

Human Rights City Alliance 2019 Annual Report

The following report summarizes some of the major activities of the Human Rights City Alliance in 2019. Since our first joint action on Human Rights Day in 2013, we have hosted and participated in events and actions to create spaces for residents to dream, plan, and demand a city that prioritizes human rights over profit and economic growth. We're calling on public officials to stop treating human rights as a by-product of economic growth, and instead to center human rights in public policy and planning. This requires efforts to change the larger culture and political discourse. In addition to the activities discussed here, we are engaged in ongoing efforts to deepen connections with human rights organizations and leaders in the region and to promote the [Human Rights City Action Plan](#). We are also a leading group in the national [Human Rights Cities Alliance](#).

Reach

Our email list provides an average of 2 monthly messages with announcements of local events (including ones organized by the Human Rights City Alliance as well as events hosted by our partner groups and by other community entities), human rights educational content, and information about movement-building and human rights city work across the United States and world. The current number of subscribers is just over 425, and we have 600 members of our Facebook page in addition to 100 followers of a second Facebook group page. In addition to those reached through these communications strategies, our events attract participants via a diverse array of networks and outreach strategies.

Major 2019 Initiatives

- ***Human Rights in Pittsburgh and the World:*** Public speaker series commemorating the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- **UPR City-Pittsburgh**—Mobilizing local participation in the national effort led by the U.S. Human Rights Cities Alliance to engage communities in the UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the United States, which takes place from April 2018-September 2020. The **UPR task force includes:** Alliance for Police Accountability, Casa San Jose, Green Party of Allegheny County, Hill District Consensus Group, Pittsburgh for CEDAW, Pittsburgh Human Rights City Alliance, Just Harvest, City of Pittsburgh Human Relations Commission & Gender Equity Commission, Urbankind Institute.
- **Housing as a Human Right**—We convened a number of meetings over the year, at the Racial Justice Summit and subsequently, to bring activists and groups together to consider how we can better advance housing in a more pro-active way. We developed a wiki page to provide resources and analyses that grow from this work and to connect our work with housing rights advocacy nationally and globally.

Coalition-Building

Evidence from human rights cities around the world show that building relationships among community leaders is a key part of the work. This resonates with our experience in Pittsburgh, and this year we've made some progress in advancing and deepening connections. A major area of work is around the **human right to housing** and our efforts contribute to the overall work of housing activists and groups by working to expand awareness in the broader population about the notion that *housing is a human right*. We have helped reinforce this idea to public officials at public hearings and are working to help amplify and support work to shift from market-oriented to human rights-oriented approaches in the area of housing.

The Human Rights City Alliance is leading work to bring groups together around the UN's Universal Periodic Review Process (See: [UPR Pittsburgh](#)). This has helped demonstrate the value of using

international human rights tools in community level advocacy. It has also helped us build connections with activists in other cities. For instance, we connected with activists from Washington DC for our housing justice community forum in October, and work is beginning to launch a partnership with leaders in Jackson, Mississippi. And work to build ties between community organizations and area universities is also central to the Human Rights City Alliance activities.

National/Global: UPR Cities In 2019-2020, the United States is undergoing a comprehensive human rights assessment through the [United Nation's Universal Periodic Review](#) (UPR) process. The Pittsburgh Human Rights City Alliance will be working with other Human Rights Cities to provide local documentation *and recommendations* for this review of the US human rights record (See: [UPR Cities Project](#)). The UPR Pittsburgh Planning Committee—which includes the Alliance for Police Accountability, Casa San Jose, Green Party of Allegheny County, Hill District Consensus Group, Pittsburgh for CEDAW, Pittsburgh Human Rights City Alliance, Just Harvest, City of Pittsburgh Human Relations Commission & Gender Equity Commission, Urbankind Institute—is developing a local human rights assessment and will use this process to build our work for human rights across the region. The initiative is helping us build ties to other cities and to the global human rights movement, and in 2020, we have an opportunity to participate in UPR lobby days with the national delegation and to join a national gathering in April.

