

MINNEAPOLIS CITY COUNCIL APPOINTMENT CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE

Candidate Name: Kaela McConnon Diarra

Position Title: Director of Civil Rights

Department: Department of Civil Rights

INSTRUCTIONS

The following questionnaire is intended to gather candidate responses for City Council consideration during the appointment process. There are two sections, the first contains questions posed to all appointed candidates, the second are questions more specific to the respective department's scope of work. Section One is broken into 4 categories, each with three questions. Section Two contains 8 department specific questions. Please ensure you respond to each question asked and aim for thorough but concise responses of roughly 1-3 paragraphs per question and the response field will adjust as you type.

Once completed, responses should be submitted to the City Clerk by the return date noted above. Should a question not directly apply to your background, briefly explain why and describe the most relevant analogous experience.

QUESTIONS FOR ALL APPOINTED CITY DEPARTMENT HEADS

1) Vision, Challenges, & Opportunities

- a) Please share what attracted you to this role with the City of Minneapolis?
- b) What do you see as the top challenges and opportunities facing this department?
- c) What are your top three priorities for the department to pursue this term? How have these priorities evolved throughout your previous appointments to this role?

Response

I am proud to have worked in the Civil Rights Department for more than 10 years in variety of roles—as an investigator, division director, deputy department director and interim department director. I know the work well and strongly believe in its impact for those who live in, work in and visit the City of Minneapolis. I hold the Department's staff in the highest esteem and am continuously grateful for their hard work and dedication, as well as their trust in me as a leader. I am energized and inspired at the opportunity to keep moving the Department forward.

The greatest challenge for the Department is the considerable deterioration of civil rights protections and enforcement at the federal level. We must, as a Civil Rights Department, chart our way through this uncertainty and continue to provide robust civil rights protections in Minneapolis. We are uniquely positioned to do this because of the robust civil rights laws we have and enforce at the city level including the City's Civil Rights Ordinance, Police Conduct Oversight Ordinance, Workplace Regulations Ordinance, Small and Underutilized

Business Enterprise Program Ordinance and more.

My three top priorities are—(1) addressing the top challenge of the changing civil rights landscape and charting a sustainable and effective course through the uncertainty; (2) ensuring we are the premier civil rights agency doing enforcement in Minneapolis, providing accessible, efficient and effective service to the public; and (3) fostering an environment of continuous improvement, ensuring effective implementation of recent amendments to civil rights-enforced ordinances, as well as continued progress toward compliance with the Minnesota Department of Human Rights settlement agreement.

2) Leadership Style & Management Practices

- a) Describe your leadership style and management philosophy? How do you recognize when staff are engaged and effectively supported?
- b) How do you incorporate continuous improvement into your own management practices, accountability standards, and oversight of senior and mid-level leadership within the department?
- c) As a department leader, how do you promote a workplace culture that values diversity, equity, and inclusion?

Response

I am a democratic, participatory leader. I lead by asking for input, collaborating and seeking shared decisions. I aim to foster a supportive, empowering and inclusive team culture. I believe that a supported and engaged staff is fundamental to effectively accomplishing the work of the Department. I consistently prioritize staff support and engagement as the Department's leader. I know staff are engaged and supported when they are able to effectively accomplish their work, have collaborative relationships with colleagues and supervisors, and are able to have open and honest communication with leadership. I want staff to come to me or anyone on the Department's leadership team with a problem and believe that we can collectively find a solution.

Continuous improvement is a key priority. We have and will continue to seek and analyze feedback from community, staff and other stakeholders in order to continuously improve. We recently conducted a 360 review of the Department and analyzed the results of the MyMinneapolis survey from staff. In both instances, we created action plans to specifically address areas where we can improve, communicated those plans to stakeholders and staff, set up regular check-ins on progress and implemented positive changes such as shared case timeline expectations across divisions, creation of an intake coordination group to share resources and standardize intake processes, and produced new awareness-raising publications such as an annual report and quarterly newsletter. As a leader, I promote continuous improvement as a culture, versus one-off efforts, to ensure it occurs at every level of the organization and on a consistent basis.

