



In this interview series on race equity, APHSA shares stories from state and local human services leaders about their work embedding a race equity lens into their policies, programs, and organizational culture. In this edition, APHSA focuses on a *Blueprint for a Just and Equitable Future* at the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS), which focuses on dismantling poverty and racial inequalities throughout the state. Lori Pfingst, DSHS Senior Director, has been supporting this effort and shares her insight on that work. APHSA extends its gratitude to Lori and her team for sharing their story.

Washington State has developed a very ambitious 10-year strategy plan to dismantle structural racism and alleviate poverty. What was the catalyst behind this incredible journey?

Lori Pfingst: Following the Great Recession in 2008, there was growing awareness that stubbornly high rates of poverty are the product of inherently unjust and unequal policies, programs, and budgets that have underwritten our economy for decades. Declines in funding for foundational public goods—such as child care, education, health care, and human services—were leading to visible increases in downstream issues, like homelessness, addiction, and behavioral illness. After watching the state budget be balanced on the backs of people with low incomes for years, a bipartisan group of advocates, legislators, