Health Equity Advisory Commission Meeting Draft Minutes

Date: May 5, 2026

Present

Commission Members: Joanne Crawford, Kheya Ganguly, Mark Hughes, Monica Hutt, Sarah Launderville, Jeff Mbarushimana, Kirsten Murphy, Song Nguyen, Breanna Sheehan, Tom Tench, Diana Wahle, Sandi Yandow
Others: Catherine Johnston, Nicole Kish, Heather Michaud, Tina Zuk

Agenda item	
Welcome and Introductions	• The meeting began with popcorn introductions.
Public Comment	• Tina Zuk, Government Relations Director for the American Heart Association, provided the Commission with an update on S.198 – Regulation of Tobacco Products and Substitutes – specifically provisions that prevent the marketing and sale of deceptive tobacco products that are attractive to kids, as well as removal of penalties for purchase, use and possession of tobacco products by kids.
Approve Minutes of March 10, 2026 and April 7, 2026 Meetings	• Diana Wahle moved, seconded by Kheya Ganguly, to approve the Minutes of the March 10, 2026 meeting. No changes were requested. The Minutes were approved by unanimous consent, Mark Hughes abstaining. • Kirsten Murphy moved, seconded by Kheya Ganguly, to approve the Minutes of the April 7, 2026 meeting. Joanne Crawford suggested additional language regarding Jill Olson's recommendation about RHTF year 2 initiatives. The Minutes were approved by unanimous consent with Joanne's suggested addition.
SharePoint Site Update – Heather Michaud	• Heather Michaud provided an update on the transition from a Teams channel to a SharePoint external site for HEAC document sharing and collaboration. The change will be minor for commission members who are state users and those using partner email accounts, and will make collaboration and document sharing significantly easier for commission members who are not using a partner email account. Heather emphasized the importance of commission members activating access to the site and offered troubleshooting assistance for anyone having trouble doing that.

	• Mark shared and overviewed three draft documents for discussion, HEAC Issues, RHTP Activity List Analysis, and HEAC Letter to AHS, VDH, DVHA. • Kheya suggested that the request go back to the people who actually wrote the grant, that the criteria used to define rural be identified, and that her signature on any letter would need to be vetted with her commissioner. • Diana questioned if it would be appropriate for just the co-chairs to sign off on the letter. She also raised questions as to who the power broker on the geographic restrictions is, what the process for reviewing grants is, and what the deadlines for the RFPs are. Diana acknowledged the intense review and preparation put into the shared documents thus far and thanked Sarah and Mark for their work. • Mark acknowledged the existence of as many questions as answers at this point in the process, as well as a lack of transparency for a project and funding of this magnitude; said this was part of the reason for the request for information letter that was drafted. • Kheya said co-chair signatures on any letter would implicate representation of the whole commission. • Song expressed appreciation for the work done on the analysis and the activity list. She noted a lack of clarity in the documents as far as the role of the HEAC and the problem it is trying to define. • Mark indicated the path to additional clarity is through supplemental information and data. He reemphasized the need for a rural health transformation program and for the program not to discriminate. He sees the role of the HEAC as being to identify opportunities for discrimination within the program and finding ways to mitigate those areas. • Monica reiterated a previous concern regarding the definition of rurality as it pertains to this program and suggested that Jill Olson be invited back for an update on that so as the Commission can better target future requests, guidance, recommendations and/or questions more appropriately rather than being overly broad. She also expressed concern that some of the requests outlined in the draft documents might exceed the Commission's scope as defined statutorily (watchdog vs. advisory).

	• Mark acknowledged the existence of differing perspectives on the role of the HEAC itself and what it's trying to do based on where members sit outside their role on the Commission. He went on to say this is something that needs to be figured out sooner rather than later given time is of the essence. He suggested the possibility of having an external third party weigh in, especially where there are potential civil rights concerns. Mark said he believes it's the right thing to do, not because it's within the scope of the Commissioner's authority, but rather because there doesn't seem to be anybody else raising this as an issue. He feels the Commission would be not only remiss, but derelict in its duty given the implications. • Diana suggested that a subgroup meet with Jill Olson before the next regular meeting of the Commission to review its points and requests to see what, if any, additional information she might have. The Commission could then take whatever additional information is gleaned from Jill to simplify and structure its requests to fit its commitment to an advisory role, rather than watchdog. Diana volunteered to continue serving on the subgroup. • Breanna questioned what the processing of additional information would look like once, and if, any such information is acquired and also volunteered to serve on the subgroup. • Sandi suggested having the federal definition of rural as it pertains to this project might be helpful in dissipating some of the issues the Commission has and allow it to focus back on the equity issues. • Mark indicated the RHTF program would not be this far down the road with grants and other opportunities if there was not already a definition of rural in place. He strongly believes the definition already exists and that there is some exclusionary strategy to it. He would like to ascertain the criteria for making the definition so the impact can be discussed. • Sarah suggested continuing with the subgroup as a way of moving this matter forward rather than waiting until the next meeting to have Jill back for another session.

	• Joanne supports having Jill return for a modified presentation with very specific asks or questions prepared. • Sarah believes the primary focus of the Commission is to draw attention to the fact that this is an equity issue and not about the definition of rural. She said it's the fact that the train is leaving the station with millions of dollars and excluding certain populations and the Commission needs information to figure out how and to whom to express that concern to.
Other Business	• Mark asked Monica to check on the advisory role of the HEAC as it pertains to Act 68 of 2025. Monica offered to do a scan of new legislation as it pertains to the HEAC, but said she could not commit to going all the way backwards.
Next Steps	• The Executive Committee and the subgroup will request to meet with Jill Olson in the coming weeks and ask that she bring any documents the Commission has requested to better understand what, if any, recommendations it has for providing advice on the RHTF project process. • A decision on whether to ask Jill to return to another HEAC monthly meeting will be made after the ES/subgroup meetings. • Mark asked that commission members begin socializing the draft memo within their respective agencies to gauge if there is support for it. • Further discussion on how to address the civil rights implications of this project with the HRC.
Public Comment	• Catherine Johnston informed the Commission about an upcoming event sponsored by The Center for Black Health & Equity, https://nomentholsunday.org/.
Adjourn	• The meeting adjourned at 1:57 p.m.