

HOW SEATTLE AND KING COUNTY ARE TACKLING INSTITUTIONAL INEQUITIES THROUGH SYSTEMIC CHANGE

From the Seattle Office for Civil Rights

At first sight, Seattle-King County seems to be a land of wealth and good living. But take a closer look: the region's social inequities mirror national trends, and many communities are losing ground.

When it comes to racial and other systemic inequities, Seattle-King County is no different than any other urban area in the United States. Race influences where we live, where we work, how well we do in school, how long we will live, and the likelihood of our involvement in the criminal justice system. To this day, people of color in Seattle-King County account for a disproportionate number of people living in poverty – in 2006, the poverty rate of Native Americans and African Americans was 30%. People of color also continue to experience discrimination in housing, employment, education and public places.

The City of Seattle and King County are tackling the problem directly. Seattle's Race and Social Justice Initiative (RSJI) seeks to end institutional racism in City government and to promote multiculturalism and full participation by all residents. King County's Equity and Social Justice Initiative (ESJI) seeks to create a place of opportunity, fairness, equity and social justice where all people thrive.

City of Seattle Race and Social Justice Initiative (RSJI)

Seattle's Race and Social Justice Initiative focuses on race because race has profoundly shaped all our institutions and public policies. Until now, government typically had responded to inequities – when it responded at all – by developing programs and services to ameliorate the effects of racism. RSJI attempts to focus on root causes by changing the underlying system that creates and preserves inequities, rather than attempt to treat the symptoms.

In 2009, Seattle City Council unanimously passed a resolution of support for the Initiative; Seattle's new Mayor Mike McGinn also has strongly endorsed the Initiative, and is using it to shape Mayoral priorities such as his Youth and Families Initiative.

RSJI focuses on three areas:

- Eliminate race-based disparities in the broader community.
- Strengthen the way the City engages the community and provides services.
- End racial disparities internal to the City by improving workforce equity, increasing City employees' knowledge and tools, and increasing contracting equity.

The RSJI Community Roundtable, whose twenty members represent community-based organizations, philanthropic institutions and other public entities, has selected education as the primary key impact area for working toward racial equity.

The Seattle Office for Civil Rights (SOCR) oversees the Initiative, monitoring departments' progress and coordinating Citywide employee training. An interdepartmental Subcabinet monitors RSJI work and makes broad policy recommendations.

King County Equity and Social Justice Initiative (ESJI)

The King County Equity & Social Justice Initiative is built on the premise that people of color, low-income residents and ethnic groups who have limited English proficiency are more likely to experience racism, underemployment, low education, poor health outcomes, incarceration and general loss of opportunity. In addition, they are more likely to have unsafe living conditions with less access to public goods and services, resources and life opportunities.

Since there is no blueprint for a government to take on these issues, King County recognizes that it must create a new culture – one that promotes learning and provides spaces for groups and departments to attempt different approaches. The push is for departments and their employees to look beyond individual behaviors to the social, economic and physical factors in communities that shape behaviors. In other words, it is not about blaming the individual but pushing “upstream” and addressing the root causes of inequities. And it is about looking at decisions, systems and policies that will create more equitable conditions.

The Equity and Social Justice Initiative has prioritized three areas of work:

- Incorporate an equity lens into countywide policy development and decision making.
- Address equity and social justice as part of the work of executive departments.
- Engage community groups that are the most impacted by inequities, as well as groups that hold institutional power, to raise the common understanding about equity and identify policies that will make a difference.

An Inter-Departmental Team is responsible for the Initiative's accountability and oversight, and reports to both the executive and operations cabinets.

A long-term commitment to change

Both Initiatives have resulted in significant policy and program changes. In the City of Seattle, new outreach and public engagement strategies have resulted in better communication with City residents, and all City departments provide translation and interpretation services for non-English speaking customers. King County has held community dialogs with over 100 different groups, and executive departments have committed to specific actions that promote equity and social justice. Both governments

also have begun using review tools to develop programs and policies that achieve greater equity.

Seattle's RSJI and King County's ESJI have tried to incorporate some of the lessons-learned from the many others in our region who have labored for social justice. There are no quick fixes, only a long-term commitment to systemic change. Both Initiatives hope to demonstrate that government can be a catalyst in the struggle to achieve real equity for the people who live and work in Seattle-King County.

To learn more about the Initiatives and to download more detailed reports, visit:

- <http://www.kingcounty.gov/exec/equity.aspx> – King County Equity and Social Justice Initiative
- www.seattle.gov/rsji – Seattle Race and Social Justice Initiative

This is an abridged version of an article that appeared in the September/October 2009 issue of "Poverty and Race." To read the full article click [here](#). The original article was written by Julie Nelson, Glenn Harris, Matias Valenzuela and Sandy Ciske.