City of Pittsburgh: Work with the [City's Commission on Human Relations](#) and [Gender Equity Commission](#) Over the past year, we have been expanding our cooperation with the Commissions in the following ways:

- We co-sponsored our **annual Human Rights Cookout** on the last Sunday in August. We hope to make this an annual partnership with both the Human Relations and Gender Equity Commissions. In addition to helping us engage residents in the diverse partner groups coming together around the human rights city initiative, this is a good opportunity for Commissioners to meet residents, learn about community groups, and to share information about the Commissions' work.
- The Commission on Human Relation's Executive Director, Megan Stanley has been an active leader in our work to carry out a local human rights assessment as part of the [UPR Pittsburgh Initiative](#), and this has helped publicize work of the Commission while contributing to efforts to document abuses and promoting recommendations for addressing these.
- Promoting housing rights: We worked with the Commission on Human Relations to organize a press conference to announce our submission of our local report to the UN's Universal Periodic Review process. This presented an opportunity to draw attention to the need for better legal protections for renters and low-income residents facing housing insecurity. ([See press release](#))
- **International Human Rights Day** is another opportunity for us to collaborate to draw public and officials' attention to human rights. We collaborated on a [media advisory](#), which highlighted the themes of our report to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review and pointed to key areas where improvements are needed, especially to address racial inequities.

Expanding work with Local Universities: Human Rights City Alliance leaders at Pitt have helped build the [Pitt Human Rights Working Group](#), a network of faculty, staff, and graduate students mainly at the University of Pittsburgh, with increasing participation from other area campuses. The purpose of this initiative is to strengthen working relationships between the University of Pittsburgh, other area universities, and community leaders working to address a variety of human rights concerns in our region. We aim to amplify human rights on the city's and area universities' agendas and to address issues where university practices negatively impact human rights in the region. The network also aims to build long-

term relationships between universities and community groups and connect more students, faculty and staff with community human rights work. This can help transform university models for “community engagement” to better reflect community priorities, perspectives, and leadership.

Public Testimony: Although our capacity is limited by not having any paid staff or sustained volunteers, Co-coordinator Jackie Smith was able to attend public hearings and give testimony on affordable housing (Planning Commission & City Council/ Inclusionary Zoning initiative) and on reparations for African American residents and on the City Budget. Along with public testimony, copies of our report to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review, [Racial Inequity at the Core of Human Rights Challenges in Pittsburgh](#), and of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Adequate Housing’s [letter to the United States](#) were provided to members of the Council and Planning Commission.¹ This activity is important for helping public officials learn about their obligations under international law as well as for helping local activists learn about how international law and institutions can be a resource for their work.

Organizational Growth

Work has expanded over recent months, largely due to the growing national movement of human rights cities and the changing political landscape. Threats to human rights have fueled new efforts to build coalitions and opened new opportunities for U.S. residents to see international human rights as tools for change. Our ability to take advantage of the foundations we have built remains limited by the fact that we remain an all-volunteer effort. To sustain and expand this work, we need more people to support our organizing activities. Assistance with coordination and logistics is most needed as our work expands. In 2020 we will consider options for building our resources and capacity, including the question of whether pursuit of nonprofit status or seeking to build partnerships with existing organizations is the best strategy for supporting, sustaining, and expanding our work.

Events/Activities

January

- **Racial Justice Summit 2019 Workshop.** We organized a session entitled, “*Building an Intersectional Movement for Housing Justice in our Region.*” The session was designed to build upon earlier housing justice work, including the housing summit. Carl Redwood, Hill District Consensus Group; Marcia Bandes, Pittsburgh for CEDAW Coalition; Randall Taylor, Penn Plaza Support and Action Coalition; Joshua Malloy, Pittsburghers for Public Transit; Facilitator: Michelle King, Teacher-Powered Pittsburgh.
- **Housing Justice Movement-Building-Follow up meetings** held monthly Feb.-June. We are participating in meetings of groups working on housing justice, convened under Pittsburgh United’s housing justice roundtable. The Human Rights City Alliance’s particular contribution to these different groups is: our work to shape larger discourses around housing as a human right, build Pittsburgh ties to national and global housing justice movements, and to push for fundamental changes in how housing policies are determined. We have also worked to support

¹ Copies of this letter were also sent to relevant committee members at the state level. More detailed description of this UN letter is provided here: [UN to US Government: Do Better on Housing Shelterforce](#) June 3, 2019, Jackie Smith and Emily Cummins.

other groups' work to affect particular policies such as the Housing Opportunity Fund and Inclusionary Zoning legislation.

