

CITY OF BELLEVUE
HUMAN SERVICES COMMISSION
MEETING MINUTES

March 3, 2025
6:00 p.m.

Bellevue City Hall
Room 1E-113

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT: Chair Singh, Commissioners Gonzalez, Imfura, Hays, Phan

COMMISSIONERS REMOTE: None

COMMISSIONERS ABSENT: Commissioners Rashid, Vice Chair White

STAFF PRESENT: Christy Stangland, Toni Esparza, Donna Adair, Ruth Blaw, Saada Hilts, Gysel Galaviz, Department of Parks & Community Services

COUNCIL LIAISON: Mayor Robinson

POLICE LIAISON: Major Ellen Inman

GUEST SPEAKERS: Melanie Cates, Nicole Barker, Emani Donaldson, Open Doors for Multicultural Families; Alison Morton, Kindering; Adina Rosenberg, Leonardo Salas Ramo, Bellevue School District

RECORDING SECRETARY: Gerry Lindsay

1. CALL TO ORDER and ROLL CALL

The meeting was called to order at 6:08 p.m. by Chair Singh who presided.

At the roll of the call, all Commissioners were present with the exception of Commissioner Gonzalez, who arrived at 6:08 p.m., and Commissioners Rashid and White.

2. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

A. February 3, 2025

A motion to approve the minutes was made by Commissioner Imfura. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Phan and the motion carried unanimously.

3. ORAL AND WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS

Chair Singh took a moment to note that under Ordinance 6752, the topics about which the public may speak during a meeting are limited to subject matters related to the city of Bellevue government and within the powers and duties of the Human Services Commission. Additional information about the new rules of decorum governing conduct of the public during meetings can be found in Ordinance 6752.

Alex Tsimerman began with a Nazi salute and called the Commissioners chief banditas and killers, Democrat mafia. Inflammatory remarks were made about Mayor Robinson for having issued him an unjust trespass order for sixty days. The mayor interrupted whenever he spoke in support of Israel. The Mayor was accused of acting unlawfully. Citing legal precedents from the Ninth Circuit, it was argued that the citation had been issued without violating any laws. Speaking alone should not result in a trespass. Such legal actions against himself and President Trump are criminal and unethical.

4. COMMUNICATION FROM CITY COUNCIL, COMMUNITY COUNCIL, BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS – None

5. STAFF AND COMMISSIONER REPORTS

Commissioner Phan shared having attended the Eastside Pathways Wisdom Series, and having led a session featuring a film screening of Black Boys. The event included a discussion facilitated by Faraji Bhakti, co-executive director of Yoga Behind Bars. The conversation focused on how society views Black boys and men and emphasized the importance of supporting their aspirations rather than discouraging them with harsh realities. The next session in the series is scheduled for April.

Commissioner Hayes mentioned having been unable to attend any events due to scheduling conflicts.

Commissioner Imfura announced an upcoming move to Redmond, necessitating resigning from the Commission. Gratitude was expressed for having had the opportunity to learn from the community.

Commissioner Gonzalez briefly noted having registering for a Washington Office of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance webinar. More details will be shared in the future.

Chair Singh shared not having been able to attend any events due to midwinter break but said shared plans to attend an upcoming affordable housing event.

Human Services Manager Ruth Blaw said the city's Diversity Advantage team will provide an update for the Commission in April. The Commissioners were asked to choose between Monday, April 21, or Wednesday, April 16, for the update. The Commission expressed a preference for scheduling the meeting for April 16 jointly with the Parks Board. Staff agreed to coordinate with the Parks Board liaison to confirm the date.

Ruth Blaw asked the Commissioners for comments regarding the ongoing experiment in which the Commission meets once per month instead of two in conjunction with the Commissioners expected to attend a community educational activity each month. It was acknowledged that the experiment had faced challenges, particularly in finding activities that aligned with Commissioners' schedules. If the approach is to continue, more effort will be needed to ensure greater participation in community activities.

