



**CITY OF GRAND RAPIDS HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION
CITY HALL, CONFERENCE ROOM 2B, 420 N. POKEGAMA AVE.
DATE: WEDNESDAY, MARCH 30, 2016
TIME: 4:00 P.M.**

4:00 CALL TO ORDER:

CALL OF ROLL:

	Present	Absent
Commissioner Becky LaPlant	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Commissioner Jackie Dowell	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Commissioner Mary Jo Wimmer	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Commissioner Frieda Hall, Chair	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Commissioner Doug Learmont	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Commissioner Melissa Weidendorf	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Commissioner Karen Noyce	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Commissioner Alice Moren	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Commissioner John Schirber	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

MEETING PROTOCOL POLICY:

Please be aware that the Council has adopted a Meeting Protocol Policy which informs attendees of the Council's desire to conduct meetings in an orderly manner which welcomes all civil input from citizens and interested parties. If you are unaware of the policy, copies (orange color) are available in the wall file by the Council entrance.

SETTING OF REGULAR AGENDA:

This is an opportunity to approve the regular agenda as presented or add/delete an Agenda item by a majority vote of the Commission members present.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES: February 24, 2015 Regular Meeting

FINANCIALS:

CORRESPONDENCE: 2016 Commission Contact List

PUBLIC COMMENT:

CIRCLE OF HEALING UPDATE:

ITASCA COUNTY DIVERSITY ALLIANCE:

BIG VIEW UPDATE:

OLD BUSINESS:

NEW BUSINESS: Election Of Officers
City Ojibwe Language and Culture Signage
Plans for Indigenous Peoples Day 2016
County 125th Celebration: Human Rights History/milestones?

REPORTS ON CALLS AND INQUIRIES:

PENDING COMPLAINTS:

ADJOURNMENT:

CITY OF GRAND RAPIDS HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

CALL TO ORDER: Pursuant to due notice and call thereof a regular meeting of the Grand Rapids Human Rights Commission was held in Conference Room 2B of City Hall, Grand Rapids, Minnesota, on Wednesday, February 24, 2016 at 4:00 p.m.

CALL OF ROLL: On a Call of Roll, the following members were present: Commissioners Alice Moren, Frieda Hall, Jackie Dowell, Mary Jo Wimmer, Barb Sanderson, Karen Noyce, and Doug Learmont.

Absent: John Schirber and Becky LaPlant

Visitor: Nancy Sauer

Staff: Michele Palkki, Administrative Assistant

CALL TO ORDER The meeting was called to order at 4:00 pm by chair Hall.

SETTING AGENDA League of MN Human Rights Membership
Letter from M. Clayton

APPROVAL OF MINUTES January 27, 2016

MOTION BY COMMISSIONER DOWELL, SECOND BY COMMISSIONER MOREN TO APPROVE THE MINUTES OF JANUARY 27, 2016.

Motion passed by unanimous vote.

FINANCIALS

A discussion was held regarding the 2016 League of Minnesota Cities Human Rights Dues and Membership Invoice for \$100.00.

Commissioner Sanderson gave a brief history of being an active member of this organization. The Commission will receive newsletters as well as any updated information from the state level. A copy of the final approved minutes will need to be attached to the invoice.

The website for the state is www.leagueofmnhumanrights.org

MOTION BY COMMISSIONER LEARMONT, SECOND BY COMMISSIONER NOYCE TO APPROVE PAYMENT OF THE 2016 LEAGUE OF MN CITIES HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE AMOUNT OF \$100.00. Motion passed by unanimous vote.

CORRESPONDENCE

Commissioner Dowell reported that she had received an email regarding an employee who was terminated at Target. They are contacting those at the state level to determine if this employee was discriminated against.

The Human Rights Commission was also sent a letter from M. Clayton supporting this young man. Commissioner Dowell will make contact with her to let her know we received the letter. If there is anything the Commission can do, they will be more than happy to assist.

REPORT ON CALLS/INQUIRIES

Commissioner Sanderson reported that she received a message regarding a complaint from someone regarding affordable housing.

