

Presentation by Aida Ramirez: January 17, 2017 - 5:30 Chamber of Commerce, 2nd Floor

Heath Carter introduced the concept of Valparaiso's Human Relation Council - an Advisory council to mayor to offer advice about matters related to equity and inclusion. Along with ValpoNext, AdHoc Committees on Inclusion, Hiring, and Housing, we have thought a lot about best practices and infrastructure. Mayor Costas asked about what should be prioritized in the extensive work done by these subcommittees. Unanimously, the HRC agreed to advise the hire of a Senior-Level Director for Community Relations position.

The speaker tonight is from the city of Columbus, IN. Ms. Aida Ramirez, serves as Director of Community Relations and Director of the Human Rights Commission. She has a law degree - Heath listed a long list of many successes in her career. Ms. Ramirez: would like to have a dialogue with the audience and answer as many questions as possible. First, she began by introducing the long and interesting history of inclusion in her community.

- Her presentation was titled "Investing in Inclusion"- she sat down with the person responsible for putting together the budget. Why choose to invest in Inclusion? There are so many other places to put the funds. Columbus strives to be different. Public and Private partnerships that make the community better. Almost all the architecture has been a collaboration of public/private entities. The first step is to get community buy-in - funding projects that the public supports. Mixed use-areas that benefit both commerce and public.
- Non-profit foundations collect donations and then find ways to invest back into the community. (Our own Porter County Community Foundation could be tapped into as a possible donor for public projects.
- Additionally, the community wanted to create a vision of diversity, inclusion, and acceptance.
- 1962 - Human Rights - there was a push from community leaders in large businesses (J.I. Miller) that were committed to hiring, promoting a diverse pool of employees. Business tried to hire people (from all over the country and world) and they left. A conversation between Miller and the Mayor led to questions about housing and inclusion.
- The Mayor had coffee with groups of people who came to tell the Mayor why they were leaving - racism, harder to buy a home, sell their homes, be part of the community, they didn't feel accepted anywhere. The mayor created a group of volunteers to try and figure out how to improve inclusion. What do we not know about our community? "Committee on Community Relations" mostly based on race (1960's) - wealth with housing, public accommodations. The group engaged with local business - invited them to have a dialogue privately. Changed to Human Relations Commissions - became more official, small budget, based on community donations. \$1,200. Eventually this was changed to Human Rights Commission - secured funding by City Council (budget 17,900 in 1977). In 1980 a budget of 22K was approved.
- Return on investment is not always seen in one fiscal year. ROI might be that people from other backgrounds living in your town and feeling included. ROI might be potential savings from lawsuits.
- Present day, there is an Annual Report that is created by this office and given to the Mayor. One of their primary jobs is to make sure that the city is doing everything that it should be doing (legally and ethically). Making sure there aren't things in the paper that could negatively reflect on the City. Limiting the city's liability by identifying a problem, and acting appropriately and quickly. She doesn't determine veracity of claims, but strives to address the problem responsibly. "Serve and protect the government by pointing out any errors or possible bad scenarios".
- Office is non-partisan, quasi-independent, neutral - the Mayor could have cut the budget and defunded the office. The Mayor relies on the office for advice and context on different issues.
- City Council Liaison - (R) The office works to serve all constituents regardless of politics.
- Three full-time staff - Director, Assistant Director, Admin Asst - Director is not managed by the Mayor/Deputy Mayor. Reports to the Chairperson of the HRC. 12-member Commission Board. Director manages a consultant, 2 committees, various community board memberships, volunteers. National speakers, Local speakers are organized.
- Jurisdiction is the City boundaries - enforceable protections exist within these limits.
- Present day, their three-person office is funded by the City General fund - 256K (.753% of total)

Question and Answer Portion:

1. **How often is the Commission appointed?** There are 3-year appointments - no max/min to the amount

of appointments. The Chairperson is voted by the committee. When a commissioner is needed, they put out a request to have a fresh pool for the committee. There is a generic questionnaire with very basic questions. The City Council appoints the member volunteers.

2. **Why is there still limited diversity in Columbus with all the efforts toward inclusion?** (Citing 3-4% black, 6% Hispanic) Affordable housing is still lacking in the community. Columbus housing market is still one of the most expensive - there is just not enough housing for even a professional making 90K. Many racial minorities are relegated to the outskirts of town.
3. **Have you tried to put through initiatives for more affordable housing?** Some, yes. Senior housing, etc. This is still a challenge.
4. **Is it important that you're a lawyer in this position?** No. The person that was in this position started out as an administrative assistant. Being detail-oriented and curious are requirements. The law is complicated and it may be quicker for a lawyer but, the information is readily available. Their office has amazing connections with other Human Relations Councils in other cities. (Bloomington, etc) Its important for someone to be a sleuth and for the to look and dig for things.
5. The HRC is independent of the City. Funder and Spender are different. The Director has a "range". The wages are calculated fairly.
6. **What advice can you give us to convince those in power to "invest"?** My dept is using 255K but what is the city gaining? They are gaining respect, a sense of inclusion and diversity, gaining community. The City has another line of protection with respect to it's reputation. A true investment in other depts - for ex: Economic Development. Assist small business owners - one had no clue how to manage employees. Owner didn't know how to manage a group of people. Handbook, regulations, etc. It helped her survive her first year in business. Another - small business owner - hires adults/minors - he could have lost his entire savings - needed some legal help. Trying to troubleshoot the issue, when to hire an attorney, what to do with the staff, etc. Small business, race issues, disability issues, education. (Heath added: this position is for all the citizens of the city - custodian of the city's reputation. Even majority population's rights have been violated.) Veterans, age, gender identity, sexual orientation. Aida talked about helping a Christian person who had been discriminated.
7. **Changes and differences between Human Relations v Human Rights - what do you see the differences?** The office needs to be able to relate to the community. It is important to be a neutral arbiter. They do not file a lot of cases/complaints. Sometimes the orgs are viewed as a sub of Human Resources and use the word Relations. Is it relational only? It depends on the set-up of that particular office and Director.
8. **How important is Cummins (large corporation in Columbus) now? Is it important that it was international?** It was and is absolutely important. If Cummins finds out about anything that changes the workforce or the community it will typically affect the nature of our work. Very important to note: We are not beholden to Cummins. If there were violations or issues at Cummins, it would be surprising since they are a leader in ethics - Cummins has been responsible in the past. She does presentations about Corporate responsibility and works with the Chamber of Commerce on a regular basis.
9. In a typical year, there are 800 different contacts (not always complaints) - how were those broken down in category? Housing and employment 2:1 ratio. Housing is a challenge in Columbus. Disability, public accommodations, not being able to access businesses, public transportation. Worked diligently with engineering and planning to make sure those issues were rectified. INDOT - making sure they were aware if it was outside the jurisdiction. Housing is pretty common and so is accommodations for Disabilities.
10. **Are you a resource that people seek out or are you out there looking?** We do both. We look to make sure there is compliance. We look for issues. It depends on the situation/issue. We are not a legal aide clinic - we refer all situations out. Pro se issues are referred and they help with forms. There is no legal fiduciary. "My client, if I have one, is the city of Columbus". The office isn't actually representing anyone - they are referring out.
11. **How do you interact with the City Attorney?** There is a City Attorney assigned to us and we communicate about bigger issues. Not a whole lot of continuous interaction - one is assigned to the office - the office doesn't have cases. There is conversation about compliance and who pays. That attorney would represent us in court.

Heath Carter ensures the audience that this conversation will continue this Spring - if there are more questions for Aida, Heath can forward them to her. Ended at 7:07 pm.

