

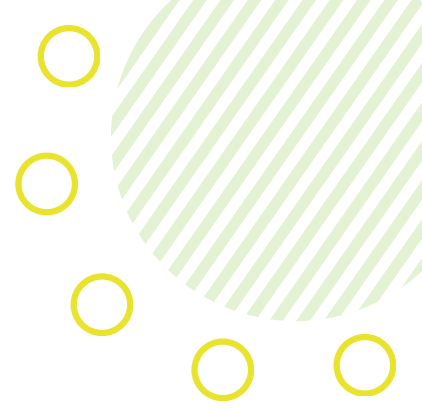
DES MOINES COMMUNITY IMPACT AND RELATIONS

ANNUAL REPORT

July 1, 2024 - June 30, 2025

*Adopted September 2025,
Updated December 2025*





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 DSMCommunityImpact

 @YourRightsDSM





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Community Impact & Relations Department

Vision

A city free of discrimination, informed and led by residents.

Mission

To **enforce** civil rights laws, **inform** and **engage** our residents, and **collaborate** with communities and city departments to **proactively** meet the evolving needs of our community.

Purpose

High quality, need-relevant programs and services for residents to achieve their full potential.

Core Values

People-centered
High Impact
Resource-driven
Impartial and Fair

Department Staff



Awal Ajak
Human Rights Specialist
Dec 2023



Alice Castle
Special Projects Liaison
Jan 2024



Tisha Carter-Smith
Community Liaison
Feb 2024



Manisha Paudel
Director
Oct 2017



Karina Sanchez
Senior Human Rights Specialist
Oct 2021



Holly Wilkens
Community Relations Specialist
Feb 2019



Wendy Acosta
Temporary Bilingual
Administrative Assistant
Mar 2023

**F
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Joy Mauskemo
Administrative Assistant/
Intake Officer
May 2024 - May 2025



Elijah Williams
Community Impact Intern
Sep - Jun 2025





Letter from the Department

Dear Des Moines Residents,

Last year was a year of regrowth, connections, strategizing and visioning. As a team, we have collectively created our vision for the community and mission for our department. We identified numerous areas for continuous improvement and re-ignited our organizational and community partnerships.

While being mindful of the budget constraints the City of Des Moines has gone through, we are continuing to prioritize the needs of our community and regularly looking for innovative and effective ways to provide relevant, quality services.

To comply with the recent changes in federal and state law and guidance, we have modified some of our focus areas. However, we have not lost sight of our commitment to serving ALL Des Moines residents. We continue to offer civil rights trainings, investigate complaints of discrimination, create and offer learning and engagement opportunities for residents, connect our community with resources they need, and support three boards and commissions. Below are some specific priorities of each staff:

- Tisha serves as a Community Liaison and is designing our Community Mediation program for residents.
- As the Senior Human Rights Investigator, Karina has been focusing her year on strengthening the compliance work of the Commission and providing support to the investigative team, while increasing the number of conciliations in her caseload.
- Awal completed her first year as an investigator, assisting in training while building her skills, and is entering her second year with continued commitment and growth.
- Holly is designing the Symposium Series and growing list of community learning opportunities, including co-leading Engage DSM. She is excited to be cross-collaborating with an interdepartmental team in developing a plan to increase resident engagement in the City's budgeting process to move towards participatory budgeting, and has earned her IAP2 Global Certificate in Public Participation.
- Wendy continues to provide essential bilingual administrative and intake support, contributing to smooth operations.
- Alice has completed the ADA Coordinator Certification Training Program and is excited to support both staff and Des Moines Residents with accessibility concerns. She also has been working with the Center for Public Impact and a team of colleagues throughout the City to address unsheltered homelessness in an innovative way, as well as the department's Engage DSM civic engagement program.

We look forward to partnering with you to continue to improve the lives of everyone in the City of Des Moines!

Thank you,



Manisha Paudel
Director, Des Moines Community Impact & Relations Department

Human Rights Commission

CURRENT



Kameron Middlebrooks
Vice Chair
2024-Present



Chris Espersen
Secretary
2021-Present



Nate Niceswanger
2023-Present



Claudia Thrane
2024-Present

Not pictured:
Kathleen McDonnell
2023-Present

VISION
Our goal is to make Des Moines a leading example of protecting human rights and equality for all, with a culture of inclusiveness, respect and peace.

MISSION
We work to advance justice, promote equality, and ensure the protection of human rights for all people in Des Moines through education, advocacy, community engagement and investigations of civil rights violations.