Commissioner Noyce reported that an individual addressed her with negative comments on the Tracks in the Snow exhibit. There were many compliments for the Tracks in the Snow exhibit. Remember the focus is to remember what is important to all humans, and we need to work together with everyone.

COMMISSIONER SANDERSON

Commissioner Hall addressed Commissioner Sanderson, on behalf of everyone, to thank her for the many years of service over the years for Human Rights.

Commissioner Sanderson took part in helping form the very first Human Rights Commission in Grand Rapids in 2004 and has served since that time. She has a heart for everyone and not to be discriminated against. Again thank you for your time and helping educate those around us. Ms. Sanderson reported that she would be around for questions in case there are any issues that come up and need help to be addressed, The Commission asked if Commissioner Sanderson would forward how to answer questions should they come up. The enforcement unit web page is located at <http://www.mn.gov/mdhr/intake>

CIRCLE OF HEALING

Commissioner Noyce gave a report regarding the happenings for Circle of Healing.

- They held their last meeting in Ball Club, which went well. The next meeting will be in Grand Rapids. The Anishinaabe trainings are going strong. The new curriculum for K-6 has been released. We are trying to get this to all area schools in the regular classrooms.

Circle of Healing Continued

- They may put together “what happens at a pow wow”. This would be geared toward the greater community. ICC may be hosting one as well as Bemidji
- Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig school needs help in funding this year.
- Commissioner Noyce wrote a letter to the Tribal Council, and Legislators regarding the needs. Circle of Healing invited the individual who did the signage in Bemidji to attend a future Circle Meeting.

DIVERSITY UPDATE

Commissioner Noyce reported that there are a couple of meetings coming up that are open to the public for comments and ideas. The meetings are scheduled for March 7 and 14, from 4:00 until 6:00 pm at the YMCA. The purpose of these meetings is to name and define the purpose of the group.

BIG VIEW UPDATE

Commissioner Moren reported that the only upcoming event is Race – The Power of an Illusion. There are two more episodes available with both held at the Grand Rapids Public Library, 140 NE 2nd Street. Episode 2, the Story We Tell, Thursday, February 25 from 11:00 am until 1:00 pm and Episode 3, the House We Live In, Tuesday, March 1, 2016 from 11:00 am until 1:00 pm

OLD BUSINESS

Tracks in the Snow – Committee Report

Commissioner Learmont gave a final report regarding the exhibit that was hosted at the Grand Rapids Library. Commissioner Learmont and several fellow Commissioners believed the event was well received by the Community.

After further discussion, per Commissioner Sanderson, at the October 2015 meeting, it was passed by unanimous vote to approve up to \$1,000.00 for Tracks in the Snow. Commissioner Learmont will have the invoice sent to the City Accounts Payable to process for payment. Commissioner Learmont was thanked for all the work done to put forth a great exhibit for the community.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:15 pm

The next meeting is scheduled for March 30, 2016

Respectfully submitted, Michele Palkki, Administrative Assistant

Big View Community Engagement

Hosted by Circles of Support
Monday, April 11th, 2016

A sudden spike in suspected heroin related deaths is cause for alarm and speaks to a bigger problem across the state

MN Dept Public Safety
3-16-16

Heroin taking deadly toll in north central Minnesota, authorities warn
Twin Cities Pioneer Press
3-16-16

HEROIN

Heroin is a highly potent illegal synthetic opioid that can produce severe consequences like overdose and death.

Heroin is highly addictive. It is used by millions of addicts around the world who are unable to overcome the urge to continue taking this drug every day of their lives—

drugfreeworld.org

Please join us for a discussion with local experts:

Michelle Vietanen: Psy.D, LP, Hope House & Pear Lake

Vic Williams

Itasca County Sheriff

Mark Weller

Investigator, Itasca County Sheriff's Department

Bob Stein

Sergeant, Grand Rapids Police Department

Brian Mattson

Investigator, Grand Rapids Police Department

I will kidnap you, raise you,
then return you to your
family so they can bury you.

