

**Needham Unite Against Racism Initiative
Interim Report for Town Meeting
May 2021**

BACKGROUND

Launch of NUARI

In July 2020, the Select Board launched the [Needham Unite Against Racism Initiative](#) (NUARI) to foster a dialogue about racism in Needham and produce actionable strategies to ensure Needham is a welcoming and inclusive community. This included a listening session for community members who wished to share with Town officials their personal experiences with racism in Needham, their concerns, and suggestions for improvement.

This initiative is intended to be an ongoing effort so that together, Town leadership and residents can craft effective solutions to identified challenges. The Town is committed to ensuring that all residents of Needham are safe and free from racism, discrimination, and hate.

In September, the Select Board finalized the charge of the NUARI Working Group and appointed its founding members. In October, Town Meeting Members adopted a resolution (Special Town Meeting Warrant [Article 17](#)) requesting that the Select Board “conduct a review of the effects of systemic racism in Needham and, if warranted, present to the 2021 Annual Town Meeting and subsequent Annual and Special Town Meetings specific warrant articles aimed at improvement.” The Needham Unite Against Racism Initiative is driven by a shared understanding, as reflected in both the NUARI Charge and Article 17, that proactive dialogue and actions are needed to achieve racial equity in Needham. This report aims to provide Town Meeting and the broader Needham community with an overview of NUARI’s progress to date, initial recommendations, and the work that remains ahead.

Working Group Members

Members:

- Ramin Abrishamian, Needham Clergy Association, Needham Diversity Initiative
- Matthew Borrelli, Select Board Vice Chair
- Marianne Cooley, Select Board Member, NUARI Chair
- Natasha Espada, Resident
- Dr. Olutoyin Fayemi, Resident
- Vivian Hsu, Resident
- Jen Howard, Needham Human Rights Committee
- Sue Neckes, School Committee
- Marcus Nelson, Needham Human Rights Committee
- Jay Spencer, owner, French Press
- Oluwatoni Ajayi, student (stepped down)
- Dennis Zhang, Resident (stepped down)

Staff:

- Kate Fitzpatrick, Town Manager
- Katie King, Assistant Town Manager/Director of Operations

NUARI Working Group Charge

1. Articulating a recommended vision for racial equity in Needham and guiding principles that will inform future actions.
2. Establishing protocols and practices for getting community feedback, with a specific focus on engaging Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), and others who have been marginalized due to their race or ethnicity. Strategies should be identified to keep Needham's racial equity work informed by BIPOC input but owned by Town leadership and the broader community.
3. Setting up communication structures to ensure the sustainability and accountability of the Initiative.
4. Discussing and prioritizing other recommendations that have been submitted to the Select Board.
5. Making recommendations to the Select Board about future action.

WORK TO DATE

The NUARI Working Group has met 2 - 3 times per month since convening in October 2020. Members dedicated a significant amount of time to completing the first item of their charge: "Articulating a recommended vision for racial equity in Needham and guiding principles that will inform future actions." (see page 4 and Appendix A)

NUARI members were also asked to identify key areas of focus, which they ranked in this priority order:

- Policing
- Schools
- Housing
- Diversity on Town Boards and Committees
- Neighbor Interaction
- Interaction with Local Businesses
- Diversity of Town Staff

These priority areas informed subsequent meeting agendas, presentations, and discussion topics. Content experts from Town departments and the Needham Public Schools presented to the NUARI Working Group to provide foundational knowledge about their work and existing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. The NUARI Working Group was provided with relevant documents, resources and links to existing studies including the Needham Public Schools Equity Audit, Attorney Natasha Tidwell's Investigative Report of the Needham Police Department, and the Town of Needham's Housing and Zoning Analysis (see Resources, page 8). These meetings launched the start of ongoing dialogues between NUARI members and municipal leaders about additional actions that may be needed to achieve our vision for racial equity. Those conversations have informed the recommendations included in this report and will serve as the basis for future discussions over the next year.

Beyond the concrete deliverables outlined in this report, the members of the NUARI Working Group have committed themselves to building relationships with one another and fostering an environment

where members can openly and productively grapple with the real impacts racism has had on individual members of the Needham community and on the Town, as a whole. NUARI Members have shared personal experiences, asked questions to better understand different perspectives, and modeled how to meaningfully engage in this uncomfortable but necessary dialogue. The hallmark of NUARI's work has been the candor, respect, and appreciation members have shown one another throughout this process.