FORMER



Brett Burk
Chair
2023-2025





Letter from the Commission

Dear Community Members,

On behalf of the Des Moines Civil & Human Rights Commission, it is my honor to present our 2024–2025 Annual Report. This document not only highlights the achievements of our commissions but also underscores the relentless dedication of our Department staff, whose efforts are the backbone of our progress.

This year brought considerable challenges with shifting state and federal policies impacting residents and those committed to safeguarding civil rights. In response, the staff of the Des Moines Community Impact & Relations Department displayed exceptional resilience, innovation, and commitment. Their dedication to enforcing civil rights laws, broadening community engagement, and identifying solutions in complex situations has kept our city on the path toward a discrimination-free Des Moines.

We extend a special acknowledgement to Director Manisha Paudel and every member of the Department, both past and present. Their work, ranging from investigating complaints and securing resources for residents to organizing outreach and training events, has been both visible and instrumental behind the scenes. They have developed programs that not only promote fairness today but also lay the groundwork for a more inclusive future for every Des Moines resident.

The Commission takes pride in the contributions of our advisory boards: the Youth Advisory Board, Access Advisory Board, LGBTQ Advisory Council, and the Refugee & Immigrant Advocacy Strategic Taskforce. Each has played a crucial role in extending our influence, amplifying community voices, and ensuring accountability to our values of fairness and dignity for all.

This report demonstrates that progress is a collective effort. It requires collaboration among staff, commissioners, the City, and residents, as well as communities united by the belief that justice and opportunity should belong to everyone.

As a Commission, we express our heartfelt gratitude to the Department staff for their leadership under pressure and to our community stakeholders for their continued collaboration. Together, we remain steadfast in our mission to protect human rights and foster a Des Moines where every resident feels included and can thrive.

In Partnership,



Kam Middlebrooks
Chair, Des Moines Civil & Human Rights Commission

Youth Advisory Board

The Youth Advisory Board (YAB) advises the City's departments, boards and commissions about issues concerning Des Moines youth. YAB works with local agencies as needed and when deemed appropriate by the board to deliver services to youth and to advise youth on service providers. In addition, the board oversees in a responsible manner all programs and events sponsored by the board.

The purpose of the Youth Advisory Board is to:

- Advocate for youth issues to be addressed.
- Amplify the voices of young people at a City level.
- Include youth in the decision-making process at all levels, by providing our input and recommendations alongside our peers in the community.
- Identify issues that the youth of Des Moines face, by utilizing engagement efforts to create solutions.
- Connect youth and non-youth to:
 - Create action within City government.
 - Inspire youth to care about their potential & advancement.
 - Introduce ways to celebrate youth and their accomplishments.

Members:

Nanees Abakar, Co-Chair
Logan Corwin
Bradlee Gross
Hadley Harvey, Co-Chair
Stephanie Kiel
Akaiyah Lee
Natalie Park
Raegan Park, Outreach Chair
Angel Pavon
Kaj Robinson
Ian Schaffer
Deziyre Simmons
Hayat Yimer

Staff Liaisons:

Elijah Williams
Tisha Carter-Smith



Not all members are pictured

YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD COMMITTEES

Beautification

Mission: To engage youth in identifying areas in the city that can utilize art or greenery to create a more vibrant and safe community. We want to cultivate safe places where youth can freely spend time within the City of Des Moines, while enhancing the City's aesthetic appeal.

Accomplishments:

- Initiated the launch of a community gardening project. The key tasks involved maintenance and improvement of the Walnut Trace Flower beds, through the 2025 growing season.
- Partnered with Capitol View Elementary to donate plants to their garden, enough to fill all four of their beds.
- Assisted in taking care of these beds through the 2025 growing season.

Youth Advisory Board

Resource

Mission: To communicate ways to make resources more accessible and therefore increase youth engagement to those who oversee youth programming and resources.

Accomplishments:

- Increased social media presence and had more community and online presence.
- We contacted schools and local organizations with hopes of developing relationships with them, but to also educate them about YAB.
- Presentations took place in schools, colleges, and organizations around the community, concerning YAB and importance of civic engagement.

Public Safety

Mission: To research, understand, and subsequently provide recommendations for improvement for the Second Chance Program.

