

**Commission on Immigrant and Refugee Affairs (CIRA)
6th Regular Meeting Minutes
141 N Front Street, Garage Conference Room
Date: January 6, 2026
6:00 pm -8:00 pm**

Attendance:

- **Commissioners:** Adeeti Jindal, Bartholomew T. Shepkong, Daniel Myungho Sim, Fernanda Diaz-Basteris, Kassandra Aguirre Ramirez, Mariam Isse, Nadia Jean-Jacques, Tasha Lomo, Naima Ilmi, and Sara Abou Rashed.

Absences: Rev. Dr. Alexander Y Sumo, Shahwar Ali, Bashir Ahmed, Kamran Syed Arif, and Jesus A. Valencia.

- **City Employees/Non-voting members:** Robert Tobias, CM Lourdes, Jessica Caceres, and Lindora Howard-Diawara

I. Call to Order & Welcome

The Chair commenced the meeting by welcoming everyone and expressed hope that 2026 turns out to be a pleasant year for all. With that, he called the meeting to order at 6:02 pm and asked for a motion to adopt the minutes to see if there were no issues to be discussed.

As a point of order, Rob reminded everyone that **“if you are not present at a meeting, do not vote on the minutes of that meeting. The most you can do is just abstain”**. With that, a motion was made by Kassandra and seconded by Adeeti. With no objections, all agreed that the minutes be adopted as is.

- **Question:** Regarding the minutes, Lindora asked if the current presentation format was okay, bulky or needed to be reworked. In the absence of detailed feedback, she asked commissioners to share feedback to help improve the process. In a statement of support, the Chair asked commissioners to share their feedback with Lindora before the next meeting to allow for potential issues to be discussed.

Additionally, the chair acknowledged that traffic jams can lead to late arrival of commissioners but, he encouraged everyone to arrive on time at meetings to allow for a prompt start at 6 pm and wrap up at 8 pm.

II. Check In on Current Events

The chair then yielded this section to CM Lourdes who wished everyone a happy new year and shared updates from December on what happened with ICE; how the city responded and where we are now:

- ICE in Columbus:

DEPARTMENT OF
NEIGHBORHOODS

- Columbus has an ICE Field Office. It's not new. They've been here.
- The Federal Government has put together and deployed Blist teams from D.C. to other cities across the country. It is not something that the local field office asked for, and, in most cases, local field offices don't even know it's coming. The Blist teams stay anywhere between a week to a month. For example, they spent a month in Chicago and during their last visit, they were in Columbus for less than a week (They may have come because of the press conference held by City Council in response to what was happening in Minnesota).
- Blist teams' deployments are usually without notification and in response to different things including news reports, perceived retaliations, or things that a local jurisdiction has said or done.
- Steven Miller and Elon Musk's tweet about the mayor gave indications that Columbus would be targeted.
- CM's office gave \$68,000 each to three organizations (Jewish Family Services, CRIS and ETSS) to assist with rent assistance, basic needs and groceries for folks who had family members dealing with deportation and other issues. Checked in with other organizations including Our Helpers, who were delivering food to families that were at home during the holidays.
- ICE was seen and confirmed to have been outside of schools and international stores.
- Volunteers at international schools were seen walking students to bus stops.
- Some schools didn't close but give students permission to stay at home.
- PSL (A local advocate group) mobilized about 400 people outside of the hotel where ICE was suspected to be staying- CM Lourdes and Council President Shannon also participated.
- There's been lots of grassroots efforts made by other organizations seen to also be delivering food, etc.
- ICE did leave the city.

What this taught us about our:

- **Community:** This is not an effort that's left to the city alone. It's been a joint effort with everyone-grassroots organizations, community members, etc. The Community Stepped up!
 - Our Helpers delivered close to a thousand meals in the first few days and, had an abundance of volunteers.
 - There were 400 people at PSL on the standby and ready to be activated.
 - 150 whistles were by a group and shared out to the communities.
- **Vulnerabilities:** The experience taught us where we have vulnerabilities and where we need to help the community most.
- **Others:**
 - The February event for the commission is still being planned to help meet some of the needs of communities. However, some adjustments will be made and shared later.
 - A meeting was held with the Department of Neighborhoods at their Cleveland office.

- A CMC forum is coming up on the Haitian community on January 21st @ Veterans Museum during lunch time.
- Meetings have been held with other civic and grassroots organizations to explore opportunities for coordination and support.
- There are uncertainties about when the Blist team will come back. But, as a city, we have a good barometer.
- Allies also stepped up as well.
- About 200 people were detained. Some have been wrongly detained, and some are in the deportation process.

