



OFFICE OF EQUITY TASK FORCE

Draft Meeting Minutes – May 14, 2020

Virtual Meeting via Zoom

Task Force members present:

Marika Barto (for Lisa van der Lugt)
Benjamin Danielson (Co-Chair)
RaShelle Davis
Michelle Gonzalez
Elizabeth Gordon
Mia Gregerson (for Manka Dhingra)
Carrie Huie-Pascua (for Toshiko Hasegawa)

Karen A. Johnson
Laura Lindstrand (for Sharon Ortiz)
Melanie Morgan
Jan Olmstead (Co-Chair)
Sharon Ortiz
Manny Santiago
Allison Spector

Task Force members absent

Craig Bill
Jeremie Dufault

Ed Prince
Maria Siguenza

Task Force staff present:

LinhPhung Huynh, Project Manager
Hannah Fernald, Administrative Coordinator

Esmael López, Community Engagement Coordinator

Guests and other participants:

Patricia David, Office of Corrections Ombuds (OCO)
Lydia Faitalia, Commission on Asian Pacific American Affairs (CAPAA)
Melanie Hisaw, State Board of Health
Christy Hoff, WA State Board of Health & Community Engagement Task Force
Caitlin Lang-Perez, State Board of Health
Jean Mendoza, Friends of Toppenish Creek
Paj Nandi, WA State Department of Health & Community Engagement Task Force
Ruben Peralta, Greater Columbia Accountable Community of Health
Joana Ramos, WA State Coalition for Language Access
Alejandro Sanchez, Office of the Governor
Omar Santana, WA State LGBTQ Commission
Joseph Seia, Public Participant
Rose Spidell, Office of the Education Ombuds (OEO)
LaQuesha “Q” Turner, Office of Corrections Ombuds (OCO)
Karen Vargas, New Life CDA, ERACE, and other organizations in Kitsap County

Jan Olmstead, Task Force Co-chair, called the public meeting to order at 9:03 a.m. and read from a prepared statement. LinhPhung Huynh, Task Force Project Manager welcomed participants and reviewed Zoom instructions. She said meeting materials are posted online at www.healthequity.wa.gov.

Benjamin Danielson, Task Force Co-chair, asked members to introduce themselves with their name, their organization, and how they have changed in the past two months. Co-chair Danielson said he is more dedicated than ever to meeting the needs of the community. Jan Olmstead, Task Force Co-Chair, said she thinks more deeply about understanding ancestral histories and taking forth concepts of the Seven Generation strategy.

Karen A. Johnson, Task Force Member, said the only constant thing is change, and she is getting more comfortable with asking for help when she needs it. Omar Santana, LGBTQ Commission, said this time allows him to enjoy new things like cooking. Lydia Faitalia, Commission on Asian Pacific American Affairs, said she has been more gentle on herself and is taking time to reflect. Allison Spector, Task Force Member, said she has been introspective and feels her 'reset button' in life has been hit.

Michelle Gonzalez, Task Force Member, said the pandemic highlights disparities related to race, gender, and socioeconomic status. RaShelle Davis, Task Force Member, said she is trying to be supportive for those who need it the most. Sharon Ortiz and Laura Lindstrand, Task Force Members, said this is an overwhelming time for the Human Rights Commission as they continue to serve the state. Elizabeth Gordon, Task Force Member, said this period has been sobering. She is seeing a large number of people trying to access state systems, and the last couple of months have shown how much work remains to be done to better prepare for crises.

Marika Barto, Task Force Member, shared her experience in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina. She added that we have an opportunity to fix things and build new systems. Melanie Morgan, Task Force Member, said the door is open even wider than before and the Office of Equity is needed now more than ever.

1. APPROVAL OF AGENDA

Motion: The Task Force approves the May 14, 2020 agenda.

Motion/Second: Member Gordon/Member Johnson. Approved unanimously.

2. ADOPTION OF APRIL 30, 2020 MEETING MINUTES

Motion: The Task Force adopts the April 30, 2020 meeting minutes.

Motion/Second: Member Spector/Member Barto. Approved unanimously.