Recommendation:

- Conceived "Cocoa with the PoPo", a prospective interaction between teens and officers to interact in a communal and fun way, which typically ends after middle school.
- Develop a DMPD/Youth-centric educational video about the Dos and Don'ts surrounding traffic stops.
- Have youth assigned to 2nd Chance attend a YAB meeting and be prepared to contribute feedback on City improvement

YAB members continue to engage in City projects/programs and participate in community efforts. Members participate in tabling, proclamation readings, and facilitation opportunities alongside department staff and commissioners throughout the year, such as facilitating the Black History Month panel event. They also host various community events, including the Youth Experience Simulation, which is intended for adults to step into the shoes of youth who seek services from organizations throughout the community.

The Youth Advisory Board's 2024-2025 term was another great year representing the youth of Des Moines. They are grateful to all City departments and organizations in the community that supported their work. They will continue to serve the youth of Des Moines in their next term and look forward to more opportunities to better the lives of all youth in our community.

Youth Experience Simulation participant responses:

"I have so much optimism for the future because of the work y'all are doing. I think if more youth had a say in how our city and country are run, things would improve drastically."

"Great job and I loved it. It helped open my eyes even more to better serve youth and families."

"Today was a great reminder to put people and personhood first as we navigate providing services to the community."

Youth Advisory Board



Access Advisory Board

The City of Des Moines Access Advisory Board is responsible for implementing and establishing accessible access to all City buildings and employment. The Board reviews plans brought forward by City departments, such as Engineering or Parks and Recreation, to provide feedback on accessibility concerns within projects. At the end of 2025, the Board voted to change the composition of 15 members to 9 members. The membership is comprised of three individuals with a disability, one person who owns or is employed by disabled service providers, two architects, and three community representatives. Members of the Board are recommended and confirmed by City Council and are allowed to serve 4-year terms.

Members:

Robert Meddaugh, Chair
Dylan Jones, Vice Chair
Nate Stieler, Exec. Committee
Tye Reiman, Exec. Committee
Garland Armstrong
Ruth Thompson
Laura Gibson
Sylvia Nemmers
Frank Strong

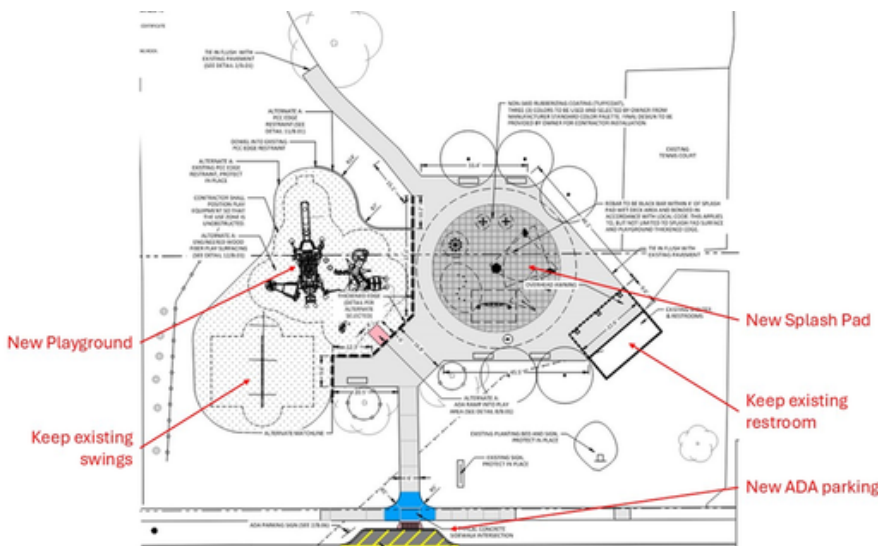
Staff Liaison:

Alice Castle

During the year 2025, the Access Advisory Board reviewed nine projects:

- Fire Station #4 Replacement
- City of Des Moines Northside (Reichardt) Community Recreation Center
- City of Des Moines TM Franklin Cownie Administration Building
- City Facility Expansion Phase 1 Improvements
- Central Place Levee Trail Phase 1
- Birdland Park Phase 1A
- Miffy Fountain
- SW 1st Street Bridge Park Improvement
- Jordan Park Playground and Sprayground Project
- Sayers Park Sprayground

The Access Advisory Board meets on the third Wednesday of each month except for December in the Board Room in the Municipal Service Center. Community members are encouraged to attend meetings and do have an opportunity for public comment at all meetings.