Naima:

- Is very proud of the city's response. And appreciate everyone for their support.
- Shared that the Department of Health and Human Services secretary sent out letters requesting individual sponsors who brought folks into the country and who received public benefits to pay back dollar for dollar the cost of the benefits received. A case received by Our Helpers shows that an individual was requested to pay back \$66,000 within 45 days. The Direction therefore given is that if folks receive these letters, they should be directed to Legal Aid.

CM Lourdes:

- Cautioned that if folks receive letters or messages like the ones described by Naima, they should ask questions first and act later for validation. That's because scammers are around and misleading people. For example, though food boxes were being delivered for free, folks were being told that the boxes were paid for.

III. Introduction and Vote for a Virtual Meeting Policy

To jumpstart the conversation, Rob firstly verified if everyone had the draft policy before them and then highlighted specific sections needing attention. He asked if commissioners had immediate questions following their reviews.

He highlighted that the policy is required by the Ohio Revised Code Section 121.221 which states that any board or commission that wants to hold virtual or hybrid meetings need to have a policy that is adopted by that board of commission to do it. This therefore reflects CIRA's goal for having this policy.

Key discussion points:

- **Section 3: Notice of Hybrid or Virtual meetings:**
 - As in the case of in person meetings, public notices are to be sent as well. Lindora must therefore be notified of the specifics of all virtual or hybrid meetings- time, place, and the technology being used- Zoom, Webex; the account holder, login credentials, etc. These will help facilitate community participation.
- **Section 4: Public Access to Hybrid or Virtual meetings:**

- For hybrid meetings, separate details (number of participants) for in person as well as the virtual component must be shared with Lindora early to allow for timely noticing.
 - If a meeting is virtual, cameras need to be on. Virtual participants cannot turn off their cameras as the chair would need to ensure that quorum is maintained. The technology used must therefore be widely accessible and ensure that the internet signal is strong enough to avoid interruptions.
- **Section 6: Voting Procedures:**
- All votes taken at a virtual or a hybrid meeting should be taken by a roll call. This means that the chair of the committee should be taking down everyone's name and documenting whether they are voting in the affirmative or negative. This helps keep track of who's voting.
- **Section 7: Technical Requirements:**
- In case of technical difficulties wherein someone signal drops off the meeting for example, the meeting would need to be paused until the person/people can reconnect and quorum is re-established.
- **Section 8: Limitations on virtual meetings:**
- The stipulations should generally not apply to CIRA. But if issues come up, legal guidance will be provided by Rob.
- **Section 9: Hearings:**
- Unlike most commissions, the stipulations should generally not apply to CIRA. But if issues come up, legal guidance will be provided by Rob.
- **Section 10: Recording and Documentation:**
- Decisions must be made regarding whether the meetings need to be recorded. If recorded, the recordings can then serve as the minutes which would then become a public record that would need to be maintained. **A key question to consider is Where are the recordings of meetings being maintained?** If it's a Webex or Zoom account, it can be saved to a cloud of the account holder. **A second question would be who's maintaining the account?**
 - Recording would need to be maintained for up to two years and not longer.
 - To get around recording issues, someone can be designated to take the minutes of each meeting. All minutes must then be adopted and filed.

Questions:

- Lindora asked if recordings could be downloaded and stored to the website considering that Zoom may have some time limits regarding how long recordings could be kept. In response, Rob mentioned that he doesn't know where the recordings would be stored (whether on a cloud or a hard drive) but that if virtual meetings were recorded and someone requested for a recording, they would need to be shared with the individual. If not, it would be problematic. As a result, he advised that it may be

best to initially start off by designating someone to write down the minutes until storage locations can be figured out.

- In reference to Section 7, Sara asked about alternatives if someone runs late to a virtual. Would the meeting need to be paused until quorum is met? Rob responded by saying that a meeting can start in the absence of a quorum for holding of general discussions, but a vote cannot be taken in the absence of a quorum.

- **Section 13: Executive Section:**

- The number of times needed for the committees are far and few in between. But if there are meetings coming up where an executive session is deemed necessary, commissioners should reach out to Rob for guidance on how to do that virtually but also ensure that the subject matter is right.

- **Section 14: Policy Review:**

- There's no requirement for reviews to be held every year but if during the process commissioners determine that a review needs to be done, Rob should be informed for guidance.

To conclude, Rob reminded the body that prior to the meeting, only a small group managed to review the document (He, the Chairs, Lindora and Council Members office). Considering that the policy was received by commissioners the day before; discussions were being held for the first time and that some commissioners were absent, he also suggested that time be taken to review the policy, feedback shared and plans be made to adopt the policy in February.

