2021. The HRC considers the results from the survey a “snapshot” of human rights perspectives in Mansfield. Many issues were identified, including limitations of the survey itself. Although the survey was not comprehensive, it serves as a starting point, from which future HRC work will begin. Initial findings, strengths, and limitations of the survey will be discussed below.

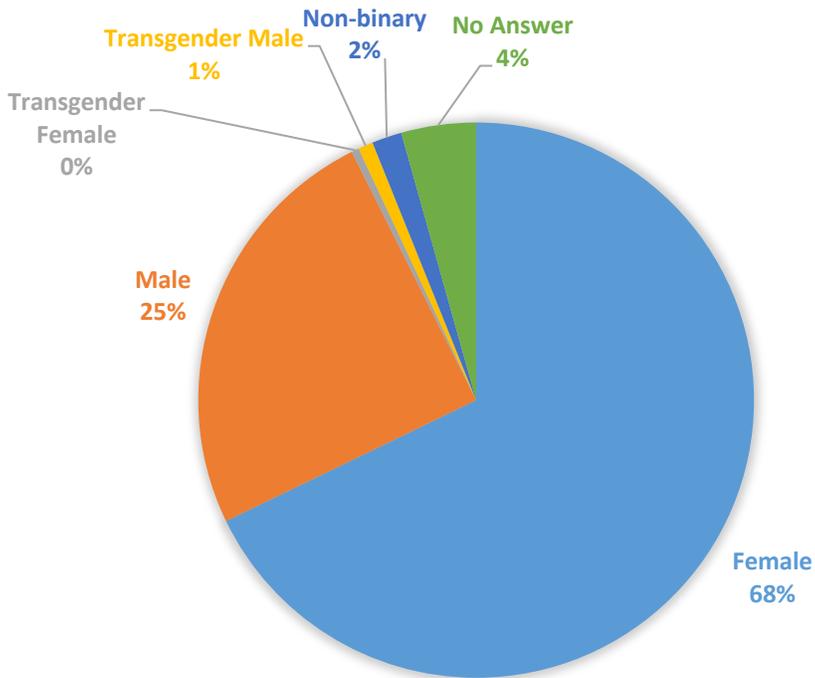
Demographics: The survey was completed by 231 respondents, ranging in ages of under 16 years old to over 75 years old. 72% of the respondents were white/non-Latinx/non-Jewish (n=166). The majority of respondents were female (68%), straight (76%), English-speaking (82%), and not disabled (85%). Household income for respondents was more than \$100,000 for 57% of respondents, but the number of household members was not recorded. Almost half of respondents (47%) reported that they work full-time and 48% reported having a Masters Degree or above.