Meetings

NUARI Working Group members were asked to identify priority areas of focus, which informed the meeting agendas, presentations, and discussion topics:

- [10/20/2020](#): Overview of NUARI and the Working Group; Discussion of Operational Questions
- [11/09/2020](#): Survey Results for Priority Areas of Interest; Discussion of Facilitator for Vision Planning
- [11/16/2020](#): Vision Setting Session 1 with Lisa Smith-McQueenie, facilitator
- [12/07/2020](#): Vision Setting Session 2
- [12/21/2020](#): NPS REAL Coalition presentation with Dan Gutekanst, Superintendent of Schools, Mary Lammi, Assistant Superintendent for Student Support Services, and Joanne Allen-Willoughby, Needham METCO Director.
- [01/04/2021](#): Vision Setting Session 3
- [01/11/2021](#): Law Enforcement Session 1: Discussion with Police Chief John Schlittler; Vision Setting Session 4
- [01/25/2021](#): Public Listening Session 1
- [02/08/2021](#): Vision Setting Session 5; Final vote on Vision Statement
- [02/22/2021](#): Discussion of Guiding Principles; Zoning and Housing Session, Lee Newman, Director of Planning and Community Development, and Karen Sunnarborg, Community Housing Specialist
- [03/08/2021](#): Town of Needham & Needham Public Schools Staff Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Efforts with Rachel Glisper, Town of Needham Director of Human Resources, and Alexandra Montes McNeil, NPS Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources; Discussion on Diversity of Town Boards and Committees.
- [03/22/2021](#): Final Vote on Guiding Principles; Law Enforcement Session 2: Discussion on Attorney Natasha Tidwell Report with Chief John Schlittler and Lt. Chris Baker
- [03/29/2021](#): Discussion of Draft Town Meeting Report; Planning for Public Listening Session

- 04/12/2021: Public Listening Session 2
- 04/26/2021: Final Vote on Town Meeting Report
- May and June 2021: Mapping Next Steps

Vision Setting Process

The Town partnered with Lisa M. Smith-McQueenie, an independent consultant who specializes in community culture, diversity, equity, and inclusion work, to facilitate NUARI's vision setting process. Ms. Smith-McQueenie is an experienced trainer, facilitator, and practiced leader oriented to integrating theory and practice. She holds a Master of Arts in Experimental Psychology from Northeastern University and has held numerous roles at Simmons University including Assistant Vice President, Organizational Culture, Inclusion, & Equity and Associate Dean for Student Life. She facilitated more than 10 hours of discussion, resulting in NUARI's recommended vision statement, guiding principles and intentional practices.

Members of NUARI agreed that a vision statement and guiding principles on racial equity are intended to help make decisions and align goals and actions with the community's values. It should be heavily informed by communities of color who have been impacted by institutional and structural racism. After discussion, NUARI agreed the shared vision statement should include the following characteristics:

- it is where you want to be (as a community)
- it is aspirational and inspirational
- it describes an outcome that is meaningful, believable, and relevant.

The visioning process included electronic communication and in-person sessions via Zoom.

- Sending a pre-survey completed by NUARI working group members individually
- Facilitating sessions which included the following:
 - Confirming working group agreements.
 - Distinguishing among vision, mission, strategy, and goals/objectives.
 - Establishing a shared language bank, vocabulary, or glossary of terms.
 - Discussing emerging themes and identifying focus areas.
 - Reviewing and analyzing sample statements, drafts, and formats.
 - considering values and guiding principles.
- Hosting a public listening session on 1/25/2021.
- Reviewing public feedback received from session, emails, and previously published survey.
- Making edits and revisions.