Sincerely

Heroin

Blandin Foundation
Stender Community Room
100 North Pokegama Ave
6:00 – 8:00 PM

Pizza served



RSVP: brianaa@kootasca.org or call 999-5883



Blandin Foundation
STRENGTHENING RURAL MINNESOTA

Circles of Support is a program of KOOTASCA Community Action

We have a crisis in our country. A crisis that claims more lives than car crashes. A crisis that rips apart families of all different backgrounds. Killing 28,648 Americans in 2014, this crisis is prescription drug and heroin abuse. And with deaths increasing nearly sixfold since 2000, it is a crisis on the rise. This deadly trend has struck at the heart of Minnesota. In 2014, 317 Minnesotans died after overdosing on opioids—a class of drug that includes heroin and prescription drugs. Daughters, sons, brothers, sisters, mothers, and fathers, all taken too soon.

Many of these heartbreaking stories begin with a legal prescription. The person is prescribed painkillers by a doctor, and they become addicted before they even know it. Many who run out of the pills turn to heroin as a cheaper alternative. In fact, four out of five heroin users start out misusing prescription painkillers. The very pills that were supposed to ease their pain end up taking their lives.

Senator Amy Klobuchar The Opioid Epidemic: Enough is Enough Grand Rapids Herald Review 3-2-16

Any issue that has the potential to adversely impact people in poverty may become the subject of a Big View Community Engagement meeting. Community members from all income levels are welcome to attend and encouraged to engage in respectful dialogue around meeting topics.

This meeting is free and open to the public.



Blandin Foundation™
STRENGTHENING RURAL MINNESOTA

February 18, 2016

Target Leadership Team
Grand Rapids Store
2140 South Pokegama Avenue
Grand Rapids, MN 55744

Target Leadership Team,
Stephanie Lundquist, Chief HR Officer
1000 Nicollet Mall
Minneapolis, MN 55403

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing this letter in "support" of a recent long term (18 years) employee by the name of Aaron Itkonen who was terminated on Christmas Eve...December 24, 2015, from The Target Grand Rapids, MN. I would like to let you know a little about Aaron that you obviously have overlooked. Aaron is a hard worker and a happy worker and has been for 18 years. He does not stand around and "shoot the bull" like some of your other employees do. He exemplifies what a "hard worker" is all about. He is friendly, always remembers the customers, goes out of his way to help, and greet you, and is always working!! He constantly stays busy and is the first one to step up to the plate to assist the customer. That is "excellent customer service." He is not a gossip, does not complain, nor does he frown at anyone. He is there to work and work only, always with a smile and knows what it means to work and be an employee.

I understand that you had 3 incidents in the past year regarding "alleged" complaints regarding Aaron. I know what the 3 alleged complaints are and were. There are always two sides to every story...always was and always will be. I also worked in HR for 16 years and so I know how "alleged" complaints work. Both sides need to be investigated. I am wondering what your leadership team OR HR Department did to help Aaron understand that sometimes what he says to a member of the public MAY come off the wrong way. You see...Aaron is a special needs adult/vulnerable adult. Aaron has some learning disabilities where he may not quite understand things he says and feels are fine, could be taken "out of context" by others...NOT all! This learning disability has followed him through his life...but again, that never stopped him from wanting to work, to be a good person, and to help everyone around him. What did you do??? You terminated him because of 3 alleged complaints, and on Christmas Eve...wow...what a gift. I know there is never any good time to terminate someone but on Christmas Eve? How do you people sleep at night? Did anyone bother to sit down with him and help him understand? Probably not!! Did HR provide him some training? Probably not!! But yet you terminated an 18 year Target employee.....and on Christmas Eve!!! Aaron is very religious and he took this very very hard. Now every Christmas Eve and for that matter, every day, he is going to think he is a failure when he is NOT. YOU failed him!!! Am surprised YOU...yes YOU, did not have a suicide because of this! I would sure hope you did your due diligence when he terminated him. Could you at least have given him

CC: OK Human Rights Commission

duties to perform while he was going through some training, that took him away from the public for a short time? Did you actually investigate these complaints or was it just easier to "get rid of him"? I also feel strongly that Aaron was picked on and bullied by others who may not understand his needs. So what does Target have in place for bullying???