Following a brief discussion by commissioners regarding the challenges already faced in relations to maintaining quorum during committee meetings, the body agreed that there was an urgent need to adopt the policy. With a request for a motion from the chair, Naima made the motion, Kassandra seconded the motion and all was in favor. Rob then indicated that the final version of the policy would be sent to the chair for his signature and forward to Lindora who would then publicly notice the policy.

IV. Committee Report Outs and Discussion

- **Community Engagement & Outreach Committee report by Sara:**

- Had a very productive meeting with Naima who shared their strategic plan for review and identification of areas of alignment. The committee found the plan useful and will use it as a guide for their planning process.
- Priorities have been evaluated and the following proposals have been agreed upon by committee members for the Commission:
 - ✚ **The launch of an Immigrant Speakers' Series:** Intended to feature commissioners as speakers and highlight expertise and leadership in various committees. The series could be held every two or four months and will present an opportunity to connect with university campuses including

Columbus State, Capital, Otterbein, OSU. The committee would love to get a sense of when people think this initiative could begin.

- ✚ **A Community Reception & Roundtable:** As CIRA approaches 1st anniversary, the committee would love to host this reception and roundtable for community members to interact with the commission. Feedback would also be appreciated by the body.
- ✚ **Hosting of this an Iftar for Ramadan:** This year's Ramadan is expected from February 18th-March 18th. The committee proposes hosting the Iftar in partnership with City Council and other partners interested in supporting and collaborating. Here, CM Lourdes and Jessica intervened and recommended that the Chair Liaises with Joseline for further discussions as the community engagement team at city council oversees the annual Iftar ceremonies.
- ✚ **Resource Fair:** Depending on the weather and for safety, this could be in person or virtual. The plan is to host a resource fair that would eventually lead toward the creation of a resource bank as a goal.
- ✚ **An Immigrant Youth Summit:** Also in the long term, the committee is still interested in the idea of hosting an Immigrant Youth Summit but, further discussions will be held and more details shared later.

Other Questions and comments:

- Jessica: Shared that she checked with CM Lourdes and Joseline regarding the February 20th event and plans are being solidified. She however cautioned everyone to hold the date and note that the Run of Show will be shared later as part of upcoming updates.
 - CM Lourdes: Embraced the idea of a reception but suggested that it be pushed out to June because June is Immigrant Heritage Month. Secondly, it will allow for temperature checks and proper planning. Additionally, she said that hosting the reception in June could also serve as the Launch of the Speakers Series. Lastly, the passage of the February Budget will also allow for money to be available for support.
 - Sara: Proposed that in the Future it might be a good thing to develop an annual calendar of events.
 - Fernanda: Thanked Sara and the team for the job well done and exclaimed that the ideas were great.
 - Lindora: Embraced the idea of an annual calendar and suggested that it be developed early on during the year. Secondly, she asked Sara if the committee had finalized all meeting dates to allow for a final noticing of all their meetings. In response, Sara indicated that the dates had not been agreed upon but that the committee had planned to meet right after the commission meeting ended.
- **Policy & Advocacy Committee report by Naima:**
- The last meeting scheduled at the Fran Ryan Center for 12th of November was not officially held due to lack of quorum. However, with the presence of three members (Tasha, Kamran and Naima), the Chair-Barth and Dr. Dorothy Hassan from Our Helpers, an informal conversation was held.

- ✚ Dr, Hassan shared about her work and strategic initiatives being carried out in support of immigrants. Additionally, the committee learned about how Our Helpers has been able to mobilize community members, city officials and stakeholders who take part in their efforts.
- ✚ A follow-up meeting was requested for members' check-in and was scheduled for 22nd of December. Those present included Naima, Jesus and Tasha. Again, in the absence of a quorum, no decisions were made. However, the team reviewed the strategic document. This effort led to the recognition of alignments with the Community Engagement and Outreach Committee. This then led to the meeting earlier referenced by Sara.
- Strategic Focus Areas: (1) Immigrant and refugee safety (2) language accessibility, and (3) legal and civic navigation. Emphasis however is immigrant and refugee safety.
- The strategic approach is to advocate for policies and initiatives that mitigate harm and provide guidance to government bodies on the impact of legislation.
- Challenges
 - ✚ Legislation is very slow moving. As a result, more effort will be required for monitoring.
 - ✚ The team's approach is to request that representatives from Our Helpers of anyone in the legislative space be invited to CIRA meetings to provide updates on shifting legislation. This will allow the committee to focus on other things.
 - ✚ Meeting quorum: some commissioners have reported challenges with transportation and getting off work. The team is therefore excited about the policy that will now allow for hybrid or virtual meetings.
 - ✚ The next meeting is scheduled for January 14th from 6:30-7:30 at the Fran Ryan center and folks were encouraged to attend.
 - ✚ The committee also plans to strategically invite other individuals to committee meetings to share on different topics.