The final vision statement, guiding principles, and intentional practices were adopted by the NUARI Working Group on March 22, 2021 and by the Select Board on March 23, 2021. **See Appendix A.**

KEY TAKE-AWAYS & RECOMMENDATIONS

General

Recommendations

- The Select Board should submit a resolution requesting that Town Meeting adopt Needham's vision statement for racial equity at the May 2021 Special Town Meeting.
- The Select Board should forward the vision statement and guiding principles to all Needham Boards and Committees for their consideration and integration into their goals.
- The Town should encourage Needham non-profit organizations, civic groups, and businesses to adopt the vision statement.
- In its bi-annual Town survey, the Town should include a question to gauge residents' perceptions of how welcoming and inclusive the Needham community is.
- NUARI will continue their work over the next year to recommend initial strategies, goals, and objectives as well as institutional owners for each area of prioritized work.

Boards and Committees

Key Take-Aways

- Town Board and Committee members volunteer their time and skills to solve complex issues and recommend policy that helps to shape the Needham community.
- The Town Charter details which Board and Committee members are to be elected or appointed and who has appointment authority. Many appointed positions are under the authority of the Select Board or the Town Moderator.
- While the Town has not collected uniform demographic data to date, historically the majority of elected and appointed members have been White. The proportion of representation by gender varies by Committee.

Recommendations

- The Town should make intentional efforts and identify creative ideas for community outreach to diversify the candidate pool for all appointed Boards and Committees.
- The Town should identify strategies and partners to encourage diverse candidates to run for elected office.
- The Town should take steps to measure efforts and progress on efforts to make Boards and Committees more diverse.

The Community

Key Take-Aways

- There are several formal and informal affinity groups in Needham that bring together people with shared identities or interests, but not all identities (e.g. culture, race, ethnicity, religion) have an existing affinity group.
- Needham has many community-based organizations and initiatives that are focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion broadly, and racial equity specifically.

- The Town of Needham has a vital role in advancing our shared vision for racial equity, but cannot be successful alone. Achieving this vision will require the engagement of Needham residents, businesses, and organizations in partnership with our schools and government.

Recommendations

- The Town should work with stakeholders to develop a discrimination complaint process and provide forums where individuals feel comfortable discussing their concerns related to diversity, equity, and/or inclusion.
- The Town should identify opportunities and partners to provide educational opportunities and community dialogues on the history of racism in America and other topics on equity.
- The Town should partner with stakeholders to create a framework for how community members can effectively engage in conversations around race, diversity, equity, and inclusion, to build relationships and a stronger understanding of different perspectives and lived experiences.
- The Town should identify opportunities and partners to host and promote cultural events and celebrations to be welcoming and inclusive of all cultures and backgrounds.
- The Town should explore ways to increase, encourage and assist minority-owned businesses.
- The Town should work with stakeholders to provide education to local businesses about the negative experiences of Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) individuals in local businesses and ways to improve.
- The Town should identify and engage partners in this work including but not limited to the faith community, the business community, hospitals, colleges, civic and community organizations, and neighboring municipalities.

Housing

Key Take-Aways

- The Town of Needham faces increasing housing demand and rising costs due in part to Needham's location as an inner suburb of Boston with four commuter rail stations, an excellent school system, and limited available land. Despite intense market pressures, the Town has made progress in promoting greater diversity and affordability of its housing stock including:
- *Increasing supply of affordable housing* -- The Town's supply of affordable housing has increased markedly over the years and has surpassed the 10% affordability threshold under Chapter 40B, now at 12.7%.
- *Further diversifying the housing stock with more rental housing* – While single-family homes have predominated Needham's housing market, almost one thousand units of new rental housing has been built in the recent past with one-quarter being affordable.
- *New funding to help existing owners and renters* – The Town has launched the Small Repair Grant Program for qualifying homeowners in making important health and safety improvements and the Emergency Rental Assistance Program to assist tenants who have lost income due to COVID-19 in covering part of their rent and avoid eviction.
- *Less restrictive zoning* – Almost half of the Town's land area is zoned for 10,000 square foot lots, relatively rare in other suburbs where large-lot zoning predominates.
- *Promotion of mixed-use, mixed-income and multi-family housing* – The Town has established special overlay districts to encourage the development of mixed residential and commercial

uses at a denser scale in appropriate locations. These districts mandate the inclusion of affordable housing.