Diversity, equity and inclusion is core to the civil rights work we do every day. We are consistently engaging in open conversation on DEI impacts in our workplace but also in our civil rights enforcement work. I and the entire leadership team prioritize having staff with varied lived experience, as well as a workforce that reflects the community we serve. The entire Civil Rights leadership team regularly attends DEI related training and encourages or at times requires staff to attend such training, while also ensures there is true capacity in staff schedules and workloads to do so. I also do my best to lead by example in thoughtfully confronting, calling in and taking decisive action when needed when concerns about diversity, equity and inclusion arise.

3) Organizational Structure, Staffing, & Budget

- a) How do you evaluate the department's existing organizational structure, staffing, and budget priorities? When areas for change or improvement are identified, how do you implement those changes?
- b) What is the Director's role in management of a department's operational budget? Describe your own approach to budget oversight and how you have adapted to any previous budget challenges.
- c) As a department leader, how do you balance budgetary demands between your non-personnel and personnel budget?

Response

As the Department leader, I closely track our processes and data on our work and I communicate regularly and openly with staff and other stakeholders to identify potential pain points, barriers and opportunities. As noted above, I prioritize fostering a culture of continuous improvement, so when changes and improvements are identified, we can efficiently and effectively collaborate as a leadership team to address them. I use my democratic and participatory leadership style to reach both consensus and buy-in on changes that need to be made and leverage that already built buy-in to effectively and collectively implement the change.

I am the lead on managing the Department's budget. I, as well as multiple members of Civil Rights staff, take a monthly deep dive into the Department's spending and tracking toward year end. I take great care to ensure we are remaining within our allotted budget, while planning and spending responsibly. I approve of all Department spending and take ownership of ensuring the Department is a good steward of city funds.

Civil rights work is largely accomplished by personnel who are conducting the day-to-day work of investigations and compliance. Because of this, I prioritize the personnel budget and spend significant time reviewing staffing needs carefully to ensure we are resourcing the work effectively. On the non-personnel side, I prioritize spending that directly supports staff effectiveness—like technology, training, community engagement tools, or compliance resources. Additionally, I maintain regular communication with partners in Finance to support this work and strike the appropriate balance.

4) Collaboration with City Council & City Government

- a) How does this appointed position fit within the City's government structure, including your relationships with the City Council, Mayor, OPS, OCS, and other City departments? Where does direction come from, where do you bring concerns?
- b) What factors do you believe are critical to building and maintaining a productive working relationship with the City Council? Describe your approach and experience communicating on significant issues, responding to Council concerns, and balancing policy direction with your professional judgment on operations.
- c) How can the City Council better support this role and department?

Response

The Civil Rights Department is situated in the Office of Public Service and the Civil Rights Director reports to the City Operations Officer. I have a strong relationship with the CCO, as well as relationships across the enterprise including with the Mayor, Council Members, other departments within OPS, OCS and the City Attorney's Office. Civil Rights Department work regularly intersects with the work of other departments and professional and

productive relationships across the enterprise are essential to move civil rights work forward. While I take direction when appropriate from the COO, City leaders and policy makers, the Civil Rights Department operates largely independently in its investigative and regulatory compliance work in order to ensure neutrality, objectivity and professionalism. I am confident I can reach the highest levels of government when and if significant concerns arise.

Continued engagement, responsiveness and open communication are critical to building and maintaining a productive working relationship with the City Council. My approach to communication on significant issues is to come in with an open mind, hear all perspectives and incorporate what I learn into my response and engagement. I prioritize identifying points of agreement and exploring how we can collaborate together to move the work forward. While I confidently communicate my perspective as City staff and the Department leader, I will effectively implement policy decisions regardless of whether they conflict with that perspective. The Civil Rights Department has seen significant success in engagement with the City Council, working closely to support strengthening amendments to each of the ordinances it enforces over the last two years.

I welcome continued collaboration with City Council, whether it be in partnering in outreach efforts to raise awareness of Department services, or working through potential new legislation. I value the productive relationship I have with Council and am proud of all the work we have accomplished together.

DEPARTMENT SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

- 1) What do you believe is the role of the Minneapolis Civil Rights Department? How does this department fit, or partner, with similar agencies at the county, state, and federal levels?