Aaron has a lot of followers which are true friends. Yes...friends.....people he met while working at Target. Aaron has integrity and integrity is what you want your employees to have. He always, always had a smile on his face. He provided outstanding customer service and in this day and age....that is a blessing...especially with youth today! He remembered everyone who came to Target and he was very helpful to everyone, and he greeted them when they entered your store. I would like to know what his record was for calling in sick or for coming in late or for not showing up for work! I bet it is exemplary!!!

Aaron has friends and followers who are 2,000+ deep who are extremely upset and frustrated by your actions. If there are that many followers in support of Aaron, then HE made an impact on them while he was employed at Target. How many other employees are recognized by the general public? I am not talking about your fundraising efforts where employees participate either! I would surmise that there will be a lot of people who may never shop at Target again!

Target took a hit when YOU compromised checking accounts and debit cards. And you WILL probably take a hit with this one.

This letter is also going to the Department of Human Rights because WE, yes WE feel this is a wrongful termination of a special employees, (how ironic that the term used today "special" is exactly what Aaron is...he is special) and you denied him unemployment benefits...on top of it all.

I copied a "blurb" from your corporate website on team members and what Target "says" they offer to their team/employees: **"We're devoted to helping our team members throughout the world live well and achieve their goals, knowing that their diverse perspectives, talents and commitment make both our company and our communities the best they can be. We support team members' paths to health and well-being through resources, services and benefits programs for eligible team members, spouses, domestic partners and other dependents. And we develop leaders and invest in team members' futures through career development and networking opportunities."** What resources and services did you provide to Aaron? How did you develop Aaron and invest in his future with Target...being he had worked there for 18 years? What career development and opportunities did you provide to Aaron to help him? Someone needs to provide these answers and you need to ask yourself these same questions. Talk is cheap, and so are words on a piece of paper! What did you do about his diverse perspectives...being he is a special needs person??? You FIRED HIM!!!

And to add insult to this termination...you DENIED HIM UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFITS????? Really??? How cruel are you people?

There are two types of employees! One who is a hard worker, always smiling, and greeting customers, comes to work on time, never complains, never calls in sick or is late, and knows his job; and the other one who has a crappy attitude, never smiles, does not make you feel comfortable, there to collect a pay check, complains, picks on others, calls in sick, comes in late, never shows up. Who am I going to gravitate to in a store or business? The "Aarons"! Where am I going to shop? In a store that treats their customers and their employees the right way!

Thank you for your time!

Sincerely,



M. Clayton

In Support of Aaron Ultkonen

P.O. Box 603
Grand Rapids MI

No need to respond to ME, a very concerned citizen and friend for Aaron. Take care of Aaron and make it right!!!*

February 20, 2016

RE: Christmas Eve 2015 Termination of Aaron Itkonen, Cart Attendant and Customer Service Team Member, Target Corporation, Store T904, Grand Rapids, Minnesota 55744.

<https://www.facebook.com/WesupportAaron>



Dear Stephanie Lundquist, Chief Human Resources Officer and Target Corporation:

This letter is written to address a matter of concern I have about a 39-yr. old male, Grand Rapids Area resident, Aaron Itkonen, who was employed at Target T904 for over 17-yrs. – recently terminated on Christmas Eve, December 24th, 2015, after two written warnings regarding boundaries/alleged employee misconduct.

Aaron Itkonen attended schools in Nashwauk, Minnesota, graduating in 1996. He was put in special education classes or classes for educational behavior disorders. He was a product of the 80's/early 90's generation when Autism spectrums were not something schools classically tested for. Aaron was eventually mainstreamed into high school and the community. He has not had any recent comprehensive diagnostic testing other than by his words of being told he was "slow and retarded." In spite of being "slow and retarded," Aaron always participated in his small school, earning his letter jacket by being the manager of many sport teams: football, basketball, track, and math team. He also participated as a distance runner in track explaining he felt his best when he could keep running. He has been described as former classmates as

“quirky,” “enthusiastic,” and “genuine.” His difficulties in school dealt with reading, comprehension and not understanding social dynamics. He was the target of bullies at varying times and he was teased often – though he still says that most people were nice to him – he remembers the not-so-nice incidents easily.