3. ANNOUNCEMENTS & TASK FORCE BUSINESS

Ms. Huynh recapped conversations from the Task Force's April 30 public meeting, including some equity issues and calls to action (on file).

4. DISCUSSION: LESSONS FROM THE COVID-19 RESPONSE

Ms. Huynh introduced the discussion topic (on file). She said important lessons are taking shape in the COVID-19 response, and we can shine a spotlight on them to inform continuing efforts and the recommendations that come from this Task Force.

Paj Nandi, Community Engagement Task Force (Joint Information Center) & Department of Health, said the response effort requires addressing social determinants of health, which are all the factors that influence health and wellbeing. He said the state enterprise did not have the necessary structures and systems in place to respond to the pandemic. He noted that the lack of community representation in the public workforce is a barrier;

cultural and linguistic diversity in the workforce is necessary to convey the nuances of communities and lived experiences. He said speed is essential in a response, and we need to create community in our institutions first before we can lean on community voice. Currently, there is not enough capacity to do meaningful community engagement.

Mr. Nandi said lack of data is a huge challenge. The pandemic shines a spotlight on the importance of disaggregating data in order to understand communities' needs. He said we need to invite communities into response efforts to help us identify and fill gaps, such as those related to race and ethnicity, certain occupations, LGBTQ status, disability status, and language access.

Mr. Nandi spoke about state contracting practices and said communities need to be prioritized in the creation of information by and for them. This is an area where government can step back and allow communities to lead, so efforts are quick and unhindered by bureaucracy. He asked members to consider how we can turn this 'emergency paradigm' into a post-emergency reality that changes the way government does business.

Mr. Nandi said the pandemic has accelerated certain efforts. Christy Hoff, Community Engagement Task Force (Joint Information Center) & Governor's Interagency Council on Health Disparities, said the CETF feels like a micro-Office of Equity. There are about 13 staff providing guidance and technical assistance to the enterprise. They work in all aspects of the response, including policy development, implementation, and agency language assistance services. She said the state needs a more diverse workforce that is reflective of the communities it serves. Cultural humility training and tools are foundational to doing work in an equitable way.

Ms. Hoff said the CETF's work on language access demonstrates how the Office of Equity could operate one day. CETF staff worked with staff from the racial and ethnic commissions to elevate issues of information access to the Governor's Office. The CETF quickly built a system to translate all vital COVID-19 information into 37 languages; the Department of Enterprise Services created a portal to facilitate vendor contracting; and State Human Resources is identifying a pool of multilingual employees. To help agencies implement the state language access plan, the CETF provides technical assistance on preparing information for translation, which ensures smart and effective use of limited resources.

Mr. Nandi said agencies should not have to come up with quick fixes. 'Building the plane as we fly it' is an unsustainable approach. He said the Office of Equity must have the right resources and support to do intentional, effective work and to support enterprise efforts.

RaShelle Davis, Task Force Member & Office of the Governor, said the state's language access plan is a huge milestone and it is unfortunate that it took COVID-19 to get one in place. She said other states look to Washington for model policies and practices. In terms of contracting, the state has been adaptive to the needs of specific industries. Member Davis said there are still many gaps, including the unmet needs of undocumented Washingtonians and disparities in the public K-12 system. She said rent and mortgage payments are accruing during the moratorium, and there is a large unmet need in this area.

Member Davis said agencies need a foundational equity toolkit to use as they do budget reduction exercises and create decision packages. She said the state should learn from the 2008 recession when program cuts disproportionately impacted communities of color. She said communities of color, LGBTQ communities, and individuals with disabilities will experience adverse impacts if there are cuts to safety net programs.

Rose Spidell, Office of the Education Ombuds (OEO), said it was important for the Governor to set early and clear expectations for agencies, so they could continue with essential services like providing meals to students. She said the public K-12 system 'hit pause' because it did not know how to serve certain student populations during the pandemic and needed time to figure things out. Ms. Spidell said it is important to prioritize those who have been farthest from opportunity. She said there are significant gaps in remote learning, technology access, and Internet access. Washington's local control model can further complicate emergency situations; it is necessary for the state to explain clearly to local jurisdictions the minimal equity measures and basic parameters for continued services.