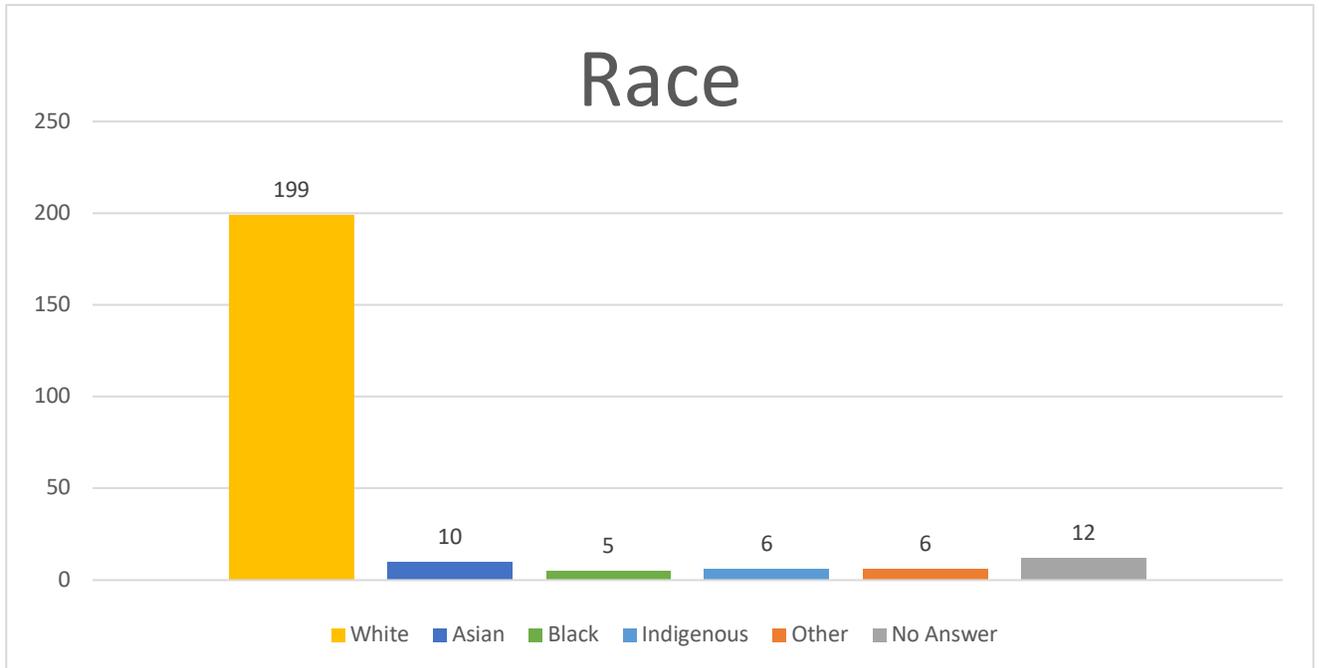
HOUSEHOLD INCOME



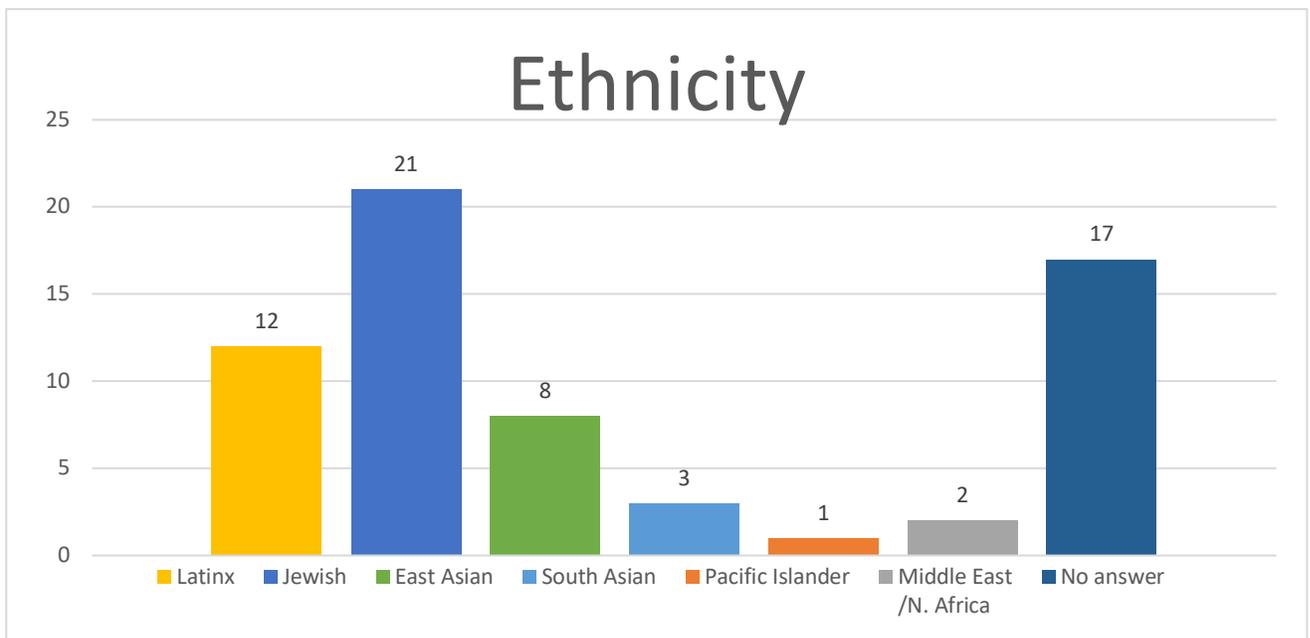
SEX



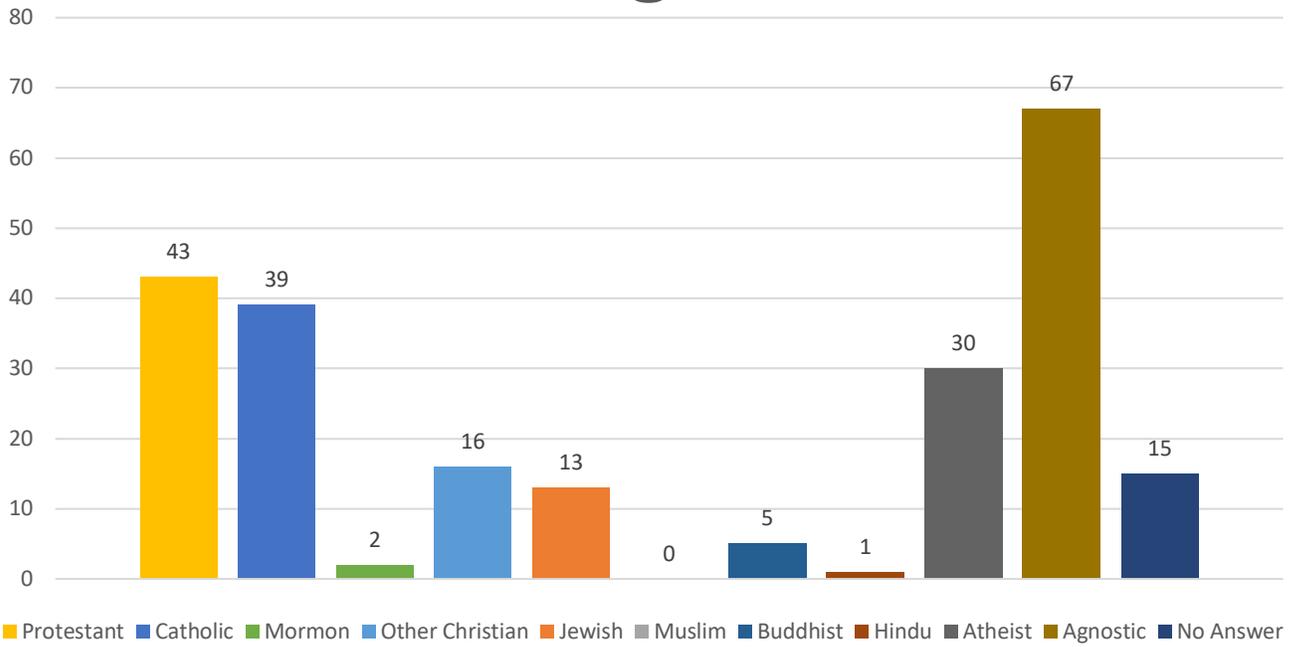
NOTE: 1 participant indicated that they are transgender female. That is less than 1% of the sample, so it is showing as 0%.



