

Advancing Racial Equity at the Local Government Level

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Across Washington State, many local governments are making a commitment to advancing racial equity. They may be in the early stages – forming advisory groups or gathering data – or in a more advanced effort – reviewing and revising policies and procedures that create barriers to progress toward equity and inclusion. This blog post will look at why local governments are

pursuing these efforts, the community and organizational context for this work, and the role of training and outside facilitators in such efforts. For additional examples of actions that local governments are taking to address these issues, see our blog post: [Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion efforts in Washington State](#).

Background

The [Government Alliance on Race and Equity \(GARE\)](#) defines racial equity as "when race can no longer be used to predict life outcomes and outcomes for all groups are improved." People of color are more likely to experience worse outcomes than white people across broad areas, including child welfare, health disparities, health care access, juvenile justice, education, and economic development and stability. Government can play a key role in advancing racial equity through policy and institutional strategies aimed at closing gaps and improving outcomes for all groups.

Approaches

Local government efforts to advance equity generally have two broad areas of focus: community (external) or organizational (internal).

Community

Community-focused efforts work to transform local government outreach and service delivery to the broader community. Components of this work include local government staff and elected officials meeting with and listening to diverse communities in order to build relationships and identify obstacles to achieving equity. Local examples of community-focused racial justice initiatives include:

- Forming a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) task force of community members ([College Place Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Board](#));
- Celebrating diversity within the community through proclamations and public-facing events ([Edmonds Diversity Film Series](#) and [Lacey Cultural Celebration](#));
- Designing outreach strategies to include communities that have not been heard or represented ([Everett Mayoral Directive: Community Engagement and Inclusion](#));
- Convening a citizen's police advisory committee ([Pasco Citizen's Advisory Committee](#)); or
- Analyzing and reallocating capital investments and public services as needed to ensure equitable distribution of resources within the community ([Seattle Equitable Development: Financial Investment Strategy](#)).

Organizational

Organizational-wide focused efforts focus on transforming the local government workplace into a more inclusive, diverse, and equitable environment. This work typically begins with equity training for staff and elected officials. Local examples of organizational-focused initiatives include:

- Completing an organizational assessment ([Snohomish County Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Assessment](#));
- Establishing an internal equity team that works to develop a deeper understanding of the organizational practices and policies that impede progress on inclusion and equity ([Government Alliance on Race & Equity, Racial Equity Core Teams](#));
- Developing organizational tools that suggest options for remedying long-standing inequities ([Renton Equity Lens](#)); and
- Reforming hiring practices to raise awareness of and reduce bias as much as possible ([Tacoma Handbook for Recruiting, Hiring & Retention](#)).

Many local governments are working to advance equity on both of these fronts — in relationship to the broader community and within the organization. There is no formula for achieving the right balance between efforts focused on the community or the organization but collecting community and organizational data related to disparities in representation and outcomes can help identify priorities.

Types of Training and Facilitated Conversations

For many local governments, the pathway toward advancing equity begins with training and facilitated conversations for staff and elected officials. This training is helpful in building a common vocabulary and understanding of race equity concepts across the organization. It often starts with examining how personal identity and lived experience shape our individual ideas about race, and then it advances to addressing structural and institutional barriers to equity. Skilled facilitation can help guide participants through challenging conversations that are essential to achieving change.

There are many different types of diversity and racial equity training offered by consultants and consulting organizations. The consulting firm Cultures Connecting has developed a [facilitator and consultant directory](#) to help agencies identify available consultants and services working in the state. There are also trainers who specialize in working with police department staff and typically have the skills to reduce the defensiveness around this topic that law enforcement officers may bring into the training.

Below is just a brief overview of some training types, starting with more personal explorations of race equity issues and progressing to training more focused on transforming institutions and structures.

Training Focused on Interpersonal Relationships and Understanding

- Implicit Bias/Unconscious Bias training focuses on the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. This training is effective in raising awareness of the existence of implicit bias. Behavioral change is rarely accomplished by any single training and, instead, is founded in an individual commitment to making a change and acting on that commitment.
- Microaggressions training raises awareness of brief and commonplace verbal and behavioral indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color. This training underscores the negative impact of these communications and provides strategies for interrupting workplace microaggressions in the moment.
- Cultural Competency training helps participants explore how individual identity develops as well as attitudes towards cultural differences. It also focuses on broadening individual knowledge of different cultural practices and worldviews and build skills in bridging these cross-cultural differences.

Training Focused on Changing Institutional Racial Inequities

- Building Organizational Capacity training uses a series of related workshops to encompass the breadth and depth of institutional transformation. Through this model, a core group within the agency develops the expertise to champion equity initiatives and provide peer-to-peer training to coworkers.
- Undoing Institutional and Structural Racism training focuses on the role race has played in shaping economic and social institutions as well as addressing the cumulative impact of race-based inequities and disparities. This training explores the differences between individual, institutional, and structural racism and typically provides tools to achieve more inclusive decision-making within groups and institutions.

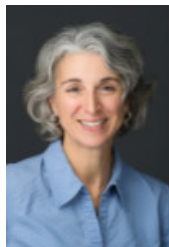
Additionally, training can be developed specific to a profession (e.g., police) or a level within an organization (leadership, front-line workers) or targeting a specific topic (recruiting and retaining diverse staff).

Conclusion

Local government can be a powerful and proactive force for equity and inclusion; however, leadership buy-in and robust initiatives at all levels of the organization are required, as a one-time training will not result in the systemic change needed to truly create behavioral and institutional change.

MRSC has been in communication with local governments across the state to gather information about racial diversity and equity initiatives being undertaken as we develop more resources on this topic to help support these efforts. Our [Inclusive Public Engagement Strategies](#) webinar on Wednesday, October 28 will review strategies for building relationships with diverse groups, thereby helping public agencies reduce misperceptions and promote a more cohesive community. We hope you'll consider joining us for this event.

MRSC is a private nonprofit organization serving local governments in Washington State. Eligible government agencies in Washington State may use our free, one-on-one [Ask MRSC service](#) to get answers to legal, policy, or financial questions.



About Leah LaCivita

Leah joined MRSC as a Communications Coordinator in the fall of 2016 and manages MRSC's blog and webinar training program, in addition to developing website content.

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