Ms. Spidell said the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction moved from an emphasis on compliance toward an emphasis on compassion, and created more space for relationship development with local jurisdictions, families, and students. She hoped to see more of this shift in our systems. She said the need for a more diverse workforce also exists in public education. Additionally, she hoped the process of analyzing and using data in decision making can become community-driven and include participatory reviews with communities.

LaQuesha "Q" Turner, Office of Corrections Ombuds (OCO), said she usually facilitates conversations with stakeholders and incarcerated persons to understand what equity looks like for the prison system, but this community forum setting has become harder to achieve due to the pandemic. She said staff are visiting prisons for first-hand knowledge, which helps inform improvement efforts and reassures families that there is continued oversight. She noted there is a lack of consistent communication reaching incarcerated individuals and their families, which causes fear and panic. Staff are taking complaints related to health and COVID-19. They are especially concerned about meeting the needs of aging populations and other populations with specific needs.

Alejandro Sanchez, Office of the Governor, said Washington is at the forefront on many issues and a leader in the nation. He added that when we look at who is doing well in our state and who is not, the gaps are clear as day. He has heard heartbreaking stories about job loss, illness, and other struggles. He said for some communities, state support structures did not apply to their lives in the first place; they are dependent on these structures now more than ever.

Mr. Sanchez said the biggest problems are related to: language access; benefits access; and fear and distrust of government stemming from historical immigration enforcement efforts that have the potential to separate families for years. Efforts must include culture shifts in our institutions. He said people fear that accessing public assistance during this time could jeopardize their residency based on the Public Charge Rule. He added that agricultural workers are at the intersection of being essential and underserved. He said the state is working quickly to get out clear rules and resources (like facemasks and sanitizer) to industries. He hoped these workers feel safe, supported, and welcomed. Mr.

Sanchez noted the Office of Equity could be an important hub for this type of work in the future.

Member Johnson spoke about an article she recently shared with other members and said, “What affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” She said our hopes, dreams, vision, and expectations center around the Office of Equity filling the role of compliance *and* compassion. Karen Vargas, public participant, said the state needs to be connected to those who are currently unrepresented. She added that many counties feel isolated in doing equity and inclusion work. She asked how the state can connect and grow these networks across Washington, especially during the pandemic. Co-Chair Olmstead said she is heartened by these conversations that raise awareness of communities and by the efforts to ensure we are not leaving communities behind. Co-Chair Danielson said communication and connectedness are founding reasons for the Office of Equity.

Members and public participants discussed challenges related to the collection, analysis, and presentation of data. They discussed the possibility of having a statewide dashboard that incorporates data on unemployment rates, resource availability, health care access, and other social determinants of health. Co-Chair Olmstead said data-related issues are important to tribes and communities, and the Office of Equity’s long-term work should include coordinating efforts around this area. Co-Chair Danielson said these efforts should consider communities’ deeper cultural, historical experiences, including the relationship between trust and data.

Ms. Turner asked when the Office of Equity would be created. Ms. Huynh responded that HB 1783 creates the Office of Equity on July 1, 2020, but the Task Force has not seen an implementation plan. She added that funding is a challenge, and pointed to the Frequently Asked Questions document in the meeting materials for additional information (on file).

The Task Force took a break from 11:20 a.m. and reconvened at 11:34 a.m.

5. PANEL: SYNERGY & ACCOUNTABILITY

Ms. Huynh said HB 1783 (creating the WA State Office of Equity) states that the Office of Equity must work with the statutory commissions in a complementary manner. She said this panel will discuss how the Office of Equity can work in solidarity with key partners, with accountability to each other and to communities.

Sharon Ortiz, Task Force Member & Human Rights Commission, described the Human Rights Commission’s role and some of its priorities:

- The Commission is a neutral enforcement entity, created to address discrimination in housing, employment, public accommodation, and credit and insurance.
- The Commission receives around 1,400 complaints a year and also works with the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development to do investigations.
- The Commission’s jurisdiction keeps extending, but staffing has not kept up. More investigators are needed to handle the 250-case backlog.
- The Commission works on policy and statements. Recently, it worked with the Department of Health and local health jurisdictions to address issues including: decisions on treatment during the pandemic; state support for the Central Valley; and housing and protective measures for agricultural workers.

