

2020 Annual Report of the Sharon Commission on Disabilities

Commissioners: Paul Remy (Chairperson), Susan Friedman (Co-Chairperson), Geila Aronson (Treasurer), James Newton (Secretary), Susan Myerson, Richard Seronick, Lois Diamond, Asma Abdullah, and Marcie Ostrow

The Sharon Commission on Disabilities had 12 meetings, 10 of them on Zoom, and another productive year despite the Covid-19 pandemic.

1. In January of 2020, the Sharon Library wanted to get David Harrell for its presentation on people with disabilities. David Harrell is an award-winning actor who was born without a right arm. According to the library, "He speaks with humor and humility and delivers a hilarious and insightful look at living with a disability." And his performance is appropriate for ages 10-100. David's fee is \$1,000, which would have been too expensive for the library.

Someone from the library contacted Geila Aronson, a Commission member, to determine if the Commission would be willing to help. The Commission enthusiastically and unanimously voted to donate \$500 for the performance and \$150 rental fee to the Everwood Day Camp, where the event would have been held.

The performance was scheduled for April 11. Unfortunately, the performance was canceled because of the Covid-19 Pandemic. The Commission got the \$650 (\$500 from David Harrell, and \$150 from the Everwood Day Camp) back.

2. In March, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Commission decided to have its meetings on Zoom. Virtual meetings are working well. But Commission members cannot wait to be able to resume having meetings in person.
3. Commission members wanted to donate \$2,000 to the Unitarian Church's Food Pantry and \$500 to the Sharon Fire Department. But the Commission can only use its funds to help Sharon residents with disabilities.
4. Commission member Asma Abdullah is also a member of the Islamic Center of New England (ICNE). ICNE members made face masks, some with clear windows so people who are hard of hearing can communicate, and gave them to the Commission. Then, in June, the Commission donated the masks to the Sharon Fire Department.
5. Chairperson Paul Remy was concerned about the disabled community during the 2020 hurricane season in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, the Commission invited Fire Chief Wright and Rob Maidman, Chairperson of the COA Advisory Council, to its June meeting to discuss this matter. Chief Wright stated the Fire Department could

handle emergencies and start bringing small groups into the shelters, which would be accessible to people with disabilities. If needed, generators would be brought in, and the Civil Defense would help, (supplying shelters with beds, blankets, etc) during a 4 or 5 category Hurricane. Also, EMTs and ambulances would transport residents living in assisted living facilities to the shelters. If there is a loss of power, assistance would be provided to residents who are on dialysis or oxygen.

Rob informed the Commission that the Governor probably would issue a “State of Emergency”, authorizing the National Guard to assist. And if needed, Mema/FEMA would build new housing that has accessible apartments.

6. Trustees of the First Baptist Church of Sharon are planning to make the facility accessible. In June Asma and Paul met with the Trustees and gave them suggestions on how to increase the Church’s accessibility.
7. The Commission liked Commission member Marcie Ostrow’s suggestion for writing articles for *The View*, the Adult Center’s newsletter. She and Paul started writing articles, such as signing up for the RIDE and getting handicapped parking placards, for people in the disabled community.
8. In May, the Commission awarded a Sharon High senior with special needs The Leslie Kriger Memorial Scholarship for \$1,000. He used the scholarship to help finance his college education.
9. Barbara Nelkin-Rosev, Co-Chairperson of the Outreach, Education, and Engagement Committees of the Sharon Racial Equity Alliance, attended October’s Commission meeting. We discussed the possibility of helping Afro-American and Hispanic students with special needs, if they are discriminated against.

Paul noted that people with mental illnesses have been shot when they don’t respond to demands, such as “STOP,” from the police. African-Americans have a higher rate of mental illness, and, as a result, they are more likely to be affected. Law enforcement officers need more awareness about mental illness. It seems to Paul that the Sharon Police Department is very good in this area. But he thinks all Sharon police officers should receive sensitivity training about mental illness and African-Americans.

10. Select Board member Hanna Switekowsky. Town Nurse Karan Waitokus, Kiana Pierr-Louis (Chairperson of the Sharon Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Committee (DEIC)) attended the Commission’s December meeting. They discussed how to encourage Sharon residents to get vaccinated for Covid-19. People with disabilities and senior citizens, many of whom with disabling conditions, are more vulnerable to contracting Covid-19. Paul who has Cerebral Palsy stated he is willing to be videoed while getting his shot, and put the video on Sharon Community Television and social media. This, he believed,

would encourage others with disabilities to get the vaccine. Kiana expressed doing the same because black people are also at greater risk of contracting Covid-19.

11. The DEIC and Commission members expressed their concerns about the brick side/crosswalks, located in the center of the town, which are not ADA compliant and detrimental to people with disabilities. The Select Board is now seeking funding from Town road funds or state Chapter 90 road funds to replace them with cement side/crosswalks.

The DEIC and Commission also discussed the possibility of using closed captioning on Zoom, which would be beneficial to people with hearing impairments during Town Committee/Commission and Select Board meetings. Zoom has a closed captioning option, allowing someone to type what people are saying during meetings. The drawback with this option is that the person doing the typing needs to be fast and accurate. There are third-party services, such as Rev.com that use voice-to-text technology. Rev.com works well in many situations: For example, the Sharon Racial and Equity Alliance uses Rev.com without any complaints. But SCTV cannot record Town meetings on Zoom when closed captioning is being used. In the spring of 2021, the DEIC and Commission want to discuss with the Select Board about trying both the Zoom closed captioning option and Rev.com. Paul thinks there might be a solution for SCTV to record while using closed captioning...and this could benefit a majority of Sharon residents who are deaf or hard of hearing.

12. The Commission discussed purchasing “Smile Masks” for special educators and language speech pathologists in the Sharon School System. The “Smile Masks” will be purchased in early 2021.
13. The Commission also discussed purchasing an automatic door opener and 20 door levers for the Sharon Housing Authority. Door levers are easier to use than doorknobs for people with disabilities. The automatic door opener and door levers are going to be purchased in 2021.
14. In November, Marcie Ostrow resigned from the Commission.
15. The Select Board appointed James Newton to the Commission.
16. The Commission is doing well financially:

Handicapped parking ticket fund:	\$ 16,198.17
Donations:	\$ 1,227.97
General fund	\$ 500.00

As of December 30, 2020 the Commission has \$17,926.14, an increase of \$3,748.07 from December 2019. Funds are used to purchase equipment and services for increasing accessibility and inclusion for people of all ages with disabilities, in the Town of Sharon.