



Diversity Gazette

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It's Hard Work

by Susan Austin

Some of you know that I serve on the City of Durham Human Relations Commission (HRC). This service has made me acutely aware of my privilege. It has also allowed me to use that privilege to advocate for those who experience barriers due to their race, ethnicity, or economic circumstances to name a few. I want to tell you about the work of Human Relations Commissions in the hopes that some of you might consider serving in your community.

There are 23 local HRCs in North Carolina, including Orange and Wake counties. There is also a statewide HRC. One example of the powers/duties of the Durham HRC is "To do research, obtain factual data, hold meetings with residents and consider and recommend the best and fairest means of progressively

improving human relations among all residents of the city"¹

Some of the issues we have tackled in Durham include racial disparities in traffic stops, Islamophobia, gentrification, conditions in the county jail, and high eviction rates. These concerns reached the HRC in many ways, including via individuals directly affected by the problem, by other community groups seeking our support, and in the case of the traffic stops, the mayor tasked us with studying the issue.

The HRC spent more than a year examining traffic stops. We reviewed data, held multiple public meetings, heard from a variety of stakeholders—including those personally affected—and met with representatives of the police department. In the end, the HRC issued a report with 34 recommendations for the city and

police department and an additional 10 recommendations for the Citizens Police Review Board to address the disparities. The city adopted many, but not all of the recommendations and data shows they have had a positive impact on the problem.



The work has been hard and very rewarding. It has also been a huge advantage to understand how local government works, and that is why I think you—my colleagues at the SOG—are particularly well suited to consider serving your local HRC.

¹ Durham Human Relations Commission Rules of Procedure & Powers and Duties. VI. (Sec. 34-112) 6.