



STATE OF WASHINGTON
OFFICE OF EQUITY TASK FORCE

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June 15, 2020

The Honorable Laurie Jinkins, Speaker of the House
The Honorable Pat Sullivan, Majority Leader
The Honorable J.T. Wilcox, Minority Leader
Washington State House of Representatives
Legislative Building
Olympia, WA 98504

Dear Speaker Jinkins, Majority Leader Sullivan, and Minority Leader Wilcox:

The coronavirus pandemic and the intolerable ongoing legacy of police brutality further expose the devastating state of racism and its many related forms of discrimination that exist in our society. Discrimination due to skin color, culture, immigrant status, language, ability, age, gender, sexual orientation, beliefs, and where a person lives. Discrimination for being indigenous. Despite our hope for a different reality, oppression and erasure are embedded in every part of our lives, including our state government.

Today we are facing the incontrovertible and centuries-long truth that the work of promoting equity must be *all our work*. It must include re-envisioning and re-sculpting our infrastructures with an intentional focus on equity. We are in the midst of an uprising—a rejection of racism. The overt forms of racism, like the killing of Black and Brown men and women by police. The eroding kind of racism that makes a virus and its response cause inequitable suffering. And the more generally broad-reaching kinds that subvert futures, constrain opportunity, deny access, undermine dignity, and shorten lives for so many communities of color.

We are in the midst of an uprising for justice. A loud and firm call for substantive change—the kind that spurred the Legislature to convene the Office of Equity Task Force a year ago. This decision set in motion a conversation about how to lift equity higher in state government. Five months ago, we submitted a report to the Legislature with some tangible steps laying out how to transparently and accountably see equity's powerful lens change the way things are done. This is the very kind of change that today's uprising is resoundingly calling for.

State government must match the solutions to the problem. Our state needs sustained, united action across the enterprise to uproot structural and systemic oppression. **Now more than ever, we need a Washington State Office of Equity to assist agencies in identifying and implementing effective strategies to eliminate systemic inequities.**

Passing Engrossed Second Substitute House Bill 1783 (creating the WA State Office of Equity) was a necessary and historic first step, but it is not enough. **The work of creating more equitable, inclusive systems must no longer reside in the margins—the Office of Equity must be adequately funded to fulfill its urgent purpose.**

Washingtonians expect action. Budgets reflect our priorities, and they are the clearest demonstration of who we are, who we are willing to stand up for, and who we are unwilling to leave behind. As you and other leaders make difficult funding decisions in the days and months ahead, we urge you to consider the duality of each action. When the state says ‘no’ to funding options that promote transformative change, it is saying ‘yes’ to maintaining a status quo built on historical inequities. As you consider the cost of an option, we urge you to also consider the cost of *not* choosing that option. The pandemic has reinforced a devastating lesson: we can only be as healthy as our most vulnerable and marginalized communities. Our state can no longer afford a system that accomplishes what it was set up to do—to provide opportunity to some at the expense of others. Our state can no longer afford to underinvest in diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Investment in the Office of Equity will save much more than it costs, and will improve lives in priceless ways. It will reduce the avoidable financial toll that inequity takes on the state; from health-related costs, to lost productivity, to falling short on the future wealth of assets this state could enjoy. **Investment in the Office of Equity ensures smart and effective use of limited resources.** The Office of Equity will equip agencies with the necessary tools, guidance, and expectations to make decisions that prioritize resources to historically and currently marginalized communities—those that have been farthest from opportunity. The Office of Equity’s work will cultivate welcoming and inclusive spaces where public employees, saddened and outraged by recent tragic events, can discuss the role each person plays in upholding systems of privilege and oppression. This acknowledgement is the first step to dismantling systems of oppression and addressing historical injustices. Together, we can embark on the journey of collective healing.

Communities across the state are looking to you to show up in this critical moment as your most visionary and powerful selves to ensure that this time will be different. **We urge you to adequately invest in the Office of Equity as a demonstration of our state’s commitment to affirming the humanity, dignity, and equal value of every Washingtonian.**

Sincerely,



Jan Ward Olmstead



Benjamin Danielson

Chairs of the Office of Equity Task Force