



**CITY OF TOPEKA
HUMAN RELATIONS COMMISSION**

**2023
ANNUAL REPORT**

The mission of the Topeka Human Relations Commission (H.R.C.) is to conduct outreach and educational activities that promote justice and cultural understanding and improve relationships among all people of the City of Topeka.

January 29, 2024

To Mayor Padilla and City Councilmembers,

On behalf of the Topeka Human Relations Commission (H.R.C.), I am submitting our 2023 Annual Report to the governing body as required by the City Code.

We welcome you to review the 2023 H.R.C. Annual Report and send us any comments, concerns, and suggestions for 2024. We are dedicated to the H.R.C. mission and look forward to planning outreach and educational events for our community this year.

Our Commission is a diverse and talented group of individuals who volunteer their time to the City of Topeka. Many of the commissioners further their civic engagement by attending monthly meetings, public forums, seminars, or other events that address the concerns of our citizenry. We are proud to serve our neighbors, all residents, and our City in this capacity.

We appreciate your continued support and look forward to collaborating with the governing body to serve fellow residents of the City.

Best regards,



Chair

Carmen Romero-Nichols

Topeka Human Relations Commission

Cc: Richard U. Nienstedt, Interim City
Manager
City Council Office
City Clerk's Office
Mayor's Office

CITY OF TOPEKA HUMAN RELATIONS COMMISSION

MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of the Human Relations Commission is to conduct outreach and educational activities that promote justice and cultural understanding and improve relationships among all people in the City of Topeka.

ROLE OF THE COMMISSION

The Topeka Human Relations Ordinance requires that the Commission be non-partisan. By historical custom, the Commission's composition reflects a varied geographic representation: individuals with disabilities; a diverse gender, racial, religious, and ethnic mix; various professional backgrounds; and a demonstrated interest in civil rights. The Commissioners shall reside within the corporate limits of the City.

Commissioners are appointed by the Mayor from Council nominations and are confirmed by Topeka City Council for two (2) year terms or until their successor is appointed.

DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

In 2010 the Commission's role changed from filing and investigating complaints and holding public hearings when the Human Relations Department was abolished in late June 2010.

The Commission supports the efforts to eliminate prejudice and further goodwill among all people of the City and promotes positive relations among our citizens and guests through community outreach. The Commission continues to promote and facilitate public forums on issues of interest and concern, participate in outreach activities and public education, and partner with groups that share similar goals.

MEMBERS OF THE HUMAN RELATIONS COMMISSION

By ordinance, the City Manager shall designate staff to assist the Commission. Staff coordinates meetings of the Commission, Committees formed by the Commission, and other requests made by the Commission. Staff is responsible for answering the Commission phone line and assisting in the referral to other supporting agencies. Staff also assists with other Commission outreach into the legal support, assistance, research, and training as needed.

Chair	Carmen Romero- Nichols	Term Expires 6/2024
Vice Chair	Carol Roberts	Term Expires: 2/2024
Commissioner	Cynthia Hopp	Term Expires: 3/2024
Commissioner	Luc Bensimon	Term Expires: 6/2024
Commissioner	Alexis Simmons	Term Expires: 7/2024
Commissioner	Pamela James	Term Expires: 9/2024

Commissioner	Marisol Marcelo	Term Expires 6/2025
Commissioner	Zachary Surritt	Term Expires 2/2025
Commissioner	Unfilled	

COMMUNITY OUTREACH ACTIVITIES

2023 HRC Achievements:

- HRC Retreat: Members of the Human Relations Commission held a Commission retreat on May 8, 2023, to discuss the HRC structure, establishment of subcommittees, and annual events.
 - Subcommittees:
 - Education and Outreach
 - Event Planning
 - Policy and Advocacy
- Community Forum with the Mexican Consulate: This forum was hosted at the Washburn Tech East on May 18, 2023, and an estimated 20 residents attended the session. The community forum's focus was the Mexican Consulate in Kansas City. The Consulate provided a presentation for Topeka residents on the services available to Mexican Nationals living abroad.
- Information Session on House Bill 2350: the DEI Office, HRC, TPD, and other community organizations hosted an information session after receiving concerns and questions related to the new Kansas law (HB-2350). This session was held at Washburn Tech East on May 31, 2023, and over 100 Topeka residents attended the session.
- The City of Topeka Newcomers Academy: The DEI Office and the HRC partnered with Top City Promise to successfully kick off the first Newcomers Academy. This 8-week program included 20 new residents from Topeka participating in the Academy, which aims to create awareness of public entities' functions and responsibilities, foster open communication between participants and officials, and provide a tangible knowledge base for civic engagement to the participants.
- Welcoming Week in September: The Human Relations Commission celebrated Welcoming Week in style by organizing the graduation ceremony of the Newcomers Academy. Members of the Ukrainian Community who participated in the academy received well-deserved certificates of completion. The HRC was also the recipient of the City Council's proclamation for Welcoming Week.
- USCIS Forums: The DEI Office and the HRC, in partnership with the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) hosted public informational presentations on September 14, 2023, and October 5, 2023, for the community about the naturalization process, permanent residency, temporary protected status, and the requirements to become a U.S. citizen. Over 100 people attended these presentations, which were highly informative and interactive. Residents were able to ask their questions.
- Holiday Posada: The HRC hosted its first Holiday Posada on December 6, 2023, at the Governor's Row House – Event Center. Although 12 people attended the Posada, the event was a success, and everyone had a great time. HRC hopes to continue the Holiday Posada every year.

