

Austin Human Rights Commission Statement to City Council - December 19, 2016

We are here tonight to make a public statement in support of Austin being a "Welcoming" community. We'd like to thank the Council for their positive steps on this issue, especially your work in making Austin one of the first cities in Minnesota to join the "Welcome America" network in July. Our purpose tonight is to reaffirm that this is the right vision for our community, and provide an update on the efforts of the Human Rights Commission in making this vision a reality.

- The Austin Human Rights Commission is a city commission made up of volunteers who are appointed by the Mayor. Our mission is to "cultivate a just and inclusive community where diversity is valued and human rights are respected". We seek to live this mission by tackling upstream causes of human rights issues through strong collaboration with other groups in our community who are working towards similar ends.
- Research confirms that communities are stronger and more prosperous when all members feel like they are welcome and can contribute, whether they've been here for just a few months or lived here their entire lives.
- Austin is a great example of this. Our community has undergone a dramatic transformation in the past 25 years, increasing from 2% non-white residents in 1990 to 23% in the latest Census report. There are now 46 different languages spoken by students at Austin Public Schools, and the current Kindergarten class at Woodson has been more than 50% non-white for several years. All of this change has been a net positive for Austin, as our population has actually GROWN by 4% since the year 2000, making us a shining star in Greater MN where many peer communities are losing population.
- Austin has a tremendous opportunity in front of us over the next 10-20 years, as the vast majority of our diversity is age 40 and younger. If we can build a community that makes all residents feel welcome and included, it will go a long way towards retaining talent, building our local economy, and maximizing our potential as a community.
- To build on these efforts, our Commission is currently assembling a "Welcoming Report" that will be published in Spring 2017. We are in the process of engaging with a diverse group of people from across the community for this report, which has 2 major goals:
 - o One, identify the barriers that exist to Austin being a truly welcoming community for all residents
 - o Two, offer a set of recommendations for overcoming these barriers that will be a guide for the Council, local businesses, and community organizations
- We request the opportunity to present our findings from this report back to the Council after its completion. We would also love your personal input into identifying barriers to welcoming in Austin, and will be reaching out to set up interviews with each of you to get your own perspective and ideas.

In conclusion, we are fully supportive of the efforts to make Austin into a truly welcoming and inclusive community. We offer our assistance, and look forward to continued collaboration in turning the vision of a welcoming community into reality.