Questions and or comments:

- CM Lourdes: Suggested that if the committee comes across any individual or group, they feel the entire commission should meet, information should be shared to allow for a full commission engagement. Also, she recommended that the committee meets with PSL to explore opportunities for organizing together and build allyship because they have an incredible platform for organizing, especially during times like these.
- Naima: Again, reemphasized Sara's point about the idea of developing a collective resource which could include direct and indirect contacts to help with mobilization and engagement.
- CM Lourdes: She and Jessica are happy to share some resources with the committees.
- Lindora: Informed the body that the Department through the New American Program launched its resource guide in November and indicated that she will share the link with the commission. Secondly, considering the conversation about committees inviting others to show up and speak, she asked about both committees' effort to invite others to join

both committees. She reminded the committees that this was an earlier mandate and that they should remember that in the absence of those invitations, the committee formation wouldn't be considered complete. In response, Naima indicated that they had spoken about it at some point but haven't done much. She however indicated that they would go ahead and discuss it.

- CM Lourdes: Thanked Lindora for highlighting the importance of inviting community members to join the committees and mentioned that it should be easier to facilitate the processes considering that there's now a virtual meeting policy in force.
- Jessica: Also supporting Lindora's point, Jessica mentioned that having full committees could help facilitate planning and progress reporting as outlined in the city's ordinance creating the commission. She therefore encouraged the committees to look back and ensure that commission is moving accordingly.
- Naima: Asked Jessica about the locations to all documents. Fernanda indicated that the documents referenced are on google drive. Jessica added that documents including the legislation, bylaws and contact information amongst others are on the drive but not accessible to the public.
- Lindora shared that the Public Information Officer (PIO) at the Department of Neighborhoods has begun engaging with the technology department and the city's webmaster to begin preparing to update the Department of Neighborhood's site. As per the City Council's site updates, a meeting was being planned with City Council's team to ensure that updates are made as well. For time being, Lindora added that documents are currently on the Shared Drive at the Department and that the others are in the drive.
- Naima asked if committees could upload meeting notes to the google drive and Jessica said yes.

At this point, the Chair, Barth, asked for more questions or comments:

- Tasha asked if there was a budget for food for dinners considering that commission members come directly from work and would need some energy. In response, Rob said that providing dinners with public funds would be problematic because public funds are required to be spent for the public and not for the commission.
- Adeeti: Suggested that commissioners become creative and develop strategies to host potlucks during meetings to allow for sharing.
- Sara mentioned that there is a need for the committees to need some training support for capacity assessment etc. In response, CM Lourdes mentioned that when the would-be facilitators are hired, they could help or others earlier engaged could be invited. Alternatively, CM Lourdes mentioned that community members expected to be invited to various committees could also provide capacity building support. As such, she said increasing the number of committee members will again be useful.
- Rob mentioned that given the current bylaws, folks should be reminded that only 2 more can be added to the committees. Additionally, he said that if the committee wants to increase the numbers to 11 or 13, then the amendment can be made to the bylaws. Rob added that 13 is probably the maximum as the outside members cannot be more than the commissioners.

- Tasha suggested that the bylaws be amended now and requested information about potential recruits to be considered from the list of applications submitted during CIRA's recruitment process.
- CM Lourdes mentioned that she, Jessica and Lindora will review the list and make recommendations.

With that, the chair called for a motion to amend the bylaws. Adeeti made a motion to amend the number of standing committee members from 9 to 13. The motion was seconded by Cassandra. And all agreed. Rob mentioned that he would make the amendment and send it over to Lindora for publishing.

V. Community Events & Closing

- Mariam expressed concerns about reports about Mehek Cookes' activities across Columbus. Reports were that "The Whistle Blower"- Cooke who claims to be an Attorney was going around and harassing Childcare business owners.
- Naima asked about available tools to help individuals navigate hostile situations.
- CM Lourdes suggested that a Know Your Rights Tool/card needs to be developed for businesses.
- Adeeti suggested that Zohran Madani made a video about Know your rights and ICE. She encouraged everyone to watch it.
- MLK Day- Lindora to share about the upcoming event slated for January 19th and encouraged everyone to attend.

The Chair thanked everyone once again for their support and dedication and called for a motion to adjourn the meeting. Cassandra made the motion and Fernanda seconded. With all in agreement, the meeting ended at 7:32 pm.