Recommendations

- The Town should create pathways for racially and economically diverse neighbors to buy and rent homes in Needham.
- Now that Needham has surpassed the 10% threshold under MGL Chapter 40B, The Town should set new goals related to affordable housing, and identify strategies to achieve them.
- The Town should evaluate and prioritize policies and programs for encouraging the development of housing for individuals and families across all affordability levels, with a particular focus on those earning less than 80% of the Area Median Income.
- The Town should identify and address any barriers to fair housing in Needham.

Policing & Law Enforcement

Key Take-Aways

- The Needham Police Department places a significant focus on ongoing training to improve themselves, the department, and to ensure everyone's safety. Every officer goes through a 26-week Recruit Academy Training followed by an internal 12-week field training program. This includes reviewing Standard Operating Procedures and being shadowed by a plain clothes officer to monitor how the recruit operates in the field. An additional 40-hours of professional development is required each year by the Commonwealth. Some of these trainings include de-escalation, defensive tactics, use of force, implicit bias, firearms, active shooter, and taser training. The Police Chief and Lieutenants collect and monitor data relative to officer actions, and can require supplemental training to address areas of concern.
- Hiring and promotions within NPD are dictated by Civil Service. The Town has asked the Civil Service Bureau for lists of diverse candidates in the past, but have been denied. It remains a Town priority to leave the Civil Service system to increase the ability to diversify the Police Department.
- NPD aims to be a community partner, not solely an enforcement agency. They have forged strong partnerships with the Needham Public Schools, the Needham Housing Authority, the Needham Department of Health and Human Services and others. NPD officers serve on the Domestic Violence Action Committee, the Human Rights Committee, the Coalition for Suicide Prevention, and the Community Crisis Intervention Team.
- The Needham Police Department identified building trust, legitimacy, and communication with the community as a priority. The Chief identified areas for improvement including working with community members so they have a better understanding of the "why" behind certain police actions and creating opportunities to hear from community members about their personal experiences interacting with law enforcement and the impact it has had on them.

Recommendations

- The NPD should meet regularly with stakeholder groups and communities of color to build mutual trust and respect.

- The Town should work with stakeholders to sponsor a series of conversations between the public and police officers, including especially BIPOC individuals, to build relationships and a stronger understanding of different perspectives and lived experiences.
- The NPD should find ways to educate the public on the role of police officers, such as through a Citizen Academy.
- The NPD should emphasize training on mental health issues, threshold inquiries, de-escalation techniques and the impact of implicit bias on policing. Further de-escalation training in non-life-threatening conditions should also be considered.
- The Town should prioritize leaving Civil Service to gain greater flexibility within the hiring and promotional process to achieve a more diverse department which reflects our broader community.
- The NPD should implement all local components of the new state police reform law once additional guidance is made available. Following that, the Select Board should identify if any local policies or practices warrant additional review or changes or whether additional reforms should be made.
- NPD should review the Use of Force Policy after the POST Commission issues the model policy and determine whether NPD's policy should include a stronger focus on de-escalation.
- The Select Board should serve as the oversight body of the Needham Police Department until the POST Commission role is defined.
- The NPD should regularly report and make publicly available key enforcement data, broken down by race, gender and residency, to identify potential disparities and monitor trends over time.
- The Town should support funding for a regional collaboration with the Needham Police Department, Dedham Police Department, and Riverside Community Care to provide clinical support services for individuals with mental illness, co-occurring substance use disorders and trauma histories who might otherwise become incarcerated (see May 2021 Special Town Meeting Warrant Article 15).

Schools

Key Take-Aways

- The Needham Public Schools' Race, Equity, Access, Leadership (REAL) Coalition provides leadership and guidance on eliminating barriers to racial equity and supporting the advancement of all learners in the Needham Public Schools. The coalition was formed in 2018 and includes district leaders, school leaders, teachers, parents, community members, and students. REAL focuses on (1) policies and practices, (2) curriculum & instruction, (3) professional learning, (4) hiring and employment practices, (5) culture and climate, and (6) communications and community engagement.
- Recent equity accomplishments across the Needham Public Schools includes an Elementary Racial Literacy Task Force, Middle School Social Justice League & Launching Scholars Program, High School Castle Scholars Program, Portrait of a Needham Graduate and Courageous Conversations on Race, a full-year NHS course where juniors and seniors apply what they learn about how racism operates on a systemic level, both in our society and in the schools.