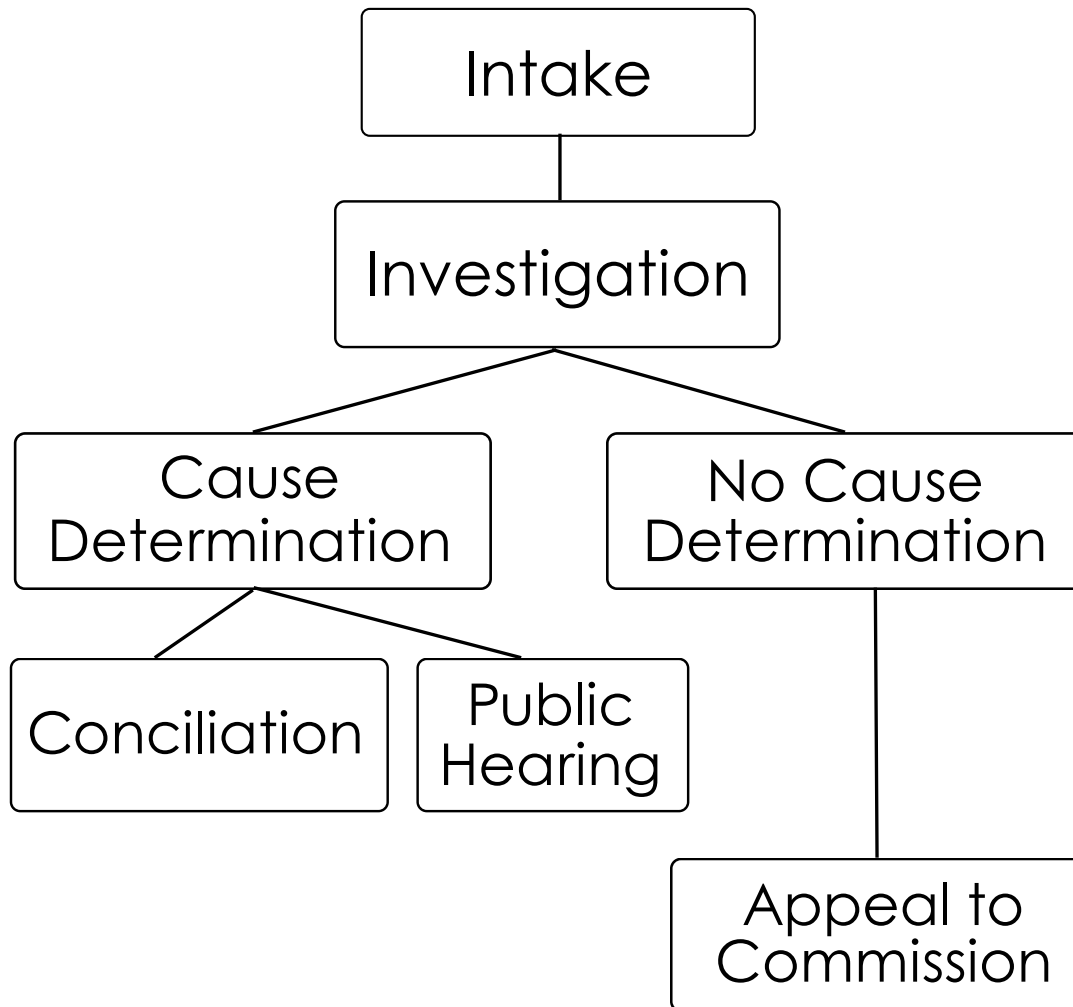


Proposed plan and graphics of the Jordan Park playground and sprayground



Miffy Fountain
Photo credit: Greater Des Moines Public Art Foundation

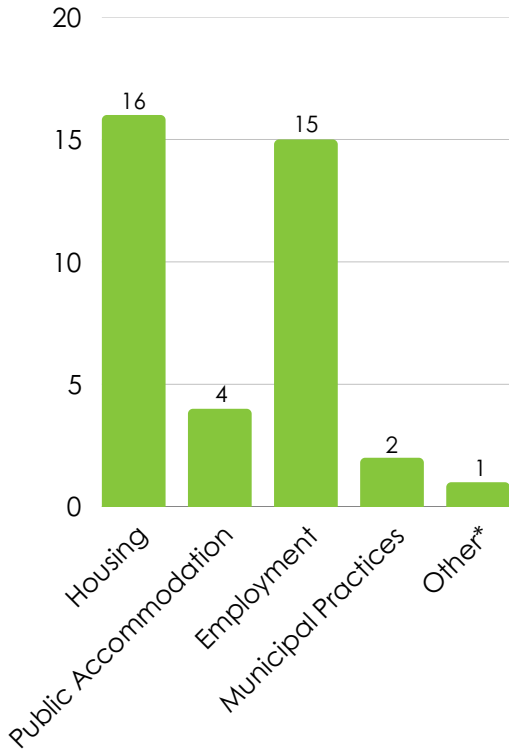
Our Investigation Process



The Commission serves the community as an impartial investigative agency. We do not represent either party, but we do engage in neutral fact-finding, provide mediation services for parties, and engage in conciliation efforts throughout all stages of a case. We also provide referrals for multiple resources and services and provide technical assistance on anti-discrimination laws.

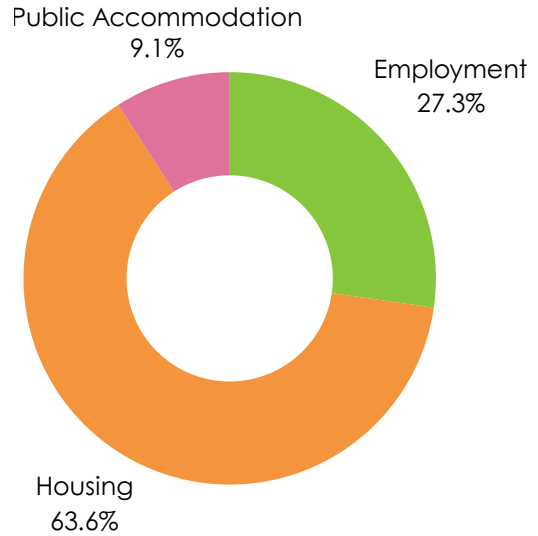
Department Investigations

Intakes by Type



*Some intakes cover more than one area or are non-jurisdictional.

Investigations by Type



\$12,000

Total amount recovered for Complainants through our mediation and conciliation services

1,211

