

**National Human Rights Cities Gathering,  
Washington, DC May 26-27, 2016  
*Summary Report***

**The DC Human Rights Cities Gathering** aimed to strengthen human rights city networks and advance knowledge about human rights cities and effective organizing strategies. In addition to helping explain the history and utility of the human rights city framework, the meeting helped highlight best practices for holding leaders and institutions accountable to human rights standards; lessons, opportunities, and challenges of building multi-sectoral alliances for human rights; and provided a space for discussions about the creation of an ongoing network among human rights cities. Links to selected slide presentations and other documents are [available here](#)

**Thursday May 26, 2016**

**Panel 1:  
Human Rights Cities and the global movement for Human Rights**

Stakeholder engagement (particularly those who are most disenfranchised) with an organizing structure, are key to a successful human rights movement. The movement should consider the intersections of different groups and perspectives and the structural drivers of inequality and oppression. The same movement can demand U.S. to comply with various human rights treaties.

According to **Standish Willis**, who discussed “*Human rights organizing over the long haul: A look at the history of human rights and movement internationalism*,” there is great need to connect today’s struggles to international human rights movement. In Stan’s work, the Convention against Torture (CAT) created an opportunity to highlight the hypocrisy of U.S. policies based on his work in Chicago. The claims against Chicago police officers included more than 100 cases of torture and clearly “embarrassed” the U.S. government, challenging its claims of being a global human rights leader. This contributed to winning an indictment against former police officer Jon Burge within 6 months. Chicago succeeded because there were deliberate efforts to create spaces to report back to the community about the work happening internationally. Building a movement is needed to create pressure that will ensure U.S. compliance with human rights treaties. Human rights cities can be a useful platform for helping ensure that leaders do not just support human rights “in name only.” It is critical that residents be engaged in the process and have a chance to learn about and discuss the documents as they were being developed. Willis reported back to community groups as the case proceeded. Intentionality was required to engage the Black community and the working class in ways that respect and build upon their experiences. Willis also discussed links to the history of African American struggles for human rights, which have long international roots. For instance W.E.B. Dubois issued an “Appeal to the World” in 1947. Yet, as Michele Alexander pointed out in her book, *The New Jim Crow*, the Roosevelt administration worked to distance the Black movement from the emerging UN human rights process. In 1951 the Civil Rights Congress delivered its petition *We Charge Genocide* to UN officials. The Black movement and its leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. have been sanitized today, and we need to recall this history in our work ahead.

**Ejim Dike, US Human Rights Network (USHRN)**, *Using the international human rights framework - the political moment*, discussed the work of USHRN as part of a global human rights movement,

working to hold the U.S. government accountable to human rights. USHRN plays a key role in building movements across issues. The organization’s mission is to ensure that the most impacted groups are able to participate directly in the international human rights monitoring and review processes. USHRN delegations to UN meetings have included the Dream Defenders, formerly incarcerated people, and families of victims of police violence. The Network is one of the only groups bringing marginalized folks into international spaces. It is critical that those most affected by rights violations are represented in the UN and have a voice in shaping the solutions; envisioning the kind of world we want to live in. We’re doing “human rights learning by praxis.”

**Cathy Albisa, National Economic & Social Rights Initiative (NESRI), *Organizing for Human Rights in the US-Challenges and opportunities***, explained that our cities continue to be centers of inequalities instead of human rights. Most of human rights interlock and intersect; and a movement is needed to enforce them. As a movement we should think about the underlying structural drivers of inequality and oppression, with multiple groups working in multiple perspectives. For example, NESRI’s campaign in Baltimore with the Housing Roundtable helped generate \$40 million/year of contribution to a Community Land Trust that helps rehabilitate properties. This land trust ensures community control of public housing resources, which is key (See [Housing Roundtable Report](#)). A critical lesson is that we need to *organize ourselves structurally for human rights*.

