

SPOTLIGHT ON Portland, Oregon

Racial equity work began at the City of Portland in 2008, in response to a report on disparities among racial and ethnic communities in Portland and Multnomah County. The Coalition of communities of color (CCC), with funding from Multnomah County and the City of Portland, hired Portland State University to conduct the study. The results were striking, showing large disparities between white communities and communities of color across many indicators of health and well-being. Racial disparities in Oregon have a long history, as the state was conceived originally as a white-only territory. The report showed this legacy was alive and well. The CCC leveraged the data politically, bringing it to the city and the county to encourage governments to take action to address the disparities revealed by the report.

At the same time, Portland was conducting a visioning process for the next 25 years of the city's future. One component of the process was called Vision into Action, which sought to incorporate the voices of marginalized communities often left out. Vision into Action included 14,000 people in the work to build a vision for Portland, which raised racial equity as a major issue. The disability community also became engaged through the process of building the Portland Plan. These community pressures motivated the City of Portland to create its Office of Equity and Human Rights (OEHR), which now oversees both racial and disability equity work for the City, modeled after Seattle's Race and Social Justice Initiative. The OEHR was created by ordinance in the winter of 2011 and opened its doors in the spring of 2012.



Portland's mayor at the time, Sam Adams, was committing to prioritizing racial equity, and felt that if the business community understood the initiative, they would be supportive. Commissioner Amanda Fritz and the mayor led eight daylong discussions with business leaders, including business leaders of color, who were able to share with their white colleagues how institutional racism impacts their experiences. These conversations helped pave the way to creating OEHR with business community support. Portland also formed a Creation Committee, a body of community representatives who helped to shape the mission for the office.

Portland's OEHR, like other cities and counties, focuses on the training of City employees in racial equity, including the definition of institutional and structural racism, the history of public policies designed to favor whites over other races, the difference between equity and equality, implicit bias, and how to apply an equity lens to policies, practices and programs. So far, 1,500 out of the city's 5,000+ employees have participated in racial equity training, and OEHR has now pushed to make the training mandatory for all employees. Several bureaus have also now hired Equity Managers to develop and drive their equity strategies within individual bureaus.

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A key strategy for building capacity was the creation of the Citywide Equity Committee (CEC), which includes two people from every bureau, committing 10 hours of staff time per month. The CEC meets once a month, and its purpose is to connect each of the bureaus to equity work and bring issues from the bureaus to OEHR. The CEC was also tasked with creating a tool to help every bureau develop a 5-year racial equity plan. The CEC modified the organizational assessment designed by the “All Hands Raised” Reducing Disparities Initiative, a collaborative of about 20 non-profit organizations as well as the Portland area school districts, working on education issues. The assessment was pared down to a streamlined list of questions that apply to the city’s work, and was divided into six domains: Organizational Commitment, Leadership and Management, Workforce, Community Access and Partnership, Contracting and Data, and Metrics and Continuous Quality Improvement.

The tool provides an evaluation scale from “This is not relevant or does not exist in our Bureau or department” to “This is part of our routine and identity. We model it for others. Practice has resulted in effective sustainable changes.” Bureaus are expected to design strategies for its 5-year equity plan about how it will improve in all domain areas. The tool is being launched five to six bureaus at a time, then OEHR and the CEC will review the plans produced by the bureaus. OEHR is working with Multnomah County on adapting the tool for the County as well.

Recently, OEHR has expanded to oversee several new programs, including the Black Male Achievement Program, which is led by a 22-member community steering committee of Black men. OEHR has also worked internally to support community organizations to advance a “Ban the Box” ordinance to remove questions about criminal convictions on job applications. State legislation has been passed and the City of Portland will be moving a local version forward as well.

In spring of 2015, Portland Mayor Charlie Hales required the use of an equity tool for the city’s budget process. Each bureau used the tool to assess the racial impacts of their proposed cuts or additions. Assessments were reviewed by OEHR and submitted to the budget work sessions (which include council members and a budget advisory team). The City Budget Office then makes recommendations. OEHR Director Dante James participated in the city council work sessions and his input was critical during the council’s review and modification of the budget proposals.

To Learn More

City of Portland Office of Equity and Human Rights (<https://www.portlandoregon.gov/oehr/68111>)

City of Portland Regional Equity Atlas (<https://clfuture.org/equity-atlas>)

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