Commissioner Phan highlighted the need to schedule attendance at community meetings more than a week in advance. Chair Singh concurred.

A motion to continue the experimental approach through July was made by Commissioner Phan. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Gonzalez and the motion carried unanimously.

Senior Administrative Assistant Gysel Galaviz said upcoming opportunities for the Commissioners include the Bellevue Better Cities Film Festival on March 6 at City Hall, which is part of the Affordable Housing Strategy; and the ARCH Investment Celebration on April 10. More information will be sent out.

6. NEW BUSINESS

A. Panel Conversation: Youth Disabilities and Service Gaps

Department of Parks and Community Services assistant director Toni Esparza introduced a quote from an equity expert, who stated that it is not humanly possible to be free of bias. It was emphasized that everyone carries biases, often without realizing it, and that it is necessary to relearn perceptions about individuals with disabilities.

Toni Esparza pointed out that the city has adopted core values. The values are what the staff think about in doing their planning work. The values are adopted throughout the entire organization of the city. Excellence in public service is one of the values that comes into play in serving the community. Another core value is diversity, equity, and inclusion. Equity is about everyone getting what they need. Inclusion involves making sure everyone can come and join in.

The update to be provided to the Commission by the city's Diversity Advantage Team is going to focus on the update of the Diversity Advantage Plan. The current plan was adopted in 2014 and it guides actions in advancing the principles of equity, access, inclusion, opportunity, and cultural competence. The plan informs the city's work. There are actions in the plan that are focused around disability.

The Human Services Needs Update is revised every two years. The update includes a lot of data about the needs in the community. The 2023-2024 Needs Update pointed out that of the respondents with a disability, only 38 percent were able to find services for those disabilities within their community; only 32 percent were able to receive the services in a reasonable amount of time; there is a need to consider intersections between disability and other marginalized identities when designing and evaluating programs; and that there is a need to amplify service needs for children and youth with disabilities, particularly when facing language and cultural barriers. There is still a lot of trauma existing for individuals with disabilities coming out of the pandemic.

Toni Esparza said there is no single right or wrong definition of disability and stressed not attempting to define disability for the world but rather to provide several definitions for consideration so that everyone in the conversation can work from a shared understanding.

The first definition presented came from the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a law frequently referenced when discussing accessibility and disability rights. According to the ADA, a disability is defined as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. From Washington State's Law Against Discrimination, which offers additional protections beyond federal law, disability is defined as the presence of a sensory, mental, or physical impairment. The definition continues by describing how such impairments could impact a person's life. The definitions are important and can be referred to in ensuring legal protections for people with disabilities. However, the definitions contain terms that may not be comfortable for everyone. Terms like "substantial limitation," or "impairment" do not always feel affirming. The terms frame disability in a way that suggest a deficiency rather than recognizing the strengths and contributions of people with disabilities. Persons with a disability bring valuable perspectives and experiences to the table that enrich society as a whole.

When adopting the city's Human Services Strategic Plan, a more nuanced definition of disability was included, one that frames disability as a condition that arises when physical, sensory, cognitive, or psychological differences interact with societal barriers. Under that perspective, challenges faced by people with disabilities are less about the disability itself and more about the way society creates obstacles. The definition shifts the focus from individual impairment to systemic barriers, and reinforces the idea that inclusive design and equitable policies can significantly improve accessibility and quality of life.

Ableism is a word used to describe seeing disability an error, a wrong way to live, or a deviation from what was considered normal. It is a shift away from the belief that not having a disability is the norm, and the view that people with disabilities have to somehow strive to fit in, holding people with disabilities separate and apart. Ableism is deeply embedded in societal structures, shaping attitudes, biases, and policies, even in ways people might not consciously recognize. It perpetuates the idea that people with disabilities need to strive to fit into a world that was not designed for them, rather than adjusting the world to be inclusive for all.