February

- **Advancing Health Equity, Racial Justice, and the Human Right to Health: Social Policy Perspectives on Public Health**, Wednesday February 13, 4:30PM, Thornburgh Room, Hillman Library (*Part of the Global Studies Center's Ferguson Voices Exhibit and program on racial justice in global perspective*). At its 2018 annual meeting, the American Public Health Association adopted [12 new policy statements](#) on the most pressing public health concerns. The statements relate to child mortality, environmental health, gun violence, refugees, police violence and food security—all areas in which we find significant racial disparities. This panel features **Dr. Tiffany Gary-Webb**, Associate Professor in Pitt's Graduate School of Public Health, and other experts exploring the implications of this effort of health professionals to confront inequality and racism and its health impacts. Panelists will consider the role of scholars and practitioners in advancing health equity in these areas as well as the wider lessons for advancing human rights today. **Panelists: Monica Ruiz**, Executive Director, Casa San Jose; **Heath Cabot**, Assistant Professor of Anthropology, University of Pittsburgh

March

- **Economic Human Rights: It's Time for a New Social Contract!** **Cathy Albisa** is co-founder and Executive Director, [National Economic and Social Rights Initiative](#), Tuesday March 19. Homewood [Community Engagement Center](#). The National Economic and Social Rights Initiative is advancing a nation-wide call for a "[New Social Contract](#)" in this country to defend our economy, democracy and climate from threats posed by extreme concentrations of wealth in a few hands and economic development that prioritizes economic growth over maintaining the infrastructure, goods and services that families and neighborhoods need to thrive. A New Social Contract *flips the script on this abusive economy* and advances comprehensive, transformative, community-led solutions that protect human rights, build equitable systems for everyone and deepen our democracy. Learn about this initiative and how it can connect with struggles for human rights, democracy, and racial and economic justice in our city!
 - *Cathy Albisa met with local organizers during her visit, and this has led to continuing conversations and collaboration. Housing justice organizers from Pittsburgh participated in a NESRI-sponsored workshop in August.*
- **[International Day of Remembrance of Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade](#)** Monday March 25 12:00-1:00PM, African Heritage Room, 330 Cathedral of Learning. We held a commemoration to raise consciousness on Pitt's campus and in the wider community.

April

- **The Human Right to Water: Threats from Privatization in Pittsburgh and the World**, Thursday April 4, 4130 Posvar Hall--[Emanuele Lobina](#), Department of International Business and Economics, University of Greenwich, and Public Services International. Lobina provides a global look at the forces shaping today's heightened debate around access to water. How are pressures to privatize water utilities impacting cities around the world—including Pittsburgh? ; *Panelists* are representatives from [Pittsburgh's Our Water Campaign](#) who attended the International Water Rights Convening in Lagos, Nigeria.

May-June

- **Housing Justice Movement-Building**-Follow up meetings held monthly

July

- **"Wait! Who's Driving this Thing?! Bringing the Public to the Autonomous Vehicle Table."** July 14, 4:00PM.—Following our earlier work with Pittsburghers for Public Transit (PPT), we worked together to bring more attention to the issue of how policy makers and corporate players are advocating for expanded AV use in our city. PPT was releasing its new report on this problem and launching a campaign to bring public pressure on public officials around public funding for AV projects. A goal was to help more Pitt faculty and students learn about this proposed development in Oakland—one where the Universities have a strong voice and stake.

August

- **5th Annual Human Rights Cookout**-Sunday, August 25. **Cookout Co-sponsors:** Penn Plaza Support and Action Coalition, Pittsburghers for Public Transit, Casa San Jose, Pittsburgh for CEDAW Coalition, Pittsburgh Human Rights City Alliance, City of Pittsburgh Gender Equity Commission, City of Pittsburgh Commission on Human Relations.