Response

The role of the Civil Rights Department is to bring civil rights protections to life through enforcement. While having civil rights protections in our City ordinances is vital and foundational, they only hold true meaning for the Minneapolis community if they are robustly enforced. The Department is entrusted with that enforcement and takes that responsibility seriously, aiming to provide accessible, timely and professional services to who live in, work in and visit the city.

While the Department has previously partnered closely with federal agencies that do similar civil rights enforcement work, with significant changes in priorities at the federal level that do not align with the City's values, the Department has shifted its focus to building relationships with other city, county and state agencies. The Department engages in meaningful and regular collaboration with local partners including the State of Minnesota and the City of St. Paul. I spearheaded an effort to create a Joint Powers agreement with the City of St. Paul for discrimination and labor standards cases when case transfers are appropriate; the Complaint Investigations Division coordinates a quarterly regional meeting with relevant agencies; Labor Standards staff regularly collaborate on investigations and outreach efforts with the Department of Labor and Industry; and Contract Compliance staff work closely with regional governmental partners as a part of the CERT program which we use to administer our Small and Underutilized Business Program. In addition to these local partnerships, the Department joined the International Association of Official Human Rights Agencies last year, where it has begun to build deeper relationships across the country and even the world with like agencies.

Within this larger network of civil and human rights agencies, Minneapolis is a leader that has regularly engaged in groundbreaking civil rights work, whether that be in adding new protected classes to its Civil Rights Ordinance,

or being the first municipality in Minnesota to pass Earned Sick and Safe Time. This is work to be proud of and the type of work and leadership the Department will continue to provide.

- 2) In recent years, Civil Rights has seen notable increases to its budget and personnel allocations. Recognizing potential budgetary and economic challenges, what additional services or improvements have been generated through these additional resources, and do you believe there may be any opportunities for strategic reductions?

Response

Additional investigators in the Office of Police Conduct Review have been vital to completing the investigative work on a 234-case police misconduct case backlog, as well as ensure future backlogs do not develop. In addition to additional investigators, the Department undertook a significant restructure of that office, shifting resources to create additional lines of supervision to ensure strengthened staff support and accountability to maintain this success. The additional positions, coupled with this restructure, has allowed the Department to make significant sustained progress toward the case timelines required in the MDHR settlement agreement—completing police misconduct investigations in 180 days—a milestone we plan to accomplish within the next year.

The entire Department underwent a significant restructure alongside budget and personnel allocations, whereby it eliminated positions and created positions that are best positioned to accomplish the Department's goals. One of the newly created positions as a part of this process is a Manager of Grants and Community Engagement. This position strategically expands the Department's community engagement efforts and strengthens partnerships with community organizations, stakeholders, and residents. Since creating the position, the Department's community engagements have significantly increased, doubling from 2024 to 2025 and continuing to grow in 2026. Another position created is the Manager of Compliance and Quality Assurance. This position provides centralized leadership and coordination for compliance and quality assurance across the Department, supporting ongoing compliance with the Minnesota Department of Human Rights settlement agreement, as well as leading the development, standardization, and monitoring of policies, procedures, and best practices across all divisions to promote consistency, accountability, and continuous improvement. This position has been vital to creating and maintaining that culture of continuous improvement within the Department.

While I do not have possible reductions to present at this time, I welcome the opportunity to work collaboratively with policy makers throughout the budget process.

- 3) As the traditional Civil Rights enforcement entity, how has the Complaint Investigation Division managed the addition of multiple new protected classes? How have these additional protected classes impacted complaint filing and investigation volumes?

Response

Since the effective date of amendments to the Civil Rights Ordinance—including the addition of the three new protected classes: justice-impact, housing status and height/weight— in August 2025, the Department has focused on implementation. An essential part of implementation is ensuring there is awareness of these new protected classes throughout Minneapolis, so that individuals facing this kind of discrimination know their rights and can seek redress with our office when violations occur. To that end, staff have engaged with umpteen enterprise partners, community groups and service providers who interface with impacted community members most including: Neighborhood and Community Relations, Regulatory Services, Neighborhood Safety, ACLU, JIVE, Tone-UP, New Justice Project, and the state bar association.