The Commissioners were asked to reflect on whether they focus on what individuals with disabilities can do or what they cannot do; whether they view people with disabilities as a group rather than as individuals given the historical exclusion of individuals with disabilities which reinforces the idea that limitations are not inherent to disability but rather created by societal structures; and whether they associate mental illness with violence or danger, and if so where they obtained such perceptions. It was noted that the majority of individuals with mental illness are no more likely to be violent than anyone else. Only three to five percent of violent acts can be attributed to individuals with mental illness, while people with severe mental illness are ten times more likely to be victims of violence. The Commissioners were also asked if they believe the lives of individuals with disabilities differ from those without disabilities, pointing out that all individuals, regardless of ability, have the same needs, wants and aspirations.

Toni Esparza transitioned to the impact of the words people use. The Commissioners were asked if they use terms such as "normal," "able-bodied," "wheelchair-bound," "impaired," "damaged," "special needs," and "limited" in describing persons with disabilities. From a city perspective, the goal is to avoid language that implies there is something wrong or abnormal about having a

disability. The terminology used should recognize that diversity can be a strength in bringing something to the table.

The Commissioners were also asked if they view individuals with disabilities as too costly to hire or believe that they receive unfair advantages in the workplace. It was pointed out that all workers require accommodations. Remote meetings, hearing protection in noisy workplaces, and ergonomic workspaces are all forms of accommodations that benefit employees, yet society often frames differently accommodations for individuals with disabilities.

Disability justice is the idea that disability is a flaw and instead recognizes it as a valuable form of diversity. Societal systems need to change in order to create better environments for individuals with disabilities. Furthermore, it is crucial to allow individuals with disabilities to lead those changes rather than imposing solutions on their behalf. The term also recognizes that a person can have a disability and still have other identities that can compound challenges due to systemic barriers.

Toni Esparza called attention to a booklet containing resources compiled by the Disabilities and Allyship Resource Team. It was noted that the booklet offers guidance on respectful and equitable interactions. Examples in the booklet included asking before assisting a person who is visually impaired, rather than assuming they need help, and ensuring that communication is accessible by keeping one's face visible when speaking with someone who is deaf or hard of hearing. Everyone processes information differently. Some retain information through hearing, while others needed to see it in writing. Information should be presented in multiple formats to improve accessibility. In virtual settings, inclusive practices such as providing captions without requiring individuals to request them is recommended.

There are physical, verbal and digital interactions barriers, and in order to fully engage and value residents and colleagues with disabilities, it is necessary to rethink behaviors, language, and engagement methods.

Human Services Planner Saada Hilts invited the panelists to introduce themselves and to provide a brief overview of their agencies.

Allison Morton, Chief Advancement Officer of Kinderling, an organization that has been supporting children with disabilities and their families since 1962, said Kinderling provides approximately twenty different services, including early education and family support, in part with funding from the city of Bellevue. It was emphasized that early intervention has a lasting positive impact on children.

Leonardo Salas Ramos, an advocate for Open Doors, remarked on having attended the Bellevue transition program and on being featured on the city's website.

Adina Rosenberg, a teacher in the Bellevue School District, noted having been a teacher in the district for the past nine years at Interlake High School, Newport High School, and at the Evergreen Transition Program. The panelist also shared having worked as a curriculum developer for the State of Washington on disability history; having taught at the University of

Washington on disability justice in schools; having conducted research on disability identity development; and having collaborated with Leonardo Salas Ramos as an advocate for local agencies.

Imani Donaldson, Advocacy and Civic Engagement Manager at Open Doors, explained that the agency provides a cultural brokerage model to support families and individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, particularly those from communities of color, immigrant, and refugee backgrounds. The organization employs case managers who speak the languages and understand the cultural backgrounds of the people they serve. Open Doors also offers youth programming, early learning programs, self-advocacy leadership training, and family leadership training.