- **2024 HRC Planned Activities:**

- **AARP Age-Friendly Network:** The HRC has applied to the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) to become an age-friendly City. Age-friendly communities serve as catalysts to educate local leaders and encourage them to implement the types of changes that make communities more livable for people of all ages, especially older adults. Once the designation is approved, the HRC will work on developing a plan that identifies recommendations to make Topeka a more livable community for people of all ages with a special focus on seniors.
- **Inclusive Entrepreneurship Program- National League of Cities (NLC):** The DEI office, Division of Contracting and Procurement, and the HRC are working with the National League of Cities under their Inclusive Entrepreneurship Program on two commitments:
 - **Equitable Anchor Procurement:** Increasing the diversity of suppliers that local anchor institutions contract with;
 - **Hispanic and Latino Entrepreneurship:** Lowering the barriers Hispanic/Latino entrepreneurs face in starting and growing businesses.

The Human Relation Advocacy Committee members will participate in the discussions to guide the City's decision on both commitments.

- **Taste of Topeka Festival:** The HRC and the DEI Office will work to host the first Taste of Topeka Festival event in Topeka as a way to bring together newcomers and long-term residents. The HRC concluded that the cuisine fills the kitchens of families from around the globe. From antiquity to today, food has served as a universal language—connecting cultures that share little else in common. Although local food trucks do a good job representing our largest immigrant groups, there is an opportunity to open the door to newer arrivals.
- **The City of Topeka Newcomers Academy:** After the success of the first Newcomers Academy, The HRC will work with the DEI Office to host the second Newcomers Academy for newly arrived Immigrants and refugees to assist individuals in learning the services the City of Topeka provides.
- **Municipal Equity Index Report:** The HRC's Advocacy Committee will work with the DEI Office to increase the Municipal Equity Index Score for 2024 with a focus on two sections of the report (Transgender Inclusive Healthcare and Non-Discrimination Contract Agreement). These two areas received a low or no score in 2023 and we plan to consult with the Human Rights Campaign to ensure we receive full credit for these two sections.
- **Holiday Posada:** The Human Relations Commission will host a Holiday Posada in December 2024 to celebrate and bring residents of Topeka together.

INVITED GUEST SPEAKERS FOR EDUCATIONAL OUTREACH

- Andi Bozarth- AARP Representative (October)
- Kristin Hammer- YWCA Representative (November)



MEET THE 2024 HRC COMMISSIONERS

CHAIR CARMEN ROMERO-NICHOLS

Carmen Romero-Nichols joined the Human Resource Commission in May 2022. She is originally from Mexico City, though Topeka has been her home for the majority of her life.

Carmen moved to Kansas with her family over 20 years ago. She graduated from Topeka High School, received her undergrad from Washburn University, and an M.B.A. from Baker University.

The City of Topeka and the State of Kansas hold a special meaning to Carmen. She understands the importance of being involved in the community and decided to get involved in shaping our community for her two daughters.



VICE-CHAIR CAROL ROBERTS

Carol Roberts was born and raised in Topeka. She is a wife, mother to seven children, and grandmother to eight grandchildren. Carol attended elementary through high school in the Seaman School District. Upon graduating from high school, she attended Washburn University, where she graduated in 1988 with a court and conference reporting degree. Carol has been a freelance court reporter, worked in the Johnson County District Courts as an official reporter, and now owns a transcription company that serves law enforcement agencies, courts, and various other clients. Carol also owns a health and wellness business dedicated to the science and study of nutrition and genetic expression with regard to the prevention or treatment of disease.

Carol has served in various capacities in city and community groups, such as the Law Enforcement Partnership Panel established under Police Chief Ron Miller. She has also served in Kansans for Life and has been involved in radio and newspaper ministries. She is active in her church and serves in several roles there. Carol is involved with the Trash Mountain Project, serving people living in trash dump communities worldwide. Carol is passionate about her faith and encouraging others. She believes all lives are precious and every human should be treated with dignity and respect.



COMMISSIONER LUC BENSIMON

I am a 48-year-old man with Trans experience, born and raised in Topeka, Kansas. I was born with three strikes against me: being assigned female at birth, being Afro-American, and being born with a disability, all of which I have been discriminated against in different areas of my life. I have two degrees in Human Services, with youth and children emphasis, and a B.A. in Criminal Justice. I wear a few different hats when it comes to activism. I am the current president and one of the founding members of the Kansas statewide transgender education project (K.S.T.E.P), the current chairperson of Equality Kansas Topeka chapter, and the president of Capital city equality center (The Mott House), the president and founder of the Black Transmen Inc. Kansas chapter (B.T.M.I. Kansas). Mr. Black Trans Kansas 2019-2020, ward captain and ward 1 precinct 3 precinct committee Man. I am an activist for the L.G.B.T. community, but my true passion is Trans people of color.



