

HALIFAX

## Group calls for independent inquiry into the ‘dumpster fire’ of bullying and harassment in Halifax workforce

By [Zane Woodford](#) StarMetro Halifax

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HALIFAX—The municipality is in the process of hiring an external consultant to conduct a review of its human-resources department, but a local group fighting for employment equity believes the municipal auditor general should conduct an independent inquiry into what it calls a “dumpster fire” of bullying, harassment, sexism and racism in Halifax’s workforce.

Equity Watch is an advocacy group formed less than a year ago to promote bully-free workplaces and encourage the hiring and promotion of women, visible minorities and disabled and Indigenous people.

Three of its members, Judy Haiven, former Halifax firefighter Liane Tessier and former Halifax councillor Jackie Barkhouse, held a press conference in Halifax on Thursday in response to a report released earlier this month.

That report, released and presented to regional council on Oct. 2, is the first quarterly update on the municipality’s work to address issues of harassment and discrimination in the workplace at Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM).

“The report is the human resource office’s response to a dumpster fire of harassment, bullying, discrimination, racism, sexism and abuse that has raged for over a decade in the various workplaces across HRM,” Haiven said during the press conference.

“Quite simply, we don’t trust that the city itself, under its current leadership, will investigate and correct its own misbehaviours.”

That's why Equity Watch has called for an independent public inquiry into the issues. It repeated that call on Thursday, and added that it believes the municipality's auditor general could carry out the review, as an "appropriate and cost-effective solution."

The first quarterly update that came to council earlier this month is the result of a motion from Deputy Mayor Wayne Mason in June for regular updates from chief administrative officer Jacques Dubé on HRM's response to multiple issues of harassment and discrimination.

Less than a week before that motion, a Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission board of inquiry found widespread racial discrimination and a "poisoned work environment" at Halifax Transit's garage.

That decision came more than a decade after an employee of Halifax Transit filed formal complaints of racial discrimination against HRM. The man's name is protected under a publication ban and he is referred to as Y.Z.

Dubé apologized on behalf of the municipality.

The month before that, in May, African Nova Scotian municipal workers held a rally outside City Hall protesting HRM's response, or lack thereof, to a 2016 external report examining racism in a now-defunct municipal department. A subsequent update on the recommendations in that report said one in five of them was "at risk."

Raymond Sheppard, who spoke on behalf of the workers in May, was at the press conference on Thursday, and said the situation hasn't improved since.

"I don't believe there's been a damn thing done," Sheppard said.

"I think they have given lip service to addressing the issues of African Nova Scotian employees, but as far as implementation, they've checked off a number of things, but the things they checked off initially had nothing to do with African Nova Scotian employees. They were just general things, not specific."

Before that protest, in December 2017, the municipality apologized to Tessier, the former firefighter after the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission found systemic gender discrimination within Halifax Regional Fire and Emergency (HRFE).

At the press conference on Thursday, Tessier said HRFE had promoted itself as a progressive employer, one that cared about employees.

"They were in fact an employer that hid, denied, stalled and dismissed all gender issues that I and other women brought forth for decades," she said.

"The Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission was not much better. It was only after years of fighting against that commission that was inadequately equipped to deal with individual and systemic issues of discrimination that I won the right to a new investigation, ordered by the Supreme Court of Nova Scotia."

Tessier settled the case and received apologies from HRFE and the Human Rights Commission.

"However, by far the most important victory in my case was the fire service's and HRM's admission that there was systemic gender discrimination in the fire service," she said.

But that didn't help another firefighter, Kathy Symington, who was engaged in a "sad and frustrating" process for more than 16 years trying to have her claims of workplace systemic gender discrimination, bullying and harassment within HRFE investigated by the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission.

The Commission reversed its decision not to investigate Symington's case after an Equity Watch press conference earlier this year.

Even further back, Barkhouse, the former councillor, said she brought forward issues of discrimination and harassment to senior management at HRM between 2007 and 2012, and nothing was done.

"It is time now for them to step up, to deal with things. There are people that hold a lot of information about things that happened at City Hall," she said.

Equity Watch points to this pile of cases, and more than 10 it said it's investigating, as evidence that Halifax can't be trusted to investigate itself.



As an example, Equity Watch pointed to another case that it said is headed to arbitration next month between the municipality and the Nova Scotia Union of Public Employees (NSUPE).

At its press conference, Equity Watch displayed a sign it said a municipal employee put up in their work space.

The sign has the word bullying in capital letters at the top, with the phrase, "Just because you don't see it, doesn't mean it's not going on" underneath. Below that is a phone number, 490-SAVE (7283), and the name "Halifax Regional Police."

That phone number is the police force's bully hotline, available 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday to Friday.

"Our photo is quite a bit larger than originally, which was about the size of a business envelope, small. This employee posted this in the employee's work area. The employee's supervisor ordered the sign be taken down, claiming that it contravened HRM's signage policy, which does not exist anywhere," Haiven said.

The municipality did not provide an answer to questions about that incident — or the possibility of the auditor general conducting an inquiry.

“Our question is: in this brave new world of safe workplaces that HRM is so proud to tell us about, why is HRM management still stubbornly refusing to budge? Why isn’t HRM management now championing signs like this? Because it has not changed its old attitude on the issue, we say,” Haiven said.

“We think it shows HRM management’s dedication to the traditional command and control, and that subordination trumps any commitment to workplace safety.”

The municipality is in the process of hiring an independent consultant to “undertake a comprehensive review of HR policies, programs and organizational practices that support a safe, healthy, diverse, inclusive and harassment-free environment.”

A request for proposals closed in August, and according to the provincial tender [website](#), HRM received bids from Royer Thompson, Grant Thornton, Turner Consulting, KPMG, PWC, and Deloitte.

“A final written and electronic report with presentation that incorporates comments and stakeholder input will be provided to the CAO on or before April 30, 2019,” said the quarterly report released earlier this month.

“A plan to implement the recommendations of the consultant will be made after that report is received and reviewed.”

Mason’s motion asked for the quarterly reports to include “the findings of the external HR consultant regarding HR processes, procedures and implementation” and “a plan to implement the recommendations of the consultant.”

But Equity Watch said the first quarterly report was vague and not backed up by enough information.

“This is something that makes us extremely nervous and that is why we’re still continuing to demand that the AG look into the situation of bullying and discrimination and racism in HRM,” Haiven said.

[Zane Woodford](#) is a Halifax-based reporter focusing on city hall. Follow him on Twitter: [@zwoodford](#)