**Jacqui Patterson, NAACP *Centering racial and environmental justice in a human rights framework***. Politically disenfranchised communities are disproportionately communities of color, and with U.S. law protecting polluters more than residents, these “sacrifice zones” are forced to relinquish their lives, health, and homes to support the consumerist culture we live in. Native Americans are especially burdened as their lands are exploited for fossil fuels while many indigenous residents lack access to electricity. Flint, Michigan demonstrated how the disenfranchisement of residents enabled the privatization and corruption that undermined community health. *We need a radical shift from extraction to human rights*. Examples of campaigns aimed at transforming the conversation by transforming the ways we organize include: Just Transition, Climate Justice Alliance, and Interfaith Investment Action Group, Zero-Waste/ Incinerator Action Coalition, Building Equity and Alignment Coalition.

**Cindy Soohoo , Human Rights and Gender Justice Clinic, CUNY Law School, *Human Rights Cities: Challenges and Possibilities***.

Human rights change doesn't come from Paris or Geneva—it involves local organizing to help articulate shared commitments and to unite in struggle for these commitments, with human rights experts and the larger international community, including Human Rights (HR) cities supporting local struggles. We need to express commitment to human rights cities then generate a human rights vision and solutions that guide our demands and link community experiences and needs to universal human rights. HR city organizing also involves shaping how cities do things. City governments are typically organized to maximize economic interests, and we need to organize to make human rights a policy priority.

## **Panel 2: Comparing Models of Human Rights City Organizing**

Human rights cities have different opportunities and priorities. DC’s Human Rights Steering Committee’s work focused on holding the city accountable to its commitment to becoming a human

rights city. In Eugene, OR, advocates worked around addressing decriminalization of homelessness, language access, and human rights education. Similarly, Mountain View, CA focused on housing shortages, homelessness, gentrification, and minimum wage. In Pittsburgh, PA, activities aimed to expand political and legal imaginations about what is needed to advance human rights. Hawaii, the first human rights state, focused on passing international treaties on rights of the children and CEDAW. Regardless of the issues each human rights city addresses, each city is organized around norms and principles of human rights.

### **Michele Grigolo**

A “Human Rights City” is a city organized around norms and principles of human rights, a place where people and local government behave and conduct themselves in ways consistent with human rights. Michele stressed the importance of *human rights socialization* to the work of building human rights cities. Public officials need to be socialized to respond to human rights norms: they now typically face more pressures to prioritize other norms related to business and economic growth. Organizing work needs to re-socialize our communities. Organizers and city leaders need to be proactive to create a new discourse that reinforces human rights. And effective human rights cities are ones where there is collaboration between government and civil society, although organizers need to be cautious of elite efforts to co-opt our movements.

### **Monica Jones-Martinez, Erica Rogers, David Schwartzman, Diana Pillsbury (Washington DC).**

Washington DC became first human rights city in the US in 2008, on the 60th anniversary of UDHR. The Human Rights Steering Committee helps monitor and hold officials accountable to the commitment to become a human rights city. The assessment report is one tool the Steering Committee developed to help monitor progress and collect information, and they made their [second assessment report](#) in December, 2015. Other organizers from Washington DC discussed human rights education strategies, including the American Friends Service Committee human rights curriculum (discussed by Monica Jones-Martinez) and the work of Youth for Human Rights International (Erika Rogers).

**Ken Neubeck, Eugene Oregon** - Eugene has a Human Rights Commission that focuses on anti-discrimination. The Commission actively promoted rights by bringing in outside speakers, writing op-ed pieces around Human Rights Day, organizing Human Rights day celebrations, and supporting community coalitions. Eventually, City of Eugene leaders took notice and they saw results: i.e., the decriminalization of homelessness, language access in government buildings and documents, and widespread use of human rights language. [www.HumanRightsCity.com](http://www.HumanRightsCity.com)

**Jackie Smith** Pittsburgh Human Rights City Alliance - When the Human Rights City proclamation was passed in April 2011, there was no vision of how to implement this. The Human Rights City Alliance was formed in 2013 to bring activists and groups together to advocate for human rights. Activities aim to *expand political and legal imaginations* about what is needed to advance human rights. Examples of our work include: Outreach to [help activists think of their work in terms of human rights](#), inviting groups around the city to join “[Human Rights Days of Action](#)” to celebrate International Human Rights Day, promoting recognition of [Indigenous Peoples Day](#), and participation in Pittsburgh’s annual [Summit Against Racism](#). Pittsburgh has also worked to integrate lessons from other human rights cities into its [Human Rights City Action Plan](#). Some key lessons emerging from this work: Relationship-building is essential, as is intentionality in selecting organizing priorities and partners. Much of our work is consciousness-raising, human rights learning and cultural change. [www.pghrights.org](http://www.pghrights.org)

**Ken Rosenberg, Vice Mayor of Mountain View California**, a Human Rights City—Mountain View is a fairly progressive city in Silicon Valley that is impacted by housing shortages, gentrification, and homelessness. City leadership is supportive but needs to win some political battles. Mountain View already has a path to minimum wage of \$15 per hour by 2018. They are using Eugene as a role model.

**Joshua Cooper- Hawaii –the first Human Rights State**— celebrated International Human Rights Day on March 8 and International Women’s Day; also held career fair for the common good and a panel on citizen visions of a human rights state. Pressure from state citizens led the state to pass international treaties on rights of the children and CEDAW. Successful advocacy included student-led testimony and youth involvement in framing priorities.

### **Panel 3: International Treaties and Review Processes as Resources for Local Organizing**

There are treaty mechanisms and processes that human rights groups and advocates can use to raise awareness of various human rights issues and to hold the U.S. accountable to its human rights commitments.

**Rebecca Landy, US Human Rights Network**—Key ideas about human rights is that they are and must be understood and implemented in ways that are proactive and comprehensive and that reflect their universality, indivisibility, interdependence, and inalienability. In terms of international human rights mechanisms we can use three major treaty processes that the US has ratified: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) and the Convention Against Torture (CAT). Also available is the Universal Periodic Review of the UN Human Rights Council. USHRN helps link human rights groups in the US with these processes and provides reports and updates on these. In addition to the treaty mechanisms, there are a number of international working groups that visit the US in response to complaints. Finally, USHRN organizes **Human Rights Tribunals** such as the [one in Detroit](#) regarding the right to water. Tribunals are a good way to help people share their stories/experiences, draw attention to human rights issues, and educate about how the international human rights system works. They connect human rights language to people’s lived experience

#### **Tara Yarlagadda /June Zeitlin: Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights**

We have been collaborating with the USHRN to hold U.S. accountable to human rights commitments. We have had really good partnership with our focus on national policy and learning and collaborating with those at local level. Cities for CEDAW initiative—followed Obama election and appointment of Hillary Clinton as Sec. of State – and is still working to reach 100 CEDAW cities by 2017. The CEDAW initiative was endorsed by the U.S. Conference of Mayors. Many cities (not just traditionally progressive ones, also, e.g., Louisville KY) are working to pass related ordinances - lessons from existing CEDAW cities help—such as San Francisco’s experience in reducing domestic violence and Gender Equity Plans with clear benchmarks being implemented in cities like LA. This provides resources and models for other cities, and expands people’s *legal imaginations*. There is a need to focus on governments, with the idea that we also need a strong civil society as watchdog. For more info, [www.CitiesforCEDAW.org](http://www.CitiesforCEDAW.org)

**Michael Santos, Attorney, National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty**, stated that at the close of 2014, the Law Center got the three human rights treaty monitoring bodies that oversee U.S. human rights treaty implementation to call for more action on criminalization of homelessness, including specific recommendations to create federal funding incentives to discourage the practice and in 2015 the UPR made a recommendation on the point. While impressive, the real breakthrough is that through the Law Center's advocacy with the DOJ, United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) and HUD, those recommendations are being put into practices. The DOJ filed a brief in one of the Law Center's cases, calling out the human suffering of homeless persons criminalized for simply sleeping outside as cruel and unusual punishment. USICH actively addresses criminalization as a human rights violation and created new guidance on tent cities opposing forced evictions. And HUD used the power of the purse to penalize communities that criminalize. All of this is covered in the Law Center's [Human Rights to Human Reality report](#).

#### **Panel 4:**

### **Federal Government Perspectives on Implementation of Human Rights at the State and Local Levels**

Human rights movements need to build political will/ public voice/constituency for the U.S. to sign, ratify and implement international human rights treaties. U.S. government agencies have limited mandates, most of their work is restricted by technical/legal terminology, and they have limited resources and capacity for outreach to state and local officials. Movements can assist the communication with public officials at local and state levels by pushing for new mechanisms for consultation, information sharing, and coordination. Inter-agency working groups are a good start, but improvements are still needed.