Calls answered

21

Investigations completed

38

Intake services completed*

14

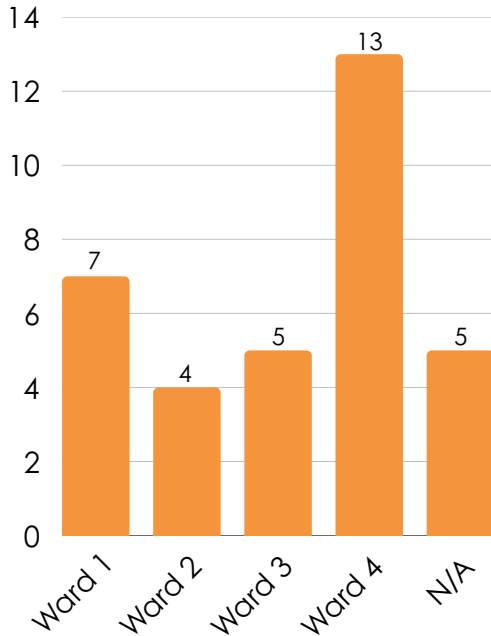
New investigations opened

*An intake is an initial complaint submitted from the public alleging a potentially jurisdictional charge to be processed by our office to begin the preliminary investigation. Intakes can also be submitted as referrals from partner agencies such as the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The intake process includes an interview and review of the complaint for approval. Not all intakes received by our office are officially filed as complaints. Some intakes may be dismissed for several reasons, such as: the Complainant choosing to withdrawal their complaint, the complaint being dual filed with or transferred to another agency, not having enough information to formalize a complaint, lack of jurisdiction, or the Complainant's lack of or limited cooperation.