Member Ortiz said the Commission could not have survived over the years without partnerships, and she is proud of the creative solutions her office implements during challenging times. She added that the Commission works case-by-case to address discrimination, and the Office of Equity could look at the big picture to implement changes and reduce inequities across the enterprise. She said the Office of Equity could be a strong partner in providing assistance to agencies and promoting education and outreach.

Elizabeth Gordon, Task Force Member & Governor's Committee on Disability Issues and Employment, described the GCDE's role and some of its priorities:

- The GCDE's mission is to increase opportunity for people with disabilities, because these individuals still face unequal access to services. It serves as a voice for this population.
- The Committee strives to conduct all activities in an accessible manner, modeling this behavior to other agencies and serving as a resource.
- Among other efforts, the GCDE conducts community engagement, manages a grant to help small counties overcome access issues, and runs a camp for youth with disabilities to build mentorship and relationships.
- Access issues related to services, equipment, technology (e.g. Internet), and language are high priority areas.

Member Gordon said agencies provide certain services that hold people's lives together, and the pandemic has further complicated access to these services. She shared her concern that some individuals will be unable to return to work due to health risks, which affects their financial security.

Member Gordon said the GCDE has very limited staffing. She said she sees the Office of Equity as a hub for resources and guidelines, weaving together efforts and strategies among partners to ensure coordination and forward momentum. She added that it is important for people with disabilities to feel included in this work. She said that in times of budget cuts, we need to clearly articulate how we are relevant *together*.

Manny Santiago, Task Force Member & LGBTQ Commission, described the LGBTQ Commission's role and some of its priorities:

- The Commission was recently established and is forming as the pandemic unfolds. Its mission is to improve the state's interface with LGBTQ communities, primarily through advising the Governor.
- The community put in a lot of work to establish the Commission and define its work. Working with community partners has been instrumental in connecting communities across the state with the information and resources they need.
- Staff serve on multiple workgroups to represent the LGBTQ voice, including those related to the COVID-19 response and recovery. At the forefront are issues such as: reclassifying life-affirming surgeries for transgender and intersex individuals as 'essential'; creating certification for LGBTQ-run businesses so they qualify as a minority-owned business; surveying communities to better assess their needs.

Member Santiago said the Commission has a limited reach with two staff positions, so collaboration is essential to providing services to the community. He hoped the Office of Equity could create uniformity in language (e.g. standardizing terms for the LGBTQ community) and competencies, and assist the Commission in creating shared resources and strategies. With mutual support, the Office of Equity can give the LGBTQ Commission more power and authority to represent its community.

Members discussed possible accountability mechanisms for the Office of Equity. Member Santiago said it is important to set standards of accountability, and the Office must model accountable behavior. He added that collecting and sharing data in a transparent manner is important for tracking progress. Member Gordon said consistency in data collection is critical to telling the story of access (or lack thereof) in our systems. She added that consistent workforce training allows people to have a shared language to discuss equity. As individuals move into supervisory roles, they need to understand equity and inclusion and be able to model this behavior to other staff. Member Barto said the Office of Equity should have standard processes and benchmarks as necessary, but also customize its approach and assistance to each agency. Member Spector said accountability includes highlighting and elevating issues that are normally buried, and the Office of Equity can have a central role in these efforts.

6. PUBLIC COMMENT

Jean Mendoza, Friends of Toppenish Creek (written testimony on file), said Yakima County is suffering most severely from health disparities and inequities in the pandemic. She said additional outreach workers should be sent to Yakima County to track infections and assist families with isolation and care. She said Yakima County is lacking the necessary resources and did not take actions early, so people are dying.

Joana Ramos, Washington State Coalition for Language Access (WASCLA), said there are still significant gaps for our most vulnerable communities, especially for those with Limited English Proficiency. WASCLA continues to hear about critical language barriers including in health care, COVID-19 screening, and testing. She said the Attorney General's Office should issue a reminder to all agencies of their obligation under the WA State Law Against Discrimination to provide language access at all points of services, at all hours of the day. She said the federal CARES Act, enacted in March, includes the Pandemic EBT program that can provide families more flexible access to food. She said program information is very limited in languages other than English, which presents an equity issue. She said Washington needs to break down bureaucratic silos, so families can sign up right away and benefit from this program.