Because of this engagement, we have begun receiving complaints on the new protected bases. While these complaints have caused only a minor increase in case volumes to date, we expect them to continue to increase as awareness grows. Additionally, beginning to investigate complaints on these new bases provides a valuable opportunity for us to identify any challenges or refinements in our process that should be made to do so most effectively and consistently. We are actively engaged in that work.

- 4) During your time with the Civil Rights Department, how have you seen the department evolve to its current state? What changes do you feel have been positive and are there any changes you believe need to be reconsidered?

Response

The Department is currently highly stable and productive. I am extremely proud of our efforts over specifically the last two years to fully staff positions in the Department, to restructure the Department to ensure we truly have the positions needed to get the work done, and to support and retain the highly qualified staff we have. Especially since taking on the interim director role, I have prioritized staff support because I acknowledge the uncertainty leadership transition can cause and because, as a City, we have face challenging and unprecedented times. I facilitated multiple sessions for staff with partners at Creative Kuponya, addressing areas including vicarious trauma and burnout. I also organized a variety of social events and new Department traditions—such as a monthly birthday celebration—to support continued creation of strong relationships across our staff. I have received positive feedback from staff regarding these efforts and the Department’s retention rate has remained high.

Again, citing to our culture of continuous improvement, we are constantly assessing our processes and implementing changes when needs or barriers are identified. I am committed to continuing that practice. Any items that I or other members of staff have identified as a concern, we are already actively addressing. As noted above, a good example of this is the action planning and changes being implemented following the Department’s 360 review and the MyMinneapolis survey. I see the efforts as an incredibly valuable tool and will continue to utilize them.

- 5) How does the Civil Rights Department prioritize engaging with the community? What specific efforts have been made to increase engagement with marginalized groups?

Response

Engaging with community is a top priority for the Department. Much of the Department’s enforcement work is complaint-based, meaning that to do the enforcement work, we need to receive a complaint or otherwise be made aware of a civil rights concern. It is therefore vital to successful enforcement that community is aware of the Department, its work and how to access services. It is also key that we make our services truly accessible, by ensuring members of public can easily interface with us. To this end, we accept complaints made through many different avenues including our online complaint forms, via 311 calls or in person during our regular walk-in hours. Complaint forms are available in all of the City’s main languages and staff stand at the ready to walk members of the public through the process or make any needed accommodation.

With the addition of the Manager of Grants and Community Engagement, the Department’s capacity to proactively engage with community has significantly increased. As stated above, the number of engagements doubled from 2024 to 2025 and continue to climb this year. This engagement includes proactive and regular

attendance at community meetings in the City's different cultural communities. Department staff regularly attend neighborhood meetings, community presentations, cultural events, business engagements, and create partnerships with trusted organizations. Department staff including myself have recently presented on the Department's work at multiple ward town halls, to the Metropolitan Urban Indian Directors (MUID) Public Safety Committee and the MUID Unsheltered and Opioid Crisis Working Group. We have appeared regularly on the City's cultural media channels and created a valuable presence on social media. A key goal in our engagement efforts is to be consistently present in community, not just what we need specific engagement or feedback on our work. We aim to create authentic, mutually beneficial and long-standing relationships with residents across Minneapolis.

In 2025, we drafted and later had approved by the independent monitor ELEFA, a policy and strategic outreach and recruitment plan for the Community Commission on Police Oversight (CCPO). The plan requires collaboration with organizations that serve marginalized communities, which include those impacted by higher interactions with law enforcement, people with different abilities, and LGBTQIA+ organizations; tabling at events and hosting informational sessions; using City communications channels; and ensuring true accessibility to the application, interviewing and appointment process. We have since implemented this plan and partnered with the appointing authorities to ensure the CCPO is an appropriately representative body.

- 6) The Civil Rights Department supports multiple appointed boards and commissions including the Workplace Advisory Committee, Commission on Civil Rights, and the Community Commission on Police Oversight. How has the department worked in collaboration with these groups? Can you identify any areas of success and potential opportunities for improvements to those partnerships?