**Jesse Tampio**, U.S. Department of State – The US is party to ICCPR, CAT, CERD and Convention on the Rights of the Child's 2<sup>nd</sup> Optional Protocol. Treaty ratification requires US government, among other things, to ensure protection of civil rights, ban racial discrimination, end torture, combat children trafficking. Regionally, the US works with Organization of American States and its Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Implementation work is necessarily local, and his office has worked to engage more with state and local officials to help them understand international treaty obligations and to help them bring that perspective to their daily work. This work has involved local and state delegates on delegations to international human rights meetings/monitoring bodies like the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). Since 2008 the federal government has brought state and local officials to every international human rights presentation. In every case, the UN body appreciates hearing from local officials' experiences. Human rights committees always want to hear more from local officials but getting broad support and maintaining contacts at the state and local levels can be challenging. The agency is working to adapt its educational materials to provide more accessible fact sheets, with materials drawn from USHRN and Columbia's Human Rights Institute. Civil society can help strengthen the work to integrate international legal commitments into local practice and the educational and monitoring work can help inform public officials and help guide practice. The biggest thing civil society can do is to press public officials—show them you are watching and educate them about these working groups and ways they should engage. Provide concrete suggestions and models for implementing recommendations from international working groups. Further collaboration and recommendations are necessary.

**Sofija Korac, State Department Office of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor**—Civil society plays a critical role in reviewing human rights implementation and submitting shadow reports. We are strong supporter of the UPR putting all countries, including the U.S., on an equal playing field. International consultations on various topics all go into our engagement with state and local level government. As a result of the second UPR review, 6 **interagency working groups** were established that connect State Department and other agencies whose work is relevant to human rights implementation. These interagency working groups do the work that comes out of the UPR recommendations (and other international review processes). Interagency groups have helped enhance our promotion of human rights with state and local officials and increased civil society participation, including US Conference of Mayors, Conference of State Governments, and National League of Cities. We hold regular civil society consultations in Washington DC and provide a growing network of contacts with UPR recommendations and USG positions on recommendations. State and local governments are laboratories of democracy. Each international review process or working group visit provides opportunities for outreach and education aimed at helping introduce state and local officials to international human rights mechanisms. We encourage civil society to also continue your outreach around the WG meetings and the visits. Fact sheets available at [humanrights.gov](http://humanrights.gov).

**Ray Peeler, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)**, said that there are many federal enforcement agencies and working groups that are not talking to each other. There is a need for better coordination. Civil society helped initiate the Equality Working Group at the Department of Justice (DOJ), which has led to better agency collaboration. EEOC comes from a narrower set of issues from the laws the agency enforces at the federal level. Two types of engagement at state and local levels: enforcement and cooperation around fair employment practices agencies. On the enforcement side, EEOC has jurisdiction over Title VII (employment discrimination) and Americans with Disabilities Act. Enforcement issues are turned over to DOJ for litigation. For age discrimination and pay claims, we have our own litigation authority and don't need to talk to DOJ. In regard to cooperation around fair employment the agency works on a limited budget to organize training programs, conferences and inter-agency cooperation/collaboration aimed at going beyond single issues to the larger language of human rights treaties.

**Eric Steineker, US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)**, stated that Congressional mandates limit agency thinking and discourse, and there are gaps between official US understandings and international treaties. For instance, HUD cannot affirmatively recognize a “right to housing” even though UDHR Article 25 (adequate standard of living) provides a domestic mandate. The goal is to change domestic norms while moving towards international obligations. Legalistic approaches are another limitation. HUD can only enforce treaties the US has ratified. But there are also opportunities to set longer term visions and using ideas of “norms” or goals vs. rights. HUD does a lot at state and local levels to hear cases but also do education, support, and capacity building at state and local levels. Fair housing initiatives include helping nonprofits get started to assist with housing provision.