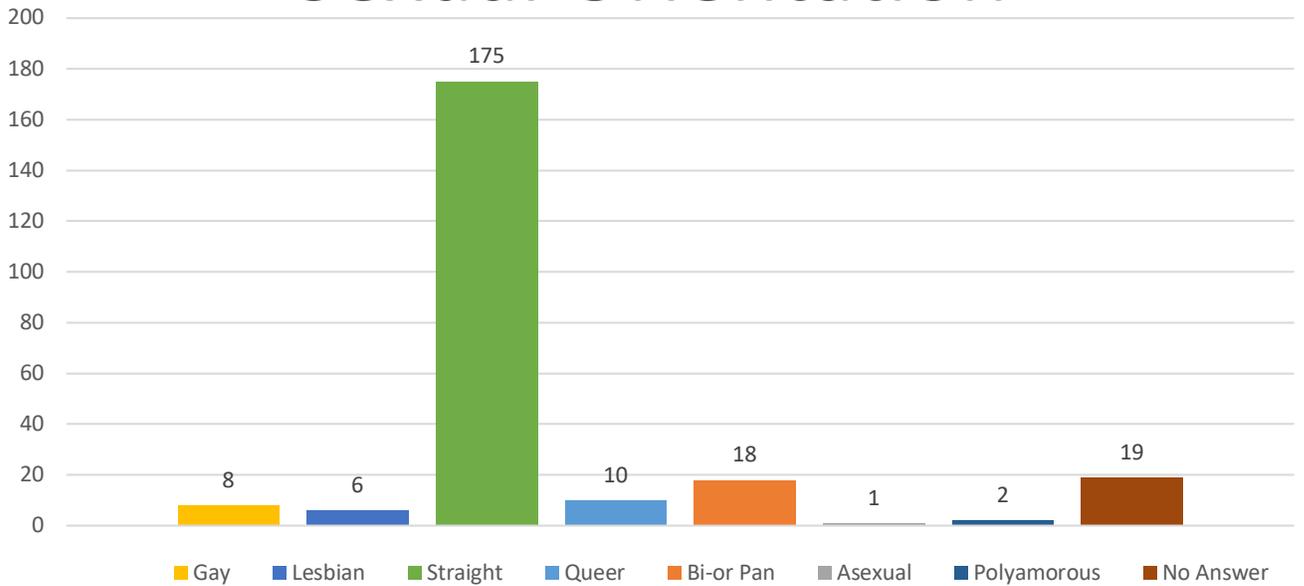
Note for Race, Ethnicity, Religion, & Sexual Orientation: Some participants chose more than one option to describe themselves.



Religion



Sexual Orientation



Outcomes of interest: The majority of survey respondents (63.41%) reported that they have never experienced discrimination within Mansfield. While that number may seem reassuring, that also indicates that 36.59% of respondents experienced discrimination while in Mansfield. Of those who have experienced discrimination, 33% report that the discrimination was within the schools (Mansfield Public Schools or E.O. Smith High School). For respondents who experienced discrimination, 20% reported that the discrimination was experienced within the workplace.

Experienced Discrimination	Percent	Number
Often	2%	5
Sometimes	15%	31
Rarely	19%	39
Never	63%	130

When examining who was more likely to experience discrimination, our survey results indicated that 65% of respondents who identify as differently-abled reported experiencing some level of discrimination. Race was also indicated as a possible factor in experiencing discrimination, as White respondents were more likely to report “never” experiencing discrimination compared to non-White respondents. However, the small number of survey respondents make this finding conditional and require further exploration.

Some respondents reported *witnessing* discrimination. While 40.49% of respondents reported never witnessing discrimination in Mansfield, 59.31% of respondents have witnessed some form of discrimination. Of those who have witnessed discrimination in Mansfield, 33% witnessed the discrimination in a school (Mansfield Public Schools or E.O. Smith High School). Respondents also reported witnessing discrimination in a business (25%), on the streets (20%), and in the workplace (15%).

Witnessed Discrimination	Percent	Number
Often	4%	8
Sometimes	28%	57
Rarely	27%	56
Never	41%	83

When asked if they have access to housing and transportation in Mansfield, 16.09% of respondents indicated that they disagree or strongly disagree with the statement that they have access to housing, indicating that these people do not have access to housing. Although the sample size is small, there seems to be a difference in housing based on education level, with 7% of respondents with a Masters degree or higher reporting that they do not have access to housing and 23% of people with less than a Masters degree reporting lack of access to housing. More than 20% of respondents indicated that they disagree or strongly disagree with the statement that they have access to transportation, indicating that more than 1/5 of our respondents do not have access to transportation. Interestingly, lack of transportation was reported equally across all demographics, indicating that there is no relationship between demographic identification and access to transportation.

Although 84.42% of survey respondents indicated that they have access to work opportunities, 15.58% do not have access to work opportunities. The respondents who do not have access to work opportunities were spread among all education levels. With the small sample size, it is worth noting that some respondents do not have access to work opportunities, but we are unable to determine a significant relationship between education level and work opportunities.