- NPS has a written protocol for how to respond to an act of bias or hate in the schools. The District includes clear race equity goals in school improvement plans that are presented to the School Committee. The District's evaluation system also assesses teachers, principals, and superintendents on their progress in being culturally responsive.

Recommendations

- The Town and the Needham Public Schools (NPS) should collaborate to determine how NUARI and the REAL Coalition can be complementary partners, including ongoing communication and coordination strategies.
- The NPS should continue to support the develop of curriculum and programs that further promote diversity, equity, and inclusion at all grade levels.
- The NPS should continue to use the Portrait of a Needham Graduate Strategic Framework to guide decision making and planning around DEI program development, budgets, staffing, data collection, and accountability.
- The Town and NPS should identify what community-based equity work is needed to better support the school district.
- The Town and NPS should explore opportunities for ongoing community engagement including but not limited to Voices in Unity, a regular convening of equity-focused groups in Needham hosted by the school district.
- The Town and NPS should identify opportunities for collaboration and communication with private and parochial schools regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives.

Staffing

Key Take-Aways

- The Human Resources Departments for both the Town of Needham and the Needham Public Schools are making concerted efforts to hire and retain diverse talent. The Town has purchased applicant tracking software that can hide personally identifiable information from applications, eliminating bias early in the hiring process. The School Department has explored new and creative ways to get job postings to a wider audience, including utilizing Handshake, a job posting software used extensively by colleges and universities to recruit recent graduates.
- There are robust efforts to provide professional development opportunities for all staff around cultural competency, workplace inclusion, and reducing implicit bias. NPS is identifying the skills and competencies required to achieve the strategic vision set forth in The Portrait of a Needham Graduate and aligning this with professional development opportunities and staff evaluations.
- The Town and Schools have partnered to launch Stronger Together, the first joint Employee Resource Group, created for BIPOC employees to have a safe place to share experiences in Town and to discuss ways to drive change towards equity. The Park & Recreation Department has also partnered with the METCO Program to promote hiring at the Pools at Rosemary and summer programs.

Recommendations

- The Town and NPS should identify and implement strategies to hire, support and retain diverse staff at every level of the organization.

- The Town and NPS should take steps to measure their efforts to recruit and retain BIPOC individuals and provide annual updates on progress.
- The Town and NPS should continue to provide professional development opportunities for all staff geared towards deepening understanding and becoming culturally responsive, anti-racist, and anti-biased members of the Needham community.
- The Town and NPS should analyze the pilot year of the METCO/Park & Recreation summer jobs partnership to identify opportunities for improvement and expansion.

NEXT STEPS

NUARI members have articulated a vision statement for racial equity (charge #1) and have begun making recommendations for future action (charge #4 and #5). The Working Group is intended to be temporary in nature. However, the work to achieve racial equity is long term and will only be successful if recommended actions are integrated throughout the Town's structures of governance and broadly embraced by the community. In the coming months, NUARI members will explore how to meaningfully engage and incorporate the input of those who have been marginalized due to their race or ethnicity (charge #2) and how to set up structures to ensure the sustainability and accountability of this initiative (charge #3). The NUARI Working Group will produce a second report upon the completion of this work.

Status of Charge

1. Articulating a recommended vision for racial equity in Needham and guiding principles that will inform future actions. **(COMPLETED)**
2. Establishing protocols and practices for getting community feedback, with a specific focus on engaging Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), and others who have been marginalized due to their race or ethnicity. Strategies should be identified to keep Needham's racial equity work informed by BIPOC input but owned by Town leadership and the broader community. **(NOT STARTED)**
3. Setting up communication structures to ensure the sustainability and accountability of the Initiative. **(NOT STARTED)**
4. Discussing and prioritizing other recommendations that have been submitted to the Select Board. **(IN PROCESS)**
5. Making recommendation to the Select Board about future action. **(IN PROCESS)**

RESOURCES

General

- [NUARI Webpage](#)
- E-mail address: NUARI@needhamma.gov
- [YouTube Recordings of NUARI Meetings](#)
- [Needham Human Rights Committee](#)
- [Select Board FY2021-FY2022 Goals](#)
- Adopters of Vision Statement

Housing

- [Town of Needham Housing and Zoning Analysis, Feb. 2021](#)

Policing

- [2018-2020 Needham Police Department Enforcement Data](#)
- [Police Policies, Procedures, and Information of Interest](#)
- [Attorney Tidwell Investigative Report](#)

Schools

- [NPS REAL Coalition](#)
- [NPS Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion website](#)
- [Needham Public Schools Equity Audit](#)

APPENDIX A

A RACIAL EQUITY STATEMENT FOR THE TOWN OF NEEDHAM...