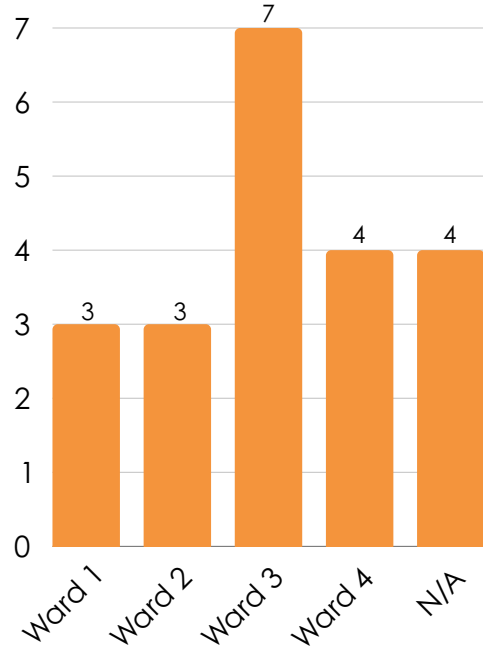
Department Investigations



Complaints per Ward



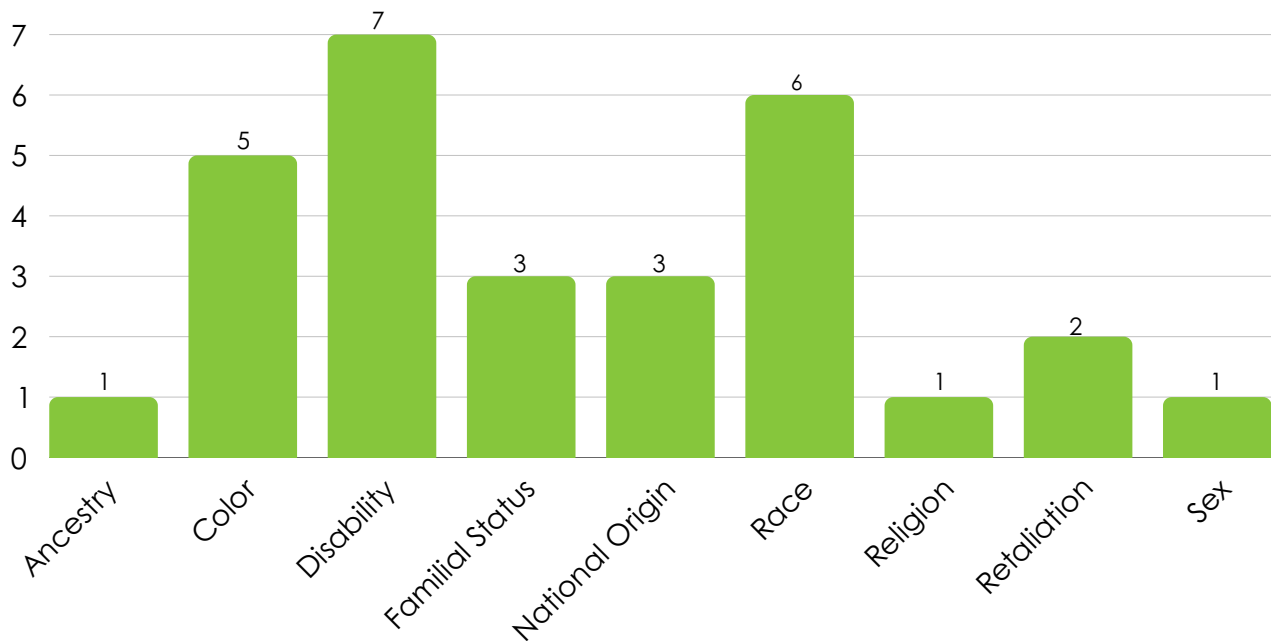
Closures per Ward



N/A = Outside of City limits

Closures by Protected Class Basis*

*Complaints filed may include multiple bases



Our Year in Photos



Youth Advisory Board Beautification Initiative



Genesis Youth Foundation Celebration



Fair Housing Month proclamation reading



Symposium Series Awards Ceremony



Youth Experience Simulation

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Advisory Council (LGBTQAC)



Members:

Isabella Andersen
Elizabeth Barnhill
Amy Blessing
Nicole Cabreriza
Maggie Canero
Laura Cangey-Symmonds
Emily Cohen
Héctor Sánchez, Jr.
Britt Shank, Chair
Maddie Rocha Smith
Corah Webber

Commission Liaisons:

Chris Espersen
Nate Niceswanger

Staff Liaison:

Holly Wilkens

The LGBTQ Advisory Council is an independent body of the Commission that raises awareness, educates, and advocates for the civil rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer residents and visitors of Des Moines to ensure the City's departments and services are fair and inclusive, with a particular focus on housing, employment, City services, and public accommodations.

LGBTQAC members are volunteers who are a part of or are allies of the LGBTQIA+ community. All members live and/or work in Des Moines and serve for three-year terms. Emily Cohen, Britt Shank, and Corah Webber served as Chairs and Laura Cangey-Symmonds served as Vice Chair throughout this fiscal year.

