



**CITY OF TOPEKA  
HUMAN RELATIONS COMMISSION**

**2024  
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.***

February 3, 2025

To Mayor Padilla and City Councilmembers,

On behalf of the Topeka Human Relations Commission (H.R.C.), I am submitting our 2024 Annual Report to the governing body as required by the City Code.

We welcome you to review the 2024 H.R.C. Annual Report and send us any comments, concerns, and suggestions for 2025. 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,

Carmen Romero-Nichols

Topeka Human Relations Commission Chair

Cc: Robert M. Perez, City Manager  
City Council Office  
City Clerk's Office  
Mayor's Office

## **CITY OF TOPEKA HUMAN RELATIONS COMMISSION**

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

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

### **2024 HRC ACHIEVEMENTS**

- In January 2024, The Topeka Human Relations Commission applied and was accepted to become nationally recognized as an Age-Friendly Network. The award was presented to Mayor Padilla during the H.R.C. Meeting in March 2024.
- Members of the HRC worked with the City Attorney to initiate a conversation regarding The Crown Act at the Policy and Finance Committee meeting; the committee voted to include the discussion in the legislative agenda

## MEMBERS OF THE HUMAN RELATIONS COMMISSION

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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 | 06/24-06/26 |
| Vice-Chair   | Carol Roberts         | 02/24–02/26 |
| Commissioner | Luc Bensimon          | 07/24-06/26 |
| Commissioner | Zachary Surritt       | 02/23-02/25 |
| Commissioner | Michaela Kerls        | 03/24–03/26 |
| Commissioner | Jaron Balderes        | 05/24-05/26 |
| Commissioner | Alexis Simmons        | 07/24-07/26 |

## COMMUNITY OUTREACH ACTIVITIES

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### TROY SCROGGINS AWARD

The City of Topeka's Human Relations Commission hosted the first Troy Scroggins Award Ceremony in 2008. The Troy Scroggins Award recognizes individuals, public and private entities, and youth whose efforts to eliminate discrimination and prejudice and advance diversity in Topeka are outstanding, singular, and noteworthy.

The 2024 Recipients: *No nominations were taken, nor were awards bestowed.*

### STEPHANIE MOTT AWARD

The Stephanie Mott Award recognizes people living in Shawnee County who have helped the Topeka Human Relations Commission (T.H.R.C.) accomplish its mission by exemplifying the work of Stephanie Mott, which is advocating for the disenfranchised and the less fortunate and giving a voice to the voiceless.

2024 Recipient: *No nominations were taken, nor were awards bestowed.*

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## **OUTREACH ACTIVITIES**

- National League of Cities (NLC) Inclusive Entrepreneurs Program—H.R.C. Policy and Advocacy Subcommittee members worked with City of Topeka Staff. They assisted in planning the Kaufman Foundation Fast Track Classes in Spanish. The NLC provided funding for the class, and Omni Circle offered the Kaufman Foundation Fast Track Classes in Spanish.
- National Night Out—On Tuesday, August 6th, 2024, the H.R.C. tabled at the national night out event at West Ridge Mall to inform the public about the H.R.C.'s role and the work being done by the city.
- Holiday Posada in December – The Human Relations Commission hosted its second Holiday Posada on December 9, 2024, at the Governor's Row House Event Center.

## **INVITED GUEST SPEAKERS FOR EDUCATIONAL OUTREACH**

- Mayor Michael Padilla (March)
- Eduardo Herrera (July)
- Taylor Bugg (May)
- Amanda Stanley (October)

## **OTHER MEMBERSHIP COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT**

- Chair Romero-Nichols and Vice Chair Robert attended the 2024 Kansas Hispanic and Latino Affairs Commission Gala, an annual event celebrating Hispanic and Latino advancement in Kansas.
- Commissioner Jaron Balderes worked the Pride Palooza event as an event organizer for the local Topeka Pride Month Celebration

## **2025 ISSUES WITHIN OUR COMMUNITY**

- Lack of information
- Misunderstanding
- Lack of involvement
- Distrust
- Lack of Resources
- Misinformation
- Negative Attitude

## **PROPOSED MODIFICATION**

None.



## MEET THE 2025 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 most of her life.

Carmen moved to Kansas with her family over 20 years ago. She graduated from Topeka High School, received her undergraduate degree from Washburn University, and earned 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 community involvement 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 JARON BALDERES

Jaron is a lifelong public servant who has varied experience in many governmental agencies. He served as a Forward Observer in the United States Army from 2006-2009 before beginning his academic studies and civilian civil servant duties. He has earned a bachelor's degree in Political Science from Washburn University in Topeka, KS and he also has an MPA from the University of Kansas in Lawrence, KS. He has served in civil servant positions with the State of Kansas and various local governments, including the Cities of Topeka, KS, Wichita, KS, and Kansas City, MO. Aside from his work in local government, Jaron now works for the Environmental Protection Agency's central budget office. His areas of experience include public budgeting, ordinance writing, public engagement, and organizational development. Jaron is also a Co-Chair for Topeka Pride's Event Committee. In his spare time, he enjoys sipping a nice light roast, trying new spots for pho, working out, and catching up on reading.





## 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.





## **COMMISSIONER MICHAELA KERLS**

Michaela was born in Wichita Kansas. She moved to Topeka in 2004 where she attended Washburn University. She subsequently obtained a bachelor's and master's degree from Washburn before attending Washburn University School of Law. She has resided in Topeka for the past 20 years. She is excited to work with the other commissioners to ensure that all of the members of our community have an avenue to have their voices heard. She encourages any member of the community to reach out to her whether through commission staff or if you see her around town to say hello and if time allows share with her your concerns and suggestions on making Topeka a more desirable city to live.

**There are two vacancies as of January 13, 2025.**