Education Level	Percent who Disagreed	Number who Disagreed
Masters or Above	14%	14
Bachelors	20%	9
Associates	33%	3
High School	8%	3

An area of concern that was identified in the survey is access to mental health care. While just over 90% of respondents reported having access to general health care, only 81% reported access to mental health care. This means that almost 20% (or 1/5) of our respondents indicated that they do not have access to mental health care. 42% of respondents who speak a language other than English in the home reported lack of access to mental health care, compared to only 14% of respondents who speak English in the home. 29% of respondents who identified as differently-abled reported lack of access to mental health care, compared to only 17% of those who did not indicate being differently-abled. These findings suggest that language and physical ability may be a barrier for access to mental health care in Mansfield.

Have Access to Mental Health Services	Percent	Number
Strongly Agree	30%	60
Agree	51%	104
Disagree	14%	29
Strongly Disagree	4%	9

Qualitative findings: The HRC's survey included several open-ended questions, which produced meaningful insight into the perceptions of Mansfield residents. The concerns about human rights in Mansfield addressed by these respondents are varied, broad, and multitudinous. The most frequently invoked concern, however, involved the lack of affordable housing, which was cited in 18 responses. More specifically invoked was a lack of housing opportunities "for low-income people in town" (Response 7), which one respondent attributed to taxes being "inequitable for lower income persons [sic]" (Response 47). Two respondents attributed this to investors displacing income-strapped tenants, with one citing a specific incident in which "six duplexes in one neighborhood [being] purchased by one person" ensured that "the original renters could no longer live there" (Response 120). UConn's hegemony in the rental market was also cited as a potential cause, with one response asserting that "the rent that UConn students will pay" determines the price of rental property in UConn's vicinity (Response 121). These responses indicate that Mansfield residents perceive a lack of affordable housing as an issue of serious concern and that various institutional practices are contributing to it.

Another frequently-cited human rights concern (invoked in 11 responses) involves Mansfield's lack of diversity and expressions of inclusivity, especially as this pertains to race. Concerns about diversity and inclusion in other respects—including ethnicity, regional origin, gender, sexual orientation, income level, etc.—were also invoked. One particular response expressed concern about "the level of tokenism, discrimination..., and intolerance... of anyone that is not White and not a native New Englander" (Response 45) in Mansfield. Another response deemed the town "elitist" and "unwelcoming of the Latino community beyond the academia sphere" (Response 102). Yet another respondent expressed concerns about Mansfield's lack of "inclusion of families from diverse races and ethnic backgrounds, as well as lower-income backgrounds" (Response 223). Another respondent expressed a desire to increase the town's diversity "in [its] year-round population and in [its] school system" (Response 121). Some respondents suggested solutions to this dilemma, including the holding of "more inclusive events that celebrate diversity" and hanging "Pride and BLM flags... at

townhall [sic]" (Response 104). In sum, many Mansfield residents perceive making an effort to increase the town's diversity and inclusiveness as a necessity and a priority.

Respondents also frequently expressed concerns about Mansfield's lack of services for individuals with disabilities or other chronic health complications, which was invoked in 9 responses. Although these responses predominantly addressed this dilemma in schools (especially Mansfield Public Schools and E. O. Smith) and as it pertains to mental health and disability services, incidents at various locations are invoked, indicating that this issue encompasses the entire town. One particular respondent expressed concern about Mansfield's "lack of enforcement... for ADA [sic] violations," citing "Price Chopper in Storrs" (Response 18) as an example. Another respondent specifically asserted that E. O. Smith High School and Mansfield Middle School can improve their "handling [of] bullying and student harassment" (Response 66). One respondent specifically addressed E. O. Smith's handling of a "neurodivergent child," describing an incident in which "Admin [at E. O. Smith] was hostile [towards the child] and actively worked to have the child removed from the school" (Response 70). Another respondent was concerned that mental health services are not sufficiently affordable in Mansfield (Response 163), resulting in a restriction of their availability to lower- income individuals and households for whom they may be necessary. In short, many Mansfield residents are of the conviction that the town must become more accommodating for individuals with disabilities and health complications, and that this improvement is most urgent in its schools.