While this fiscal year brought challenges to the LGBTQAC, the group still found ways to benefit our community by the work that was done. They planned one community outreach event for National Coming Out Day celebration in October, which had a great turnout and was a great time to come together as a community. LGBTQAC members also supported the Department with various tabling opportunities, and were happy to have the City of Des Moines recognize June as Pride Month with the proclamation shared by Mayor Boesen on June 5th. With the support of Commissioners Espersen and Niceswanger as the liaisons, the group had productive conversations regarding the future of the LGBTQAC. While the group's reach was limited this fiscal year due to the legislation that was passed and in progress, they are confidently looking forward to the future and the opportunities it will bring.



Not all members are pictured

Refugee & Immigrant Advocacy Strategic Taskforce (RIAS)



Members:

Tika Bhandari
Keyana Graney, Vice Chair
Grace Johnson
John Kanyo
Sarah Kunur
Dena Lewerke, Secretary
Isaac Mundere
Fausiya Nur
Lily Okech
Bridgett Robinson
Catalina Samaniego, Chair
Vidal Spaine
Mak Suceska
Narayan Rizal

Commission Liaisons:

Kathleen McDonnell
Kameron Middlebrooks

Staff Liaison:

Holly Wilkens

The Refugee and Immigrant Advisory Strategic (RIAS) Taskforce of the Des Moines Human Rights Commission is an inclusive group representing the needs of the refugee and immigrant community in Des Moines. The group works directly with those impacted to identify barriers that prevent individuals prospering as Des Moines residents.

RIAS members are volunteers who are refugees, immigrants, first-generation Americans, or work closely with the refugee and immigrant community. All members live and/or work in Des Moines and serve for two-year terms. Dena Lewerke and Catalina Samaniego served as Chairs, and Keyana Graney served as Vice Chair throughout this fiscal year.

This year, RIAS made both fun and significant progress through a variety of initiatives focused on community engagement, research, and support for immigrant and refugee communities. The group completed an economic and housing development research project through a grant affiliated with Drake University's Omicron Delta Epsilon chapter. The grant dollars were utilized to offer incentives to survey respondents of the research. The project gathered over 400 responses with the findings shared with the Commission in 2025.

Throughout the year, RIAS participated in several significant events, including Juneteenth Neighbors Day, Captial City Pride Fest, CelebrAsian, and Roads to Religion, which allowed them to connect meaningfully with thousands of community members.



Not all members are pictured

The group also opened new dialogues with local resettlement agencies, including the Iowa United Nations Association, food banks, shelters, religious organizations, youth centers, and immigrant and refugee communities. In addition, RIAS members participated in RACI (Refugee Alliance of Central Iowa) meetings, contributed to local research efforts, such as the Drake Political Review, and proudly donated \$1,000 to support translation services for immigrants and refugees.

Community Outreach

Community Outreach, Engagement, and Education



Fostering meaningful relationships in the community and building connections is imperative to our work.

Outreach and engagement activities throughout this year included: Juneteenth Neighbors Day, Monsoon's Baby Gear Swap, Iowa Refugee Summit, Accent Neighborhood Resource Fair, The Outreach Project, CelebrAsian, the Drake University Head Start Block Party, I'll Make Me a World in Iowa, the Together We Can Conference, pop-ups at each Des Moines library, and more. At our table, we provide fair housing materials and general information about our department, our boards/commission and their advisory committees, free merch items, and community resources.



Community outreach, engagement, and educational activities conducted



In addition, we aim to create and strengthen partnerships with community-based organizations and groups through sponsorship, committee memberships and information-sharing partnerships.



and Trainings



Know Your Rights and Responsibilities Trainings

In accordance with our compliance work, our department offers a variety of free trainings and workshops designed for tenants, employees, and the public about their civil rights and protections covered by the local, state and federal laws. Each training ranges from 1-hour to 4-hour sessions.

Additionally, we offer free or fee-based training ranging from 2-hour to 4-hour sessions to landlords, employers, associations/organizations to inform about their responsibilities and the rights of their clients and employees covered by the local, state and federal laws.

Our department provides trainings and workshops in:

- Fair Housing for Landlords, Tenants, and Real Estate Professionals
- Anti-Discrimination in Public Accommodations
- Anti-Discrimination in the Workplace
- Fair Housing in Crime Free Multi-Housing
- ADA and Disability Accommodations
- Introduction to Community Impact & Relations and Our Services
- Des Moines Human Rights



training attendees



Symposium Series and Awards Ceremony

The annual symposium took a new format in 2024. Instead of a single day event to discuss civil rights, the symposium series offered multiple opportunities to participate and engage in topics surrounding civil and human rights.