More than likely with a current comprehensive diagnosis, Aaron would fall into an Autism spectrum and a syndrome once referred to as “Asperger’s Syndrome.” He may also have other learning and intellectual impairments, even cognitive delays. He states he always struggled with reading and social awkwardness. When Aaron is nervous and he grows uncomfortable, his eyes dart and he does not always make direct eye contact. He states he will also chat with everyone because he was raised with old-fashioned values. He has told me he doesn’t always remember names but he remembers faces.

I came to know Aaron when he was first hired at Target, which was around March 1998. I have developed a friendly customer-oriented relationship with him for nearly two decades, first as a frequent guest shopper of Target T904 and then when Aaron, his wife and family frequented two places of business where I was employed. I was able to surmise that he had some disability issues early on. I also believe the general public was as aware as I was. Aaron is very animated. He wants to befriend everyone. He is not discriminatory – any age, any gender – he will be a friend to all. He also believes that everyone wants him as a friend. Most do, some have not.

Aaron’s weakness is that he does not understand social boundaries, meaning he may not have a filter to make him aware when he has asked a question that could be construed as inappropriate or perhaps, too personal. He remembers everyone and most every detail they have shared with him. This is important to him. He went beyond and above in his duties – this was visible to the general shopping public, as you could see him hustle and bustle – offering help and assistance to every customer. He was always on the run. Front windows were kept sparkly clean as he scrubbed handprints and grime. If you entered a Target bathroom and saw it neat and washed – chances are you would see Aaron’s name as the sign off on the wall board as you exited. He would ask a customer, what they needed and if he could help them out to their car. The Target carts were precisely in order – this was his expertise – no one could do this task as well. His concern was the customer. And he was friendly, open and talkative in the process. Many customers thought this trait was awesome. A few thought it was odd. More than likely those few did not understand his behaviors and that he had a learning and/or neurobiological disorder.

Aaron soon became the “face” of Target in Grand Rapids. You could ask most residents to name a Target employee and people would say “Aaron” or “the cart man,” a funny take off from the South Park satire. At the Grand Rapids Target, faces came and went - but with certainty there was Aaron, smiling, always awaiting every daily guest with dedication to his

work and our community. He might ask a person for a phone number. He might invite a person to his home. He invited lots of shoppers to his wedding reception – he was so excited about his marriage. He would share a funny story or a silly joke or two; mostly he just wanted to know how you were. It was important to him. Aaron is an “includer” – he does not want to leave anyone out.

Aaron is a deeply religious man, a devout Catholic who was an altar boy and is involved with Knights of Columbus. Aaron earned the top position of Eagle Scout and he has achieved different honors including a prestigious honor from the Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce for his outstanding service to the public. Aaron also works part-time for Cub Foods in Grand Rapids bagging groceries. While employed with Target he continually offered to work for additional Target events like Grandma’s Marathon, The American Cancer Society’s Relay of Life, Meals on Wheels, annual Highway cleanups and he most always promoted Target’s climb back from the snafu of the great credit hack by encouraging guests to get their red cards.

Aaron was raised by his loving parents to be community-driven, to work hard and not let your disability define you. He has one brother who also works in retail. Aaron was taught it was acceptable to hug a friend and care for everyone. His father told him: “Go forward and be the best person you can be.” Aaron met and married an area girl who has the diagnosis of MMH – Mild Mentally Handicapped. She is unable to work and Aaron is the sole provider of their household.

This leads me to my concern over his termination. It is my understanding that Target Corporation has undergone many changes and certainly at our local store, it appears in more recent years that the turnover is rapid.

A couple of months ago two women (I do not have their names – I was contacted by several people who saw the posts) went on Facebook social media and referred to Aaron as a “creepy” and a “freak.” I have been told that people came to his defense and told the “mean girls” that he has disabilities and would never have any intent of harm.

