

Halifax learned of diversity problem 2 years ago, but workers say little has changed

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Black employees of the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) say that the city has a diversity problem and it hasn't addressed the issue — despite a confidential review finding in 2016 that the HRM needed to “create a more diverse workforce, at all levels.”

A group of about 20 people, the majority of whom were African Nova Scotian employees of the HRM, gathered outside of City Hall on Tuesday in protest.

Their goal was to raise awareness of about what they called the very small number of solutions the municipality has implemented to address racial inequality among its employees.

The protesters pointed to an employment systems review undertaken by the city in January 2016 as a reason for their protest.

The review, a copy of which was obtained by Global News, examined the city's Municipal Operations Programs (MOPS) business unit in 2016 and found a number of issues “central to creating equitable hiring practices, a diverse workforce and inclusive organizational culture.”

MOPS workers were responsible for maintaining the city's streets, sidewalks, trails and other public utilities and have since been split into the city's road operations and construction, and parks groups.

The review gave the HRM 72 recommendations to implement in order to make a more equitable and diverse organization.

“Very few things, if any, [of the recommendations have] been implemented to make it easier for African Nova Scotians to be a part of HRM,” said Raymond Sheppard, who acted as a spokesperson for the protesters, despite not being an employee of the HRM.

“The African Nova Scotians employed by the HRM are hard workers, they know their job and they do a job well done each and every time. However, they are passed over consistently by the administration and supervisors.”

The review describes a toxic work environment, with very few employees in the MOPS unit expressing confidence in the hiring process or their ability to advance in employment.

Very few supervisors or managers of the business unit were people of colour or women, the review found.

Both Black and White employees, men as well as women, talked about the personal toll that harassment and discrimination has on them, the review says.

“They shared experiences of stress, anxiety, lost sleep, and negative overall impact on both physical and mental health.”

At the time of the review, roughly 50 per cent of African Nova Scotians and women in the MOPS unit said they felt they’d been treated unfairly because of their supervisor or co-workers due to their race or gender.

HRM response

“Unexpressed bias exists in our society and at the municipality, and it can lead to discrimination. To deal with bias, we must acknowledge it exists, support the people who are affected by it, and implement a plan to make a meaningful and lasting difference for them,” said CAO Jacques Dube in a statement in response to the protest.

Dube said that change takes time and that the HRM is still trying to create a diverse workforce.

According to Dube, the HRM is still “systematically” addressing the recommendations of the 2016 Employment Services Review.

He wrote that the city is expected to have an updated progress report on the implementation of the review’s recommendations within the month.

“We know we can do better than our past and we are committed to making it happen,” Dube said.