**Monica Palacio, Director of Washington DC Office of Human Rights**, whose office was established with the DC Human Rights Act of 1977, covers 19 protective traits and has one of the most aggressive civil and human rights laws in the country with a large staff of more than 30. She discussed local efforts to implement inter/national human rights obligations through, e.g., Ban the Box (formerly incarcerated protected from job discrimination); language access/right to interpreter; safe bathrooms.

## **Summary of Discussions on Alliance Building & Where do we go from Here?**

Participants discussed ideas for strengthening local alliances and promoting human rights learning and for building a national human rights city support network. Discussion questions focused on obstacles to alliance-building, best practices and models, leadership, and strategies for decolonizing/ confronting institutional racism

### **Discussion Summary: Alliance Building around Human Rights**

- Framing human rights –can be vague, criticized as Western, hegemonic → need to focus on concrete material needs/ survival: Linking food-health-income-land/housing
- Challenges of organizing across race/class—need intentionality; providing food, child care, meeting near most affected communities
- Focus on the city-building connection to place and lifting up shared values of human rights, community, dignity
- Challenge of advancing larger human rights city strategy vs. problem of issue silos
  - Young people are easier to organize around human rights
- Housing/displacement as a cross-cutting issue to unite diverse groups (can link to food, discriminatory policing, income/job, etc.)
- Coalition leaders: creating space for groups to move out of silos—no one should ‘own’ the space/ collective; recognize differences
  - Helping people see that their work in terms of human rights
  - Getting vastly different stakeholders to understand their role in human rights promotion—i.e., promoting work of public servants as human rights work

**Friday May 27, 2016**

### **An Evaluation of Human Rights Cities**

Masters students at American University, Joshua Heath, Tahina Vatel, and Natasha Wheatley, prepared an analysis of human rights city organizing for this meeting. Drawing from interviews with organizers or government officials in six of the eleven U.S. human rights cities, they concluded that the establishment of a support system for human rights cities is essential to the long term success of the movement. Each city appears to have a different conceptualization of what a human rights city is and their programming surrounding that ideal shows differing goals and priorities. Such a difference in priority is not by itself a detriment, however, with the current lack of central goals and a joint concept to sustain the movement, each city appears to lack the support necessary to sustain its mission. In other words, there is a lack of sustained buy-in from most of the cities that have made a human rights city declaration. The lack of buy-in does not mean these cities are not working toward goals that support human rights, but without a sustained and focused goal it is unlikely these cities will achieve their intended aims. The authors of the study provided a forward thinking Action Plan and Evaluation Matrix to encourage each city’s progress. (The full report can be found [here](#)).

## **Strategies/Actions for Human Rights Coalition-building**

Revisiting the goals of our convening, participants discussed themes, lessons, and commitments aimed at helping advance human rights city organizing and strengthening a national human rights city organizing network.

### **Community Commitments/ Plan of Action**

#### **Organization/Coordination**

- Participants agreed to re-convene a national gathering of human rights city organizers in two years (2018). The meeting should take place in a formally designated Human Rights City, ideally in the U.S. south (the first two were in the north).
- A national steering committee will be established to carry forward the lessons of this gathering and develop resources and plans for the 2018 meeting. The Steering Committee composition should be intentional about prioritizing the voices and needs of those most impacted by human rights abuses and to recruit national leaders experienced at coalition-building within a human rights framework. Representatives from past host cities and from upcoming host city should also be included on the Steering Committee.
- Participants expressed an interest in developing our capacity to use free and open source technology and to ensure online protections of people’s rights to communication and privacy. The next convening should be used to help develop our capacities in this regard.
- Participants expressed an interest in strengthening our capacity to share information and to coordinate our actions. There is an interest in exploring how this might be done within the US Human Rights Network, with which many participants are familiar.

#### **Human Rights Actions**

- Participants committed to taking some action on December 10 as part of a national day of action to promote human rights Cities
- Human rights cities—should encourage their international “sister cities” to become human rights cities
- Participants committed themselves to organizing around [March 25 day of remembrance](#)—and work together to build and promote the archive project
- Participants agreed to honor and raise consciousness around Indigenous Peoples Day-October 12
- Participants agreed to support national focal points of human rights work, including upcoming UN special rapporteurs, the International decade on people of African Descent (USHRN’s Ubuntu Council); and work to improve local implementation of national human rights treaty commitments.