COMMISSIONER CYNTHIA HOPP

Cynthia Hopp has been a Topeka public school system teacher since 2013 and has taught for the last ten years. She recently graduated with a Master of Educational Leadership at Kansas State University.

Cynthia is a member of the Minority Leadership Academy and a Kagan Cooperative Learning instructional coach. After school hours, she serves at the Woman's Foundation and is also a Human Relations Commissioner for Topeka.

With an evident passion for education and volunteering, Cynthia enjoys helping people achieve their goals.

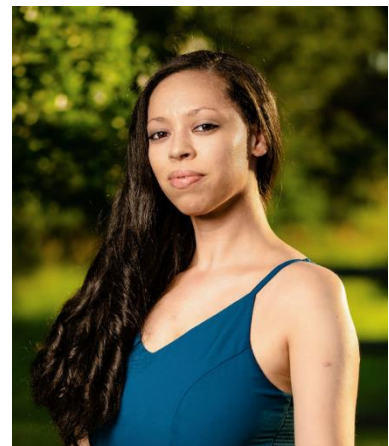
Cynthia is married to Kevin Hopp and is the mother of two children, Mikaela and Mauricio. In her spare time, she enjoys learning how to play the cello, meditating, and doing yoga.



COMMISSIONER PAMELA JAMES

Pamela James first moved to Topeka in 2010. She was born and raised in a small town about 4 hours from Topeka, Hutchinson, Kansas. She graduated from the University of Phoenix in 2021 with a Bachelor of Science in Business and General Management.

Pamela has been a State of Kansas employee for several years and is passionate about helping people and her community become the best possible. She is an active member of the National Society of Leadership and Success and has become a member of the Human Relations Committee in her pursuit to continue helping others.



COMMISSIONER MARISOL MARCELLO

Marisol Estrella Marcelo is a distinguished professional dedicated to making a difference in her beloved Topeka community. Though not native to Topeka, she has embraced it as her home and actively contributes to its vibrancy. Marisol's educational journey has been diverse, spanning Music Education and Mortuary Science studies culminating in her recent graduation in marketing and business administration.

Marisol's involvement in community-building extends to various organizations, including her role as a graduate of the Leadership Greater Topeka Class of 2023. She also serves as a mentor with Big Brothers Big Sisters and is an engaged member of Mana De Topeka. Her dedication is further exemplified through her active participation in the Kansas Funeral Director Association, her volunteer work with Hospice, and her commitment to Fiesta Topeka. Additionally, Marisol is engaged in her church community.



She advocates for supporting local businesses and charities, reflecting her unwavering commitment to the betterment of her community. In her role as Director of Marketing, Public Relations, and Preplanning Specialist at Brennan-Mathena Funeral Home, Marisol's compassion and dedication shine through as she guides and supports families during their most challenging moments, helping them honor and celebrate the lives of their loved ones. Her mission is deeply rooted in her faith and a commitment to personal growth, striving daily to be the best version of herself and making a positive impact in her community.

COMMISSIONER ALEXIS SIMMONS

Alexis Simmons is a graduate of Washburn University (Go Bods!), where she majored in political science and served as student body president. After graduating from Washburn, she obtained a master's degree in American politics and government from American University's School of Public Affairs in Washington, D.C.

While in D.C., Alexis helped train women to run for office and wrote a weekly newsletter about women in politics for the Women & Politics Institute. After joining a boutique consulting firm, Alexis and a small team advised Fortune 500 companies on creating and implementing forward-thinking, socially responsible policies.

After moving back to Topeka in 2020, Alexis returned to work where her love for public service started: the Kansas Legislature. She serves as the Communications Director for Vic Miller, Kansas House Minority Leader, and the Kansas House Democrats. As a former intern, her favorite part of the job is helping coordinate the internship program for the House of Representatives.



Alexis is a graduate of the 2021-2022 Kansas Chamber of Commerce's Emerging Leaders program, Democratic precinct committeewoman, EMILY's List Ignite Change Fellow, National Organization of Women (NOW) scholarship recipient, Bryce Harlow Foundation honoree, and adjunct professor in Washburn University's political science department.

COMMISSIONER ZACHARY SURRITT

Zachary Surritt is a native of the Greater Topeka area. He was born in Topeka, raised in Meriden, and has lived in the Capitol City since he started his college career in 2015. Zachary graduated from Washburn University with his Bachelor's Degree in Public Administration in 2020. While at Washburn, he served as a leader in several student organizations, including a term as the Student Body President in 2018-2019. Zachary has also served as a City Council member for the City of Meriden and is the current Chair-Elect of Forge Young Talent, where he is dedicated to making Topeka and Shawnee County a place where young people want to live, work, play, and belong. Zachary is also the Business Development and Marketing Director for R&S Maintenance Services, of which he is part of the third generation of family leadership. Zachary is passionate about public service and looks forward to working with our community to create an environment for positive change.



There is one vacancy as of December 5, 2023.