Melanie Cates, program manager for multicultural families for Open Doors, spoke about being involved in youth and adult services where the organization provides a wide variety of engagement programs serving individuals from infancy through adulthood. The programs include social-emotional learning, early learning playgroups, and parent training for diverse communities. A transition-focused initiative called the Lead Collective Group facilitates self-advocate leaders in meeting monthly to discuss leadership, empowerment, accessibility, and diversity. The participants explore disability pride and disability justice through shared experiences. Open Doors provides technical assistance by offering training and education for self-advocates, parents, and disability professionals. The efforts aim to improve understanding of the multicultural experience of transitioning from school to adult services.

Nicole Barker, deputy director at Open Doors, shared the history of Open Doors, explaining that it is a BIPOC-led organization that began in the home of its founder, Ginger Kwan. Over time, it has grown significantly while maintaining a commitment to bridging different cultures within various systems. The organization focuses on advocacy and disrupting inequitable spaces to foster change and growth through the collaborative work of the case managers, engagement specialists, and advocacy teams.

Saada Hilts asked the panelists to weigh in on common misconceptions and overlooked challenges related to accessibility and support services for youth with disabilities in Bellevue.

Adina Rosenberg said many people lack awareness about transition services, pointing out there is a drop-off of services after age 22, creating a significant gap for young people with disabilities. State law only recently changed the cut-off date from 21 to 22, but the stark drop-off in support remains a major issue. Young persons with disabilities are often underestimated, infantilized and ignored. It is a misconception that young people cannot learn about their own disabilities or understand complex theories. Young people need to be included and centered in conversations on what impacts them most, including programming, events, and community-building.

Leonardo Salas Ramos added that a disability does not define a person's identity. It is frustrating as a creative individual to be ignored due to having a disability. There are accessibility issues in Bellevue, including sidewalks and roads that are often not designed for people with disabilities. There is also a lack of adequate tools and resources available to individuals with disabilities.

Alison Morton pointed out the misconception that families of children with disabilities automatically know where to access services. Many families do not know that organizations like Kinderling exist, which creates a barrier to receiving early support. Another misconception involves the belief that private insurance fully covers disability-related services, when in reality many families rely on fundraising by organizations and city-funded programs to afford care.

Nicole Barker noted having observed as a former special educator and administrator that many teachers do not fully understand the transition process or the resources available to students after they leave the school system. The importance of ensuring that educators are equipped with the necessary knowledge to guide students and families was stressed.

The panelists were asked which innovative services and emerging technologies hold the potential to transform future opportunities and outcomes for youth with disabilities.

Leonardo Salas Ramos immediately responded by naming iPads as a crucial tool. The tool helps in reading messages and accessing information, which makes it an essential device for people with disabilities. A desire was expressed for increased access to such technology.

Allison Morton agreed, stating that Kinderling also uses iPads extensively. The organization provides assistive communication services to families, helping them to understand how technology can enhance their children's development. Platforms like Zoom and Teams have helped to revolutionize service delivery. During the pandemic, many people had not anticipated how integral virtual tools would become, but by 2025, they have become standard in providing care. Kinderling's commitment to individualized care was emphasized given that every child requires a different type of support. It was also pointed out that technology has made interpretation services more accessible, allowing families to receive support in their preferred languages. Additionally, video conferencing allows professionals to observe family environments, ensuring that services align with their daily routines and cultural norms.

Adina Rosenberg shared an example of an innovative grant-funded program recently introduced in Bellevue Schools. The program is offered through a partnership with an organization called Thread that focuses on fostering social connections for young people with disabilities. Social outcomes for young adults with disabilities are significantly lower than for their non-disabled peers, making friendship-building particularly challenging. Thread, originally designed as an HR tool, uses common interests to help individuals form meaningful connections.

Melanie Cates said the use of technology is exciting when it comes to transition planning. Artificial intelligence is an emerging tool within the disability field; it is being embraced as a way to support person-centered planning. AI can act as a thought partner, helping individuals explore their interests, hobbies, and goals. Many young adults struggle to articulate what they wanted in life simply because they lacked exposure to different possibilities. AI-assisted planning allows individuals to focus on the specific services they require rather than trying to navigate all available options, making it a valuable tool for optimizing benefits. Transportation access is also a significant challenge. Even in places considered among the most accessible in the nation, transportation services are inconsistent. Users have noted having to wait for more than three hours to get an accessible Uber, which highlights how limited transportation options restrict

the ability of individuals with disabilities to engage in their communities spontaneously. Metro is a good option, but there is a clear need to have partnerships with rideshare companies to improve accessible transportation on the Eastside.

