

Equity Office Task Force

November 6, 2019



The Equity Office Task Force was created through a proviso in the 2019-2021 biennial operating budget, [ESHB 1109](#) (section 221, subsection 7). This legislation directs the Governor's Interagency Council on Health Disparities to convene and staff the Task Force, and it outlines the Task Force's membership and reporting requirements to the Legislature.

The Equity Office Task Force is responsible for creating an operations plan for a new WA State Office of Equity. The purpose for an Office of Equity is to coordinate equity work across state government and across sectors, so communities can experience better outcomes. This includes promoting access to equitable opportunities and resources to reduce disparities, including racial and ethnic disparities. The Task Force will make recommendations on what this office should look like and how it should operate.

The Task Force held its first public meeting on August 19 on The Evergreen State College (TESC) Tacoma campus. To access video-recordings of the full meeting, please visit the [Task Force's website](http://healthequity.wa.gov) (healthequity.wa.gov). At the beginning of each meeting, Task Force co-chairs Jan Olmstead and Benjamin Danielson, make a statement to acknowledge the indigenous peoples whose land the Task Force is gathered on. In this opening statement, the Task Force: acknowledges the exclusions and erasures of many indigenous peoples; states its support for tribal sovereignty and self-determination; and reaffirms the responsibilities included in [government-to-government relations](#).

Tanna Engdahl, Spiritual Leader with the Cowlitz Tribe, gave a welcome address at the Task Force's September 16 public meeting in Vancouver, WA. Ms. Engdahl shared that the Tribe has experienced racism and inequity at the level of attempted erasure. The Tribe was decimated by illness—reduced from 55,000 individuals to only 500—after the coming of white settlers. She said the Tribe has experienced first-hand the manipulation of systems and policies based on inequity, such as through the offer of treaties. The Tribe declined to move from their land, refusing to leave the place where their ancestors lay, even as the Tribe faced devastation.

Ms. Engdahl said that 'equity' is the most difficult word we will ever try to define, live up to, and make happen. She said Task Force members have been pulled together from many places and backgrounds to do amazingly complex and extremely important work. She expressed understanding and appreciation for this effort.

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Ms. Engdahl said she and the Tribe will look for the Task Force's product, and she gave encouragements and reminders. She asked Task Force members to remember who they are as they complete this work, since this is the first component of cultural humility and the most important way to keep on track. Ms. Engdahl added that cultural humility means recognizing others in the way they see themselves. For the Cowlitz Tribe, she said: "One desire we have is for others to know us as we know ourselves." She said this practice is important if we want to see equity become reality.

In October, the Task Force held a community forum (Oct 20) and a public meeting (Oct 21) in Yakima. The Task Force gathered input for an equity definition and equity statement during the community forum, and members deliberated policy recommendations at the public meeting. The public can access meeting materials on the [Task Force's website](http://healthequity.wa.gov) (healthequity.wa.gov).

The Task Force will submit a preliminary report to the Governor and Legislature in December 2019, outlining the general structure and operating budget for a new WA State Office of Equity. Some of the proposed roles for the Office of Equity include:

- Guiding statewide efforts through a common vision around equity;
- Serving as a conduit between state institutions, and between state government and communities;
- Providing guidance and technical assistance to agencies for systems and policy change; and
- Maintaining an online dashboard to show agencies' progress in a transparent, accountable manner.

The Task Force will continue to meet and work on recommendations between January and June 2020. Its final report is due to the Governor and the Legislature by July 1, 2020. A meeting schedule will be shared with the public and published online at www.healthequity.wa.gov. To receive updates about the Task Force, please subscribe to its distribution list by sending an email message to healthequity@sboh.wa.gov.

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