

Culver City Equity and Human Relations Advisory Committee
Equity and Human Relations Awards Ad Hoc Subcommittee
May 12, 2026

Members of the 2025/2026 Equity and Human Relations Awards Ad Hoc Subcommittee are Haifaa Moammar, Denice Renteria, Rebecca Rona-Tuttle, and Carlos Valverde.

Presentation Date for 2026 Awards We expect that the 2026 awards will be presented in late spring or summer. As before, the mayor and city clerk will determine the date.

Request of EHRAC Staff: We ask that EHRAC staff communicate to the city clerk and mayor our request to allow the medallions to be presented at the same time as the commendations are presented.

Addressing members' concerns: During EHRAC's April meeting, some members expressed concern about the process used in selecting award recipients. During the July meeting, members of the Equity and Human Relations Awards Ad Hoc Subcommittee will share their recommendations for addressing these concerns.

Descriptions of four Award recipients At the April EHRAC meeting, members selected four award recipients from among seven finalists. The next step will be to request a City Council commendation for each. The process is to submit a description of each of the recipients to the city clerk and mayor. These may be no longer than 300 words apiece.

Student: Lailanie Azam (282 words)

Lailanie Azam was selected by the Equity and Human Relations Advisory Committee to receive an Equity and Human Relations Award in the "Student" category.

Ms. Azam is a senior at Culver City High School. She strives to support teens facing mental health challenges, especially those impacted by social media pressures and the stigma surrounding seeking help. The peers she serves are navigating issues such as anxiety, grief, bullying, and sexual assault.

Through her involvement with Didi Hirsch Mental Health Services' Teen Line hotline program, Ms. Azam provides direct peer-to-peer crisis support to adolescents. She has assisted more than 50 teens from around the world, offering active listening, empathy, and grounding techniques during crisis. She has completed more than 65 hours of weekly seminars focused on understanding psychological disorders and struggles. Her service addresses the need for accessible, youth mental health support. She also encourages callers to seek continued help beyond the hotline.

Ms. Azam serves as secretary of Culver City High School's Muslim Student Association. In this capacity she helps promote multi-cultural understanding. Through participation in intercultural summits and collaboration with Culver High's Jewnity (a club centered around the Jewish student body), she has helped organize fundraisers for social equity efforts. The summits have fostered conversation and community understanding.

Beyond her direct service, Ms. Azam supports underserved women and children facing inequities. Through her small business selling button pins and keychains, she raises funds for organizations such as The Malala Fund and the Syrian American Medical Society, contributing to expanded access to education and healthcare in minority regions.

The impact of Ms. Azam's commitment and service, both supporting teens in crisis and uplifting marginalized youth, is evident to all who know her.

Individual: Sameen Ahmadnia (258 words)

Sameen Ahmadnia was selected by the Equity and Human Relations Advisory Committee to receive an Equity and Human Relations Award in the "Individual" category.

She is an immigration attorney as well as a volunteer. She became dedicated to immigrants' rights even before entering law school.

Following the 2016 election, she organized a "Refugee Ball" as an alternative inaugural ball in Washington, DC that focused on uplifting the voices of our immigrant community, who had been under attack by xenophobic rhetoric during the presidential election. This event raised approximately \$10k for immigration non-profit organizations.

In Culver City, Ms. Ahmadnia has continued fighting for immigrants in her day job as well as in her free time. As an asylum law expert and practitioner, she has represented numerous immigrants facing persecution, including dozens of LGBTQ+ and sexual assault cases.

She assists immigrants from every part of the world. Many of them have come to the US seeking not only economic opportunity but also freedom from political, religious, sexual, and gender oppression.

Ms. Ahmadnia's paid and volunteer work protects them both from the regimes they are fleeing and dangers now facing them in the United States. She has kept numerous families together, and has kept her clients safe and free to pursue their American dreams.

Since her child entered a CCUSD school, she has been consistently available to parents with immigration questions, giving generously of her time and skills. She also organized a "Know Your Rights" presentation and event for Culver City families who may be facing immigration persecution at this moment.

Business Owner: Jennifer Casper, Owner of Village Well Books and Coffee (186 words)

Jennifer Casper was selected by the Equity and Human Relations Advisory Committee to receive an Equity and Human Relations Award in the "business owner" category.

Ms. Casper, owner of Village Well Books and Coffee, hosts a wide variety of programs for the community at her bookstore. Many are related to human relations, such as ICE awareness events.

She has created a space for people to congregate. Ms. Casper hosts Open Mike nights for community members to express their points of view or showcase their work. A broad spectrum of people gather for these community experiences, which foster the free exchange of ideas, and better understanding among people of different backgrounds.

Ms. Casper is a compassionate person, supporting others in learning to deal with ICE safely.

She recognizes the importance of language to a people's culture. This is reflected in the fact that some of the story time programs for children are held in Spanish.

Loneliness is a rampant mental health issue. She offers a space where people who are lonely can come together around shared interests, where they can go for free when they need company.

Executive director of a nonprofit

Joelle Kirtley, Founder and Executive Director of Mass Liberation (299 words)

Joelle Kirtley was selected by the Equity and Human Relations Advisory Committee to receive an Equity and Human Relations Award in the “executive director of a nonprofit organization” category.

She is founder and chief executive of Mass Liberation, which addresses the harms of incarceration by educating and empowering returning citizens using evidence-based, whole-person approaches.

Although Mass Liberation is headquartered in Torrance, it serves Culver City residents, among others.

Ms. Kirtley founded Mass Liberation for the purpose of providing resources and support to the formerly incarcerated. Their needs are diverse: housing, reentry navigation, employment readiness, financial opportunities, educational and vocational opportunities, tech support.

According to a client, the formerly incarcerated are “welcomed for the resources and support, stay for the community, and leave with family.”

Ms. Kirtley leads by example, and inspires everyone she works and interacts with. She is practical and hands on. She encourages, contributes, guides, and appreciates others. She operates with intention, restoring people's sense of personal value and strength. She is humble, working tirelessly without need for accolades.

The population is diverse, providing Mass Liberation an opportunity to promote inclusivity. Their transformational work melts away long-held stigmas and conscious or unconscious prejudice. There are long-term offenders who routinely enroll, attend, and remain as Mass Liberation family.

Mass Liberation assists clients to meet their urgent needs, needs that others may take for granted: to enroll in a medical insurance plan and obtain a provider; acquire birth certificates and social security, learn to drive, build a resume, prepare for interviews. Lack of any of these can be a serious obstacle for someone reentering free society.

The care and warmth that Ms. Kirtley and the Mass Liberation staff extend go a long way towards shifting perspectives, instilling in clients an attitude of self-empowerment, and encouraging them to embrace opportunities.