Saada Hilts asked about the training agency staff and service providers receive in regard to working with youth with disabilities.

Leonardo Salas Ramos responded bluntly that staff do not receive enough training and often lack the knowledge needed to effectively support individuals with disabilities.

Adina Rosenberg added that many special education professionals are unfamiliar with universal design principles and disability justice. Paraeducators frequently enter the field without adequate preparation, despite the demanding nature of their roles. In many cases, the responsibility of training paraeducators falls to teachers and individuals with disabilities themselves.

Leonardo Salas Ramos confirmed that and shared that he often had been the one to explain his own needs and preferences.

Adina Rosenberg emphasized the need for strength-based training that focuses on growth rather than a deficit-based approach, which is still common in special education. It is surprising that disabilities are often treated as a separate world by educators, rather than as a natural part of human diversity.

Allison Morton said it may be unique to Kindering that many of the staff are clinical experts in supporting kids with disabilities. The field, however, is constantly evolving. Kindering has invested in continuous education, providing resources in written, digital, and in-person formats. The importance of learning from families, acknowledging that parents are often the strongest advocates for their children, was emphasized.

Leonardo Salas Ramos humorously pointed out that sometimes parents need to learn from professionals as well, and the panel agreed that collaboration between families and service providers is key to ensuring high-quality support.

Nicole Barker elaborated on the Open Doors approach to staff training, explaining that the organization emphasizes inclusion, equity and belonging through a cultural brokerage model. The organization ensures that its training incorporates perspectives from the communities they serve, and elevating voices from diverse backgrounds. Open Doors also prioritizes behavior support training, universal design principles, and decision-making that includes individuals with disabilities at every stage.

Melanie Cates said many professionals do not fully understand what cultural brokerage means in practice. King County is one of the most diverse counties in the nation, yet training on cultural brokerage remains scarce. If more professionals were to have access to that type of training, it would significantly enhance services in special education. Also highlighted was the fact that language access as a critical issue. Professionals need better awareness of the tools available to bridge communication gaps with diverse families.

Saada Hilts asked if there are any recent legislative changes or emerging trends or shifts that are having a significant impact on services provided to youth with disabilities, and how such developments influence approaches to care or service delivery.

Leonardo Salas Ramos described a major legislative effort in Washington State that allows students with intellectual and developmental disabilities to remain in school until age 22, rather than being forced to exit at 21, and shared having personally testified in support of the bill along with other self-advocates. It was a significant achievement in that it has helped to address the abrupt loss of services many young adults faced after leaving the education system.

Emani Donalson said every January Open Doors brings a group of self-advocates and family advocates to Olympia. A week is spent talking with legislators and testifying on disability-related bills that are in the House and Senate committees. The advocates emphasize the importance of advocacy in shaping policy and ensuring that individuals with disabilities have a voice in decision-making. Another key piece of legislation, HB-1200, focuses on allowing parents of minor children with disabilities to receive payment for their caregiving responsibilities. Previously, Washington State law had prohibited parents from being compensated for providing care, as it was considered part of their parental duties. However, many families struggled financially because their caregiving responsibilities made it difficult for parents to maintain employment. Without support, children were often placed in "stranger care," which was not always the best option. Leonardo Salas Ramos and his mother testified in favor of the bill, with the mother stepping forward to share personal experiences. Of the additional bills being tracked, one concerns an effort to eliminate isolation and reduce restraint in schools to the extent possible, a practice that has a disproportionate impact on Black and brown boys. It was acknowledged that there are difficulties involved in training educators on restraint and isolation, which emphasizes the need for a statewide policy. Given the large number of school districts in Washington State, achieving uniform regulations without opt-out options poses a challenge. Another major advocacy effort involves eliminating the 16 percent cap on special education. The advocates sought complete removal of the cap, arguing that it restricts necessary services. Despite a long road ahead in the legislative session and a challenging budget deficit, the organization remains committed to pushing for the changes. In addition to advocacy week, the organization conducts webinars, wake-up calls, and community alerts.