The qualitative results do yield one notable positive result, however: the quantity of respondents who indicated that they lacked any human rights concerns (79, excluding those who failed to respond to the question that is pertinent to this discussion in the survey) vastly exceeds the quantity of respondents who expressed any specific human rights concern (maximum of 18). This indicates that the respondents are generally of the conviction that human rights are adequately addressed and ensured in Mansfield. This is perhaps a testament to Mansfield's consistent and concerted efforts to establish itself as a welcoming and inclusive community for all of its residents, as noted above. This does not, however, indicate that Mansfield's progress towards ensuring the human rights of every resident has been completed, as several residents continue to express concerns about human rights issues that the town is failing to ensure and many other residents evidently lack such essential human rights as adequate housing and transportation, mental health services, and work opportunities.

Strengths: The HRC survey indicated a number of strengths from respondents. The first positive finding is that 94.63% of respondents agree or strongly agree that they are able to access town services. This likely speaks to the quality of our town services and town staff as well as to the centrally located town services. Additionally, 96.10% of respondents reported that they agree or strongly agree that they have access to food. While we did not ask for details related to this item, it is likely that this number is the result of strong nutrition programs within the Mansfield Public Schools, strong food

assistance resources, and nutrition resources for Mansfield Seniors. One indicator of a happy & healthy population is access to recreation. Our survey respondents indicated that more than 90% agree or strongly agree that they have access to recreation opportunities. Again, the HRC did not request details related to this item, but we hypothesize that the high level of access to recreational opportunities is due to the Mansfield Community Center, the Community School of the Arts, the Mansfield Senior Center, Mansfield Advocates for Children, and other recreation-focused departments/agencies.

Study Limitations: The HRC anticipated using this survey as a snapshot of the perceptions of human rights in Mansfield and did not anticipate this initial survey to be comprehensive or to capture the full spectrum of human rights perceptions in our town. However, it is important that we mention some limitations in the implementation of the survey, as they will guide our future surveys and assessments. First and foremost, we did not have responses from the majority of Mansfield residents, with only 231 people responding. Although we advertised the survey on the town website, the HRC website, via social media, and at Mansfield Public Schools (via take-home notices), there are many people who did not have access to the survey or did not hear about the survey. While Mansfield Public Schools (the 3 elementary schools and Mansfield Middle School) was willing to disseminate information about the survey, the administration at E. O. Smith was not willing to disseminate information pertaining to the survey. Respondents who are also E.O. Smith students heard about the survey from non-school-related sources. This limited the number of young adult respondents. Future surveys will need to be more widely accessible to our full population.

While the population of Mansfield is not as diverse as some other cities/towns in CT, we do need to strive to make sure that all segments of our Mansfield population have access to the next survey, especially those who report being a member of an historically underrepresented population. Additionally, the small number of respondents for this first, snap-shot survey (231) makes it difficult to draw conclusions based on the data. Greater care must be taken to make sure that future surveys are available and accessible to more people.

The HRC obtained services from a Mansfield resident who has statistics expertise. She was able to assist with interpretation of results. She also helped us understand that future survey items should be structured differently so that the information obtained will be more meaningful. An example of this is the fact that we've identified that 33% of respondents reported experiencing discrimination within Mansfield schools (Mansfield Public Schools or E. O. Smith High School). However, because the question did not specify the specific school, it is unknown which school(s) have the most reported discrimination. Some respondents indicated that they have children in 2 schools and also that they have experienced or witnessed discrimination within the schools, but it is not clear which school (or both schools) were involved.

CONCLUSION

The first year of the human rights commission involved a great deal of discussion within the group in an effort to determine how to implement the mission as created by the town council. As the year progressed, the commission identified specific concerns that were not immediately obvious or emerged during that time. The survey of human rights concerns was a significant step toward understanding the needs and issues of town residents. The relatively low response rate indicated that a follow-up survey should be done and additional efforts to distribute and publicize it should be made. There is a “glitch” in the survey related to the school district. The town of Ashford sends its students to E.O. Smith but their households did not receive this survey. Ashford residents with high school students should probably be included in the second round.

Mansfield residents are generally satisfied with the level of attention to human rights in this town. However, the demographics indicate that this town is overwhelmingly white, able bodied and employed. The HRC should pay attention to those whose experiences have been marginalized. Many of those town residents expressed their concerns. Every effort should be made to follow up on their comments. There is still a great deal of information to be evoked and many specific situations which need further understanding and action.