Response

The boards and commissions the Department supports and collaborates with are of vital importance to the Department's work. Board and commission members are Minneapolis residents passionate about and engaged in civil rights issues at the local level and provide a direct view into the valuable perspectives throughout the city. Those perspectives inform both the Department's day-to-day work, as well as its long-term vision.

Our supported boards and commissions have played a substantial role in the legislative process relating to amendments to the ordinances the Civil Rights Department enforces, in collaboration with the Department and the City's policy makers. The Workplace Advisory Committee was a key driver behind the original sick and safe time protections and its more recent amendments, as well as the prohibition on wage theft. The Civil Rights Commission was heavily engaged in the development of amendments to the Civil Rights Ordinance and the originator of the idea to include height/weight as a new protected class.

Both the Community Commission on Police Oversight (CCPO) and the Civil Rights Commission are active participants in our regulatory case processes. CCPO members sit on review panels that review police misconduct cases completed by the Department and make recommendations as to merit and the level of discipline to be imposed by the Chief of Police. Civil Rights Commissioners sit on panels that review appeals of Department decisions in discrimination cases and can sustain, remand or reverse those decisions. The Department welcomes the tremendous impact these roles play in its enforcement work and also commits significant resources in staff time and extensive training for Commissioners to ensure they are best equipped to take on the role.

There is a particularly strong partnership between the CCPO and policy and research staff within the Office of Police Conduct Review. When the CCPO identifies a specific area, question or concern, it is able to hand that off to the policy and research team who can dedicate time and professional expertise to researching and analyzing

it. This collaboration can and does lead to viable, well-supported recommendations from the body to City policy makers. Leveraging this process, the CCPO executed three resolutions recommending policy changes and improved processes in 2025.

An additional highlight of the last year was supporting the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Commission. The event brought together current and former commissioners to reflect on the important work the Commission has accomplished throughout the last 50 years and also address the work that is yet to come.

I look forward to continuing to collaborate effectively with all three boards and commissions that Department supports. I also want to acknowledge the collaborative effort across the enterprise to support boards and commissions that includes colleagues in the Clerk's and City Attorney's Offices.

- 7) How has the role of Police Conduct Review evolved following the 2023 changes made to the police oversight ordinance? How has the shift in focus to external complaints impacted workloads and investigation timelines?

Response

The work of the Office of Police Conduct review has evolved in a positive way since the 2023 changes to its enabling ordinance. The shift to external complaints—only investigating complaints from the public while internal complaints by City employees are routed to Internal Affairs—is a clearer distinction for stakeholders to understand and allows the Department and Office to focus on building trust specifically with the public. The distinction also ensures that any member of the public making a police misconduct complaint is guaranteed a civilian investigator, which often puts them at further ease when they are making a complaint. It has further allowed the office to refine its processes to respond to the specific needs of members of the public—for instance in taking time to best align the alleged facts of a particular interaction with possible violations of the Police Department's Policy and Procedure Manual.

Complaint volumes continue to fluctuate year to year but have notably increased in 2025 and 2026, which I believe can be attributed to, at least in part, the trust built with community.

- 8) Recognizing the role of the Labor Standards Division, and Workforce Advisory Committee, in implementing and enforcing the City's minimum wage, sick and safe time, and wage theft regulations, what do you see as next big undertaking for these groups?

Response

The next big undertaking for these groups is proactive enforcement. As noted above, much of our current enforcement is complaint-based. The next step to expand the Department's impact in the labor standards space is to identify areas of concern in specific industries and actively engage with workers to proactively identify and then address possible violations. With a fully-staff Labor Standards Enforcement Division, there is more capacity for these proactive efforts than ever before.

Additionally, the division will continue to prioritize education as a vital component in its enforcement efforts, including in its more proactive work. Over the last few years, the division has worked in close partnership with Rutgers's Workplace Justice Lab, the Neighborhood Development Center and enterprise partners to provide

extensive technical assistance and training related to the City's labor standards laws to small businesses and trusted community bookkeepers. I am especially excited about the work with community bookkeepers, as they are a vital connection to many small and micro businesses across the city. These recent efforts provide trusted community bookkeepers the tools to continuously guide their clients to implementing effective, compliant practices in their businesses.