Allison Morton stressed that advocacy in Olympia remains a top annual priority for Kindering. Missing even one opportunity could have long-term consequences. About 85 percent of brain development occurs by the age of three, making early intervention services crucial. Kindering faces significant financial shortfalls despite receiving government contracts and medical insurance reimbursements. The expenses of providing services continues to exceed revenues, which makes legislative advocacy essential. In 2024, HB-1916 allowed for reinstating the first month of billing for services. The bill corrected an administrative change that had inadvertently caused financial strain on Kindering. With the victory, the organization has seen improvements in monthly billing. Kindering is now advocating for a Senate bill that would align reimbursement rates with those for older students receiving special education. Kindering functions as the first stage of special education and it is vital to ensure that funding levels reflect the importance of early intervention. The change will prevent situations where families might be turned away due

to financial constraints. The importance of local funding was also stressed. Many of Kinderling's programs are not covered by state or federal dollars and must instead rely on support from sources such as the City of Bellevue. There is a need to maintain those partnerships in order to continue serving families in need.

Adina Rosenberg said the Bellevue School District is currently facing immense budget cuts that directly impact special education services. There are cuts to mental health assistance teams, resulting in increased caseloads and larger class sizes. The cuts will impact students with and without disabilities. They impact the ability to provide inclusive practices in the schools, and stunts the growth of students. It is necessary to think creatively about how to support students. It is disheartening to see funding reductions affect essential services.

Adina Rosenberg said the school district is also closely monitoring other legislative efforts at the state level. A recent change extends transition services eligibility until a student's 22nd birthday, but it does not cover students for the entire school year. As a result, students with late-year birthdays lose months of services, creating inconsistencies in support. Advocates are pushing for a legislative fix that would fund services through a student's entire 22nd year rather than ending on their birthday. Also being tracked is a bill that would eliminate subminimum wages for workers with disabilities in Washington State. Many individuals with disabilities are engaged in vocational training programs with the goal of entering the workforce. Despite that, some remain legally subjected to discrimination in the form of being paid less than minimum wage. People with disabilities want to work and should be compensated fairly for their labor. It was also stressed that recent federal executive orders threaten protections for students with disabilities. There is a clear need to advocate not only for students with disabilities but also for trans students and students of color, who often face additional barriers.

Chair Singh acknowledged the emotional weight of the conversation and shared deeply valuing the discussion despite not personally having a family member with a disability. Chair Singh asked how many in Bellevue or on the Eastside require disability services. Emani Donalson explained that while there is data on the zip codes of families served by Open Doors, the organization does not have comprehensive numbers for all of Bellevue and the population of the Eastside. Open Doors serves approximately 120 individuals in the area, including those in Newcastle and surrounding communities.

Saada Hilts pointed out that the Needs Update estimates that 7.3 percent of residents live with a disability. Of those, only 38 percent have been able to access necessary resources. Toni Esparza added that the figures likely underrepresent the actual number of people with disabilities due to underreporting. Some individuals hesitate to disclose their disability status on census forms, which contributes to data gaps.

Leonardo Salas Ramos said many elect not to report a disability due to fear of being misunderstood.