See below for one person who provided some information:

[Sarah Marie Gassert](#) to [We Support Aaron Itkonen - Best Customer Service Agent in Grand Rapids.](#)

February 14 at 7:48am

“I'm wondering why he got let go.... I'm hoping it's not because if a few comments I read a couple months back from a few snotty women who mistook Aaron's kindness for being "creepy". There were at least two women who thought he was too nice and supposedly followed them and made them uncomfortable. When they posted this info almost everyone who read it told them they were wrong. Aaron was just super nice and helpful. I sure hope target didn't listen to those girls because Aaron was not creepy; he was amazing at customer service!”

I was provided with one commentary from a person who posted on Facebook with this nasty comment in regards to Aaron:

Tammy Miller He's a freak , I've personally dealt with him many times & he's tried hugging me several times & he's WAYYYYYYYYYY TOOOOOOOOO touchy feely .. Even my kid thought he was "off"!
Like Reply · 18 mins

*Interesting note on the above comment – this woman's child thought in her words that Aaron was "off" and yet, she had no awareness that he had a disability???

What followed in approximately late September – a person filed a complaint with Target that said that Aaron had followed them around the store and out to their car asked them to go skinny dipping at his home. Aaron and his wife live on a lake in a rental house condominium complex where there are other tenants and a beach area. Aaron has told me he might have told someone they could go swimming at his house but he never said anything in regards to skinny dipping. He also has explained to me that he often asks people he considers his friends to visit him. He has no discernment for the term "friend." Anyone who responds to him; carries on a conversation or that he has met before is a "friend." He was given a written warning, which he signed and stated he agreed to for fear termination. Aaron says that he was reprimanded by Target Management and told that "he was old enough to know better." This description of the events related to me by Aaron shows me that members of the Grand Rapids T904 Leadership Team have not been educated in how to manage a person with Aaron's disability nor did they afford him the opportunity of having an advocate present to help explain to him the seriousness of the accusations that were being made towards him. No additional training measures appeared to be offered to him and he was told to not do the action again and given a corrective action final warning.

Then on Dec. 21st while Aaron was on "final warning" – Aaron was alleged to have followed a guest around the store, asking her for her phone number, making her upset and uncomfortable. I would state that probably any customer with a misinterpretation of Aaron's friendliness could make this claim. Again, I know from years of shopping at Target that Aaron does not follow a person with the intent to harass or stalk – he believes that he is maintaining a friendship and being of service to a person. He cannot read subtle clues that a person may be uncomfortable or may be trying to cut short a conversation. This is a genuine part of his learning disability.

Aaron explained to me he had not seen this person in a long time, considered them to be a friend and asked them for a phone number so they could "catch up." Aaron would be most happy if he had 1000 numbers in his phone directory.

So two customers complained and management viewed the allegations as disorderly conduct, harassment and employee misconduct and Aaron was terminated on Christmas Eve, which in his mind, is the most egregious action of all. This is Jesus's birthday (his words) and now Christmas will forever be spoiled by this terrible incident. I have asked Aaron if at any time did Target offer to provide you with any specific training or assistance to show you what you were doing wrong or did they ever say they would take you out of the front of the store and remove you from cart attendance and customer service? Aaron said no. If Target's concern was so strong about Aaron's interactions with guests – I asked why did they not put you in an area where you did not have contact with the public – in particular after 17-yr's of service? He said he does not know.

Aaron has presented me with his unemployment paperwork and I have to say I am pretty appalled that nowhere in the paperwork is the mention that this employee has a disability. I can NOT imagine nor will not accept that with Aaron's length of service that management personnel did not know that he has a defined impairment and that he most likely required assistance and a different set of learnable objectives – perhaps actual demonstrations of what expectations were desired. Seriously, how could Target have failed this long-term employee in such a manner? I find it troubling on so many levels.