Needham will be a community free of racism, racial bias, prejudice, and discrimination. Our residents, schools, businesses, organizations, and government will work together to identify barriers to racial equity and create solutions, opportunities, resources, and support for removing them.

1. We will work collaboratively and democratically toward a just, equitable, antiracist community.
2. We will work to identify and change current policies, procedures, practices, and cultural norms in Needham that prevent meaningful access to opportunities because of race.
3. We will create opportunities for the community to confront unpleasant truths and seek solutions that always amplify values of racial equity.
4. We will intentionally create spaces for respectful dialogue and difficult conversations toward racial amity.
5. We will actively engage with those who feel the impact of racism most directly, seeking their input, guidance, and honoring the wisdom of their experience.
6. We will commit as individuals to be intentional in our efforts to learn and practice anti-bias and antiracism, transforming our thinking, attitudes, and behaviors.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES...

1. Racial equity in Needham means that the experiences of people of color are the same as those of the white majority – from day to day interactions, housing opportunities, interactions with the police and other first responders, employment, and educational opportunities, etc. On the path to racial equity...
 - a. People of color will see others of color in leadership roles in government, business, the school system, and civic groups.
 - b. Our community will have opportunities to learn a more complete version of American history and its relevance to today's challenges.
 - c. Students in schools will experience equity with regard to all aspects of their education (e.g. placement, acknowledgement, recognition, engagement, discipline, curriculum, and co-curricular involvement).
 - d. People of color will feel safe, validated, and treated equitably with respect to public safety (e.g. arrests, use of force, motor vehicle stops, traffic infractions, handcuffing, and criminal applications).
 - e. People of color will feel safe, validated, included, and treated equitably in all Town-related activities (e.g. town meeting/government, services, and events).
 - f. In the decision making process, the voices and experiences of people of color will be honored and respected as valid (e.g. equity in hiring, engagement and promotion, programs and events are inclusive and equity minded, intentional anti-bias efforts are employed in all considerations).
 - g. All races will want to live here – Needham will be a desirable community for everyone. The town will take proactive measures to support a more racially and economically

diverse and inclusive population (e.g. housing access, mixed income, and diversity of housing stock).

2. A healthy and equitable community recognizes the harm created by implicit bias, intolerance and racism and strives to embrace diversity and inclusion by using a racial equity lens to promote anti-racist behaviors and attitudes in all aspects of civic and inter-personal living.
3. We value lifelong/ongoing self and group learning and critical social analysis to acknowledge and to further understand the dominance of white culture and privilege throughout US history, and the importance of disrupting racial structures that perpetuate it.
4. Becoming anti-racist means that we must tackle our own implicit bias, intolerance, and discriminatory lenses - thus, bringing about restorative justice, healing, and reconciliation to truly bring together the community we live in.
5. All members of the community commit to engaging with good will and respect in order to repair and build healthy relationships.

**SUPPORTING THE FOLLOWING INTENTIONAL PRACTICES WILL HELP NEEDHAM
REALIZE THE VISION FOR RACIAL EQUITY...**

1. Seek to increase interactions and create/cultivate friendships across and among the various groups
2. Commit to self-education to have a better understanding of and be more informed about race, racism, racial equity, race amity, and race relations.
3. Foster safe environments for, and listen to residents who are, directly affected by racism and racial inequities.
4. Engage in meaningful and productive conversations on racial issues with town/community members.
5. Support those services, materials, expertise, scholarships, and organizations that advocate for racial equity.
6. Stand up, speak out, and act against racism and racial injustice.
7. Encourage vision, transformation and advocacy anchored in democratic action.
8. Encourage and build public understanding of the need to eliminate racial injustice.