Melanie Cates stressed the importance of highlighting the challenges of disclosing disabilities. Understanding when to disclose a disability is an important skill that is often not taught to students. Knowing when to disclose could help individuals access necessary support, but must be

acknowledged that there are times when it might be best to withhold that information. Tracking data will improve transition services. Ideally, transition services should begin as early as age 14 to give families time to understand and navigate the process. The data regarding who would benefit from transition services includes students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and 504 Plans within the Bellevue School District given that those figures can provide a clearer picture of the population in need of transition services. There is a population of students that educators often refer to as "tweeners," students who either have undiagnosed disabilities or who have not qualified for state waiver services. Those students are often unsure as to whether or not they will attend college or pursue vocational training. Absent receiving transition services, the students tend to leave school at 18 without a support system in place. Many of the students are at higher risk of falling into the school-to-prison pipeline due to a lack of resources and guidance. Policymakers and school officials should collect data on the students to better understand where training and resources are most needed. Identifying gaps in services can improve support for students with high needs and prevent them from slipping through the cracks.

Ellen Inman referenced a report from the 2021-2022 school year which stated that approximately 9 percent of Bellevue School District students were receiving special education services. Although the data is a few years old, it provides a useful estimate of the student population in need of support.

Leonardo Salas Ramos expressed appreciation for being invited to participate in the discussion, stating that the topic was both educational and important, as well as meaningful before asking what can be done to address those who lose their services after the age of 22, which is what the law dictates. It was acknowledged that efforts are under way to change the policy, but it remains an issue.

Adina Rosenberg allowed that public school services end the day before a student's 22nd birthday. Transition programs often attempt to connect families with state agencies such as the Developmental Disabilities Administration (DDA) and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) before graduation. In the Bellevue School District, the efforts are prioritized to ensure students have post-graduation support. However, there is a high turnover among agency staff, which sometimes disrupts the continuity of services. Once students turn 22, school districts can no longer provide assistance, leaving families to navigate the system alone.

As the session drew to a close, Commissioners and panelists exchanged final words of gratitude for the panelists. Commissioner Gonzalez voiced appreciation for the advocacy work of Leonardo Salas Ramos on behalf of others.

B. Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing

Community Development Block Grant Administrator/Housing Repair Specialist Donna Adair explained that the completion of an Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing report is directly related to the city's fair housing obligations as a local government. Because King County and the cities of Auburn, Kent and Federal Way receive HUD funding through the Community Development Block Grant program, there is a duty to take meaningful actions to combat discrimination, address patterns of segregation, and promote inclusive communities. Fair

Housing planning, or the development of the AI, is one way to affirmatively further fair housing.

The AI report has more than 150 pages and contains more than 500 footnotes. The report is updated every five years, with the latest version covering the period from 2025 to 2029. Bellevue, along with King County and the other participating cities who contributed to the creation of the report, and will be adopting the report as part a commitment to furthering fair housing.

Donna Adair explained that the primary goal of the AI report is to identify barriers to fair housing through community input and data analysis. The report includes sections on demographics, housing disparities, tenant protections, and access to opportunity. Over 50 figures, including tables, charts, and maps are included in the report to provide a detailed look at fair housing conditions in King County and Bellevue.

Several key fair housing barriers are identified in the report. One major issue is exclusionary zoning and land practices, which disproportionately affects low-income populations, particularly communities of color. Areas zoned for low-density housing limit affordable housing options for those communities.

Another significant barrier highlighted in the report is the high cost of housing. Nearly every interview conducted for the report cited steep rent increases, security deposits, and the application fees as major obstacles to securing housing.

Many of the organizations reported that clients frequently faced housing discrimination based on protected classes, such as race, source of income, immigration and citizenship status, sexual orientation, and gender identity. The findings from the community engagement process further emphasized the urgent need for increased support in providing housing that meets the specific needs of individuals with disabilities.

Nearly every organization interviewed reported an extreme shortage of housing units with three or more bedrooms. Even in affordable housing markets, larger-sized family units are difficult to find across King County and throughout the state of Washington.

While many renters expressed the desire to own a home in the future, most organizations reported that the communities they serve saw homeownership as an unattainable goal. Many prospective renters face significant barriers due to rigorous screening criteria, making it difficult to secure housing. Additionally, organizations reported that fair housing rights are difficult to enforce, often due to a lack of awareness about tenant rights or a fear of landlord retaliation.