August-December

UPR Cities-Community Forums

- **Human Rights & Immigration**-August 5: *Urgent Action Needed to Defend the Human Rights of Immigrants in Pittsburgh and Beyond*—Panelists conveyed the concerns and needs of immigrant communities in our region and the international basis for human rights protections for all refugees and immigrants. Recommendations for strengthening rights protections for this vulnerable group were discussed by panelists and participant small groups. *Speakers:* Kim Dinh, Pennsylvania Immigration and Citizenship Coalition; Laura Perkins, Casa San Jose; Helen Gerhardt, Just Harvest.
- **The Human Right to Housing**-September 16: Panel stressed that housing is an internationally recognized human right, not a commodity and the intersecting human rights issues connected to housing, such as disability rights. With this forum, we also discussed work in Washington DC and built cross-city ties with another Human Rights City and member of the U.S. Human Rights Cities Alliance by hosting an activist from that community. *Speakers:* Gerald Dickinson, University of Pittsburgh School of Law; Robert Warren, Washington DC People for Fairness Coalition, One DC, and the National Coalition for the Homeless; Paul O'Hanlan, Pittsburgh attorney and disability rights advocate.
- **Human Rights & the Criminal punishment system**-October 14: The United States imprisons more of its residents than any other country in the world. The U.S. is under increasing international pressure for its disproportionate harm to African Americans, immigrant detentions, and violations of rights of disabled people and youth. Learn about how policing and criminal punishment impact residents of this region, and how a human rights approach can help us address injustices and unfair treatment of returning citizens. Activist groups addressing these issues will discuss ideas for fixing a discriminatory system that undermines human rights protections for youth, immigrants, and other residents of our communities. *Speakers:* Megan Stanley, Pittsburgh Commission on Human Relations; Beth Pittinger, Citizens Police Review Board; Khalid Raheem, Convenor, Campaign for reparations and Black Self-Determination, & Chairman, New Afrikan Independence Party

- **The Human Right to Health**-November 11: Pittsburgh residents face serious challenges when it comes to health: our region’s air quality is among the worst of all U.S. cities, as are racial disparities in health outcomes including life expectancy, infant mortality, and chronic disease. Low-income communities lack access to healthy food and basic services. How can Pittsburgh residents come together to build solutions to these challenges and make human rights a priority in public policy and planning. This forum will identify challenges and opportunities to fix a broken health system and promote health as a basic human right. *Speakers:* Dr. Clair Cohen, Dawn Plummer, Pittsburgh Food Policy Council, Ann Sanders, Just Harvest
- **The Human Right to Decent work**-December 9: Minimum wage in Pennsylvania is tied for the lowest in the nation and at least \$1 lower than any of our nearest neighbors. Pittsburgh workers face racial and gender segregation in their jobs, contributing to our region’s shortcomings in pay equity. Many of the jobs in this region have come at a high cost to our health and environment. This forum will identify ways we can come together to make human rights and decent work a priority in public policy and planning. *Speakers:* Carl Redwood, Hill District Consensus Group, Jonathan Reyes, North Braddock Residents for Our Future & a newly elected Council member at-large in East Pittsburgh; Sarah Hansen, City of Pittsburgh Gender Equity Commissioner

Media and Online Articles

- [Immigration rights are human rights, speakers at Downtown forum say](#). *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* August 6, 2019.
- [Coalition to U.N.: Human rights in Pittsburgh are lagging for people of color, people with low incomes](#) *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* 15 October, 2019
- [Pittsburgh files human rights report to the UN & Passes City Zero Evictions Day Proclamation](#) *KDKA-Pittsburgh* (Video) Activist groups and city leaders are submitting a report on local human rights conditions to the United Nations, centering the problem of racial inequities and its impacts on residents' right to adequate housing.
- [Corporate Influence Threatens Human Rights in Communities Nationwide](#) *Common Dreams* October 28, 2019
- [Bringing Human Rights Home: New Strategies for Local Organizing](#) *Open Global Rights*, By Jackie Smith & Joshua Cooper-U.S. Human Rights Cities Alliance, August 1, 2018.
- [UN to US Government: Do Better on Housing](#) *Shelterforce* June 3, 2019, Jackie Smith and Emily Cummins
- [Press Release: October 1, 2019: Pittsburgh Joins Global “Zero Evictions Days” & Files Human Rights Report with United Nations](#) (October
- [Media Advisory: December 10, 2019: Pittsburgh joins other cities recognizing International Human Rights Day & highlights persistent challenge of racial inequities](#)

Pittsburgh Human Rights City Alliance Steering Committee

Marcia Bandes, [Cities for CEDAW Coalition Pittsburgh](#)

Brandi Fisher, [Alliance for Police Accountability](#)

Helen Gerhardt, [Pittsburghers for Public Transit](#) & [Just Harvest](#)

Michael Goodhart, University Human Rights Network, Director of Global Studies Center & Political Science Dept.,
University of Pittsburgh

Monica Ruiz, [Casa San Jose](#)

Randall Taylor [Penn Plaza Support and Action Coalition](#)

Co-Coordinator: Jackie Smith, Sociology Dept., University of Pittsburgh & Steering Committee member, [U.S. Human Rights Cities Alliance](#); Bob Glidden, Green Party of Allegheny County