In Fall 2024, Des Moines residents had five unique and free opportunities to connect and learn about social justice. The theme of the series was "Move Your Heart, Mind and Body." The five events were hosted in partnership with the Des Moines Art Center, Mindspring Mental Health Alliance and Can Play:

- "In Loving Memory": Gallery Talk with b. Robert Moore with Des Moines Art Center
- "Move Your Mind": The Hearing Voices Simulation (2 sessions) with Mindspring Mental Health Alliance
- "Raising Awareness Through Experience": Adapted Recreation Simulation with Can Play
- "Art For All": Social Equity Participatory Walk For Families with Des Moines Art Center

In November 2024, the Commission recognized residents and local businesses in our community who have made a difference through their steadfast dedication to advancing civil rights and justice at the Symposium Awards ceremony. The awards were thoughtfully designed and created by youth at Artforce Iowa.

Congratulations to the awardees and nominees of the 2024 Symposium Awards on being recognized for their steadfast dedication to the community:

Fort Des Moines Business & Organization Human Rights Award: Oakridge Neighborhood Services
Porter S. Dimery, Sr. Youth Human Rights Award: Nanees Abakar
Donna Russell Red Wing Human Rights Award: Sedina Traljesic



ENGAGE DSM

DES MOINES RESIDENT ACADEMY



Launching in Spring 2025, the City of Des Moines welcomed its first public cohort of Engage DSM: Resident Academy! After conducting two cohorts consisting of City staff and board/commission participants, the Community Impact and Relations Department continues to lead the Engage DSM civic engagement program.

Whether a long-time resident or new to the area, Engage DSM: Resident Academy offers an exciting opportunity to connect with the community and gain valuable insights into the essential services that keep our city thriving.



This 6-week program encourages residents to learn about ways to engage with their local government. Throughout the program, participants meet City leaders, gain insight into how each department operates, discover how to access City services, explore opportunities to join committees, boards and commissions, tour City facilities and get a first-hand look at how the City of Des Moines serves its residents.

More than 100 applications were received when the program was announced. Each cohort has a limit of 25 participants with representation from all four wards within the City of Des Moines, including diversity in neighborhood representation. There is no cost to participate. The next cohort will begin in September 2025.



“It was extraordinarily well done! Thank you so much for organizing and offering this program. I am sure it was no small feat. It left me feeling more engaged with and even prouder to live in Des Moines.”
- Spring '25 Cohort Member

Engage DSM Spring 2025 Cohort



Our Year in Photos



National Night Out



I'll Make Me a World in Iowa



Disability Rights Iowa Anniversary



LICHRA Conference



Youth Experience Simulation



Monsoon's Baby Gear Swap



Global Greens Farmers Market

Our Year in Photos



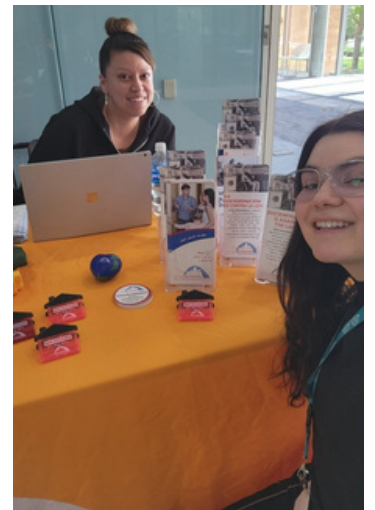
DMACC RIAS Housing Survey Outreach



Symposium Series Awards Ceremony



Black History Month Panel Event



Community Pop-Up



Symposium Series Awards Ceremony



Fair Housing Training for Landlords

Our Year in Photos



AANHPI Heritage Month Proclamation Reading



Hearing Voices Simulation Symposium Series Event



Staff in the office



Symposium Series Awards Ceremony



I'll Make Me a World in Iowa



b. Robert Moore Symposium Series Event

Our Year in Photos



Juneteenth Neighbors Day



Art for All Symposium Series Event



Pride Month Proclamation Reading



Capital City Pride Fest



Community Impact & Relations Department with current and former staff



Core Values:



People-
Centered



High Impact



Resource-
Driven



Impartial
and Fair

**DSM.city/CommunityImpact -
CommunityRelations@dmgov.org
(515) 283-4284**



DSMCommunityImpact



@YourRightsDSM



Thank you,
Des Moines!



#YourRightsDSM