The fair housing goals were collaboratively developed by the participating cities and King County and were shaped by community engagement findings and months of discussions between the jurisdictions. The ten fair housing goals will guide meaningful actions to advance fair housing and to expand housing choices over the next five years.

Continuing, Donna Adair said Bellevue and King County are committed to reporting annually on the progress of implementing the goals. Collectively, the goals emphasize housing stability

through tenant assistance programs, support for people with disabilities, and strategies to prevent displacement. The goals focus on strengthening policies and programs that increase tenant stability, such as rental assistance, fair housing education, legal aid for tenants, and fair housing enforcement measures; address the need for stable housing for people with disabilities, particularly those requiring supportive services; look to engage underrepresented communities to better understand barriers to housing access and funding the development of more housing for individuals earning 80 percent of area median income; place a focus on increasing the availability of three-bedroom units; target investment in communities at high risk of displacement; seek to improve homeownership opportunities for low-income households; reducing racial disparities in homeownership; and ensure that the annual reports will track progress on fair housing initiatives.

The next step involves voting to adopt the updated Analysis of Impediments report. The draft report was posted online for 30 days to allow public comments, but no comments were received.

Commissioner Hays noted that the report lists disability housing as a barrier and asked for more details on the specific challenges faced by people with disabilities in securing appropriate housing. Donna Adair acknowledged that the study had found a lack of housing designed to meet the needs of individuals with disabilities. Accessible housing options remain insufficient throughout the area.

Toni Esparza allowed that disability is a term that encompasses a wide range of needs. Bellevue's Housing Stability Program, funded through a city-adopted sales tax, is one initiative addressing the concerns given that fifteen percent of the tax revenues are allocated to human services, specifically for behavioral health and housing-related support. Some of the funds are directed toward case management and behavioral health services at housing complexes, while the remainder are designated for affordable housing projects serving specific populations, including individuals with disabilities. The city has structured the program to fund both the construction of accessible housing and the ongoing services that some residents require. While not all individuals with disabilities need supportive services at their housing location, the funding model ensures that those who do have access to the necessary resources. A recent press release announced the groundbreaking for Bridge Housing, a development that will include 40 units designated for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The project is expected to include on-site services, with Open Doors named as a partner in the implementation. Other service-based housing programs are also in place, including Plymouth Housing located at the Eastgate campus. The facility houses the men's shelter and provides on-site services to support residents.

Chair Singh asked how the city connects affordability with disability housing needs. Toni Esparza explained that housing needs are varied by population. While many people simply need affordable housing, others require a combination of affordability and specialized services. For example, survivors of domestic violence often need housing along with tailored support programs. Within the disability community, some individuals do not require affordable housing, while others need both affordability and on-site services. The Affordable Housing Strategy update will focus on the production of affordable housing as well as targeted investments in specific communities that need additional support.

With regard to rent control policies, Commissioner Phan inquired about the city's involvement in policy-level discussions related to housing legislation, particularly in relation to controlling rising rental costs. Toni Esparza pointed out that while efforts are being made to increase affordable housing availability, landlords can still raise rents by as much as 30 to 35 percent. city's Intergovernmental Relations team monitors state legislation and works with lobbyists to advocate for housing-related policies. Locally, the city is focused on land use and zoning updates to encourage greater housing density and affordability. The recent Comprehensive Plan update made a lot of movement toward increasing housing options by modifying zoning regulations. Ongoing projects, such as the Land Use Code update for the Wilburton and BelRed areas, will provide further opportunities to shape local housing policies.

Chair Singh commented that rent control has historically been ineffective in various places around the world and is difficult to enforce. It was noted that rising property taxes and maintenance costs influence rental rates, making it challenging to implement strict rent caps.

A motion to approve the draft Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing Choice report was made by Commissioner Phan. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Gonzalez and the motion carried unanimously.

7. ADJOURNMENT

Chair Singh reminded the Commissioners that the April 7 meeting had been canceled due to a conflict with spring break. The next meeting will be held either on April 14 or 21.

Chair Singh adjourned the meeting at 7:58 p.m.