Aaron, the Cart Man was the most recognizable employee (positively) to the Grand Rapids Target Store. I can verify by a "We Support Aaron" Facebook Page – his termination is a tragic loss that has impacted a large portion of Target's shopping community in the Grand Rapids area. Two negative voices cancelled 17-plus years of a special man's dedicated career to the Bullseye. These allegations also tarnished a life of someone who has done nothing but good in every capacity he can, in spite of his learning behaviors.

I am absolute in my belief and as a frequent shopper to Target – Aaron's personality and behaviors have always been the same. Nothing has changed over the years. He remained his courteous, quirky, and talkative self – always stepping up to greet and help a customer.

I have asked Aaron how other managers dealt with any former complaints and Aaron said he doesn't remember anything being a big issue. He does feel a new management team and a clique of workers made many of his days difficult, if not just for dirty looks he received when he came into an area. He said there were whispers and people joking behind his back. This to me - is bullying and intimidation.

I have serious concerns after learning of the two young women on Facebook making catty and classless remarks about Aaron and how this name calling on social media may have aided or have coincided in the two complaints. I would hope Aaron was not targeted because he was

misunderstood. I worry that Aaron may have been treated harshly, feeling coerced to sign warning complaints without having full understanding of the alleged transgressions.

I think Aaron will always talk, want to be friends, and not know when to shut down a discussion while he serves people. I also believe he has never had intent to harm or scare anyone. He has stated one of his frustrations is that if someone would have thought he hurt or scared any person – he would tell them he was sorry. Aaron stated he even asked to see camera proof of how someone could have said he was harassing him and this was denied.

My bottom line with this letter is that I feel this Aaron Itkonen suffered a human rights violation and Target Corporation discriminated against him with any lack of understanding or empathy for Aaron's intellectual weaknesses and inability to fully understand social cues with an absence of filtering. Denying him his unemployment benefits and fighting his appeal is deplorable. Aaron has no assistance in trying to figure out the web of unemployment. He doesn't even fully understand his infractions and paperwork is confusing to him.

I think Aaron Itkonen's situation is a case for Autism/Asperger's Awareness and added or improved training for Target Corporation and their management teams. Target has lost their "face" in my Grand Rapids Community! And what a loss it is.

The Facebook page "We Support Aaron" has generated nearly 2,200 likes and has engaged nearly 35,000 people. The page received several hundred private messages of support and less than 1% of negative comments – the opposing and/or negative comments came from family members and friends of your management team in Grand Rapids – touting with affirmation that there was another side of the story with one of your manager's father stating on a public Exchange and Swap site that if people knew the story – they would know Target did the right thing for the public and for its employees by firing Aaron.

See below for the exact copy posted on the Grand Rapids Anything and Everything Swap and Exchange Site:

[William Olson](#)

10:49am Feb 14

"Before you all get on board with the lynch mob mentality, you should get the facts of this situation. What happened was definitely in the best interest of the other employees that worked there, and also some of the people that patronized the store. Target dealt with him fairly, and in the interest of avoiding litigation for not doing so."

I found the negative comments curious and wondered how Aaron's data privacy had been violated within T904 with this termination. It sure seemed like there were several out there with ties to management that knew of his alleged wrong-doings.

My hope in creating Aaron's FB support page was that it would generate a few hundred people to lift him up in support – but I was wrong – Aaron generous nature has touched thousands. The world needs more Aarons to greet them at the door and to help them to their cars. His termination is a tragic loss to our community. Tolerance must be learned and practices put in place to assist a guest in greater understanding of a disability should something arise with an employee who is learning behavior impaired. Target must do better.

I expect a response to this letter – in fact, as a Target guest; I have to ask you “What Would Jesus Do?” At minimum, was a termination on Christmas Eve necessary or just downright cruel?

Sincerely,

Pamela J Dowell
210 NE 5th Street
Cohasset, MN 55721
Phone (218) 301-0257
Email: grpam79@hotmail.com

Cc: Minnesota Dept. of Human Rights,
Grand Rapids Human Rights Commission,
Americans with Disabilities Act – Minnesota,
EEOC – MN,
The ARC – Greater Twin Cities