Ruben Peralta, Greater Columbia Accountable Community of Health, said many people are impacted in inequitable ways during the pandemic, and he is especially touched by the comments about his community. He said Yakima County has a large immigrant population. He is involved in community efforts and his organization recently provided \$300,000 to Second Harvest to provide food to food banks. They are doing work around Adverse Childhood Experiences and providing resources to areas with most need. He thanked the Task Force for advocating for the most vulnerable populations.

Karen Vargas, representing several organizations in Kitsap County including New Life CDA, ERACE, Living Life Leadership, Living Arts Cultural Heritage Center, and The Marvin Williams Center in Bremerton, said there are 32 organizations combining efforts to address inequities in Kitsap County. She said their communities overlap and connect with other counties, and some populations move from community to community. She said sometimes Kitsap County is referred to as ‘Kidnap County,’ because people feel isolated from the rest of the state. People want to connect and be part of a coalition, and they understand that the census plays a key role in getting resources. She added that Kitsap communities want to be present and have voices at the table.

Ms. Huynh read written testimony from Joseph Seia, public participant: “Thank you all for your amazing advocacy work on behalf our diverse communities most impacted by systemic barriers that are racialized. I am a part of the Pacific Islander community and we are seeing devastating impacts of COVID-19 on our community's well-being in health and in social well-being. While our Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander (NHPI) data is disaggregated in King County, our data is very much invisible throughout the state and the implications for policy change is bleak. In King County, we are also seeing that NHPI have the highest rates for unemployment filing at 33% compared to all other racial groups. I list all these to ask member of this taskforce to not lock our Pacific Islander communities out of these tables, but to continue to partner with us in real ways so that our particular issues are included in this body of work.”

7. DEBRIEF & BRAINSTORM

Co-Chair Danielson, asked members to share thoughts on how the Task Force could prioritize its work based on the information gathered today. Member Johnson said she is excited about the opportunity before us—the pandemic clearly shows the need to expand opportunity, access, resources, and supports to all members of our communities so they can work, play, live, and thrive. She said the Office of Equity’s work with agencies and with communities would be mutually reinforcing.

Member Gregerson said today’s conversations remind her that our work is on the right path. Member Spector said the Office of Equity’s success is tied to the question of “*How will this time be different?*” Member Barto said it is important to leverage partnerships, such as those mentioned today, to keep momentum for the Office of Equity. She said partners can help ‘carry the water’ until the Office of Equity is able to operate in its truest, fullest form.

Members tentatively agreed on six features of accountability that the Office of Equity can promote:

- Lending visibility to important issues that are unheard or unseen;
- Establishing standards that apply across the enterprise;
- Creating markers to show progress (or lack thereof) in a transparent way;
- Shining a light on how data should be collected and used;
- Promoting consistent training, including training related to disability rights; and
- Modeling a supportive and engaging approach.

8. COMMENTS, UPDATES & REFLECTIONS

Ms. Huynh encouraged members to review the focus group report, because there is much alignment between the findings and members' comments today. She encouraged members to review the Task Force's preliminary report to consider how far we have come as a group, and how we can update content to respond to the drastic changes happening around us.

Co-Chair Danielson said that although we do not have every solution, this project is a prologue to an important legacy. This challenging time presents an amazing opportunity to address Member Spector's question: "How will this time be different?" He encouraged participants, "Let's speak our truths...and make sure...that the impact of our voices is heard long and far and wide and that we change this world in the way we wish to." Co-Chair Olmstead shared appreciation for staff, public participants, and Task Force members.

ADJOURNMENT

Jan Olmstead, Task Force Co-Chair, adjourned the meeting at 1:09 p.m.

OFFICE OF EQUITY TASK FORCE

Jan Olmstead, Task Force Co-chair
Benjamin Danielson, Task Force Co-chair

To request this document in an alternate format or a different language, please contact Kelie Kahler, Washington State Board of Health Communication Manager, at 360-236-4102 or by email at kelie.kahler@sboh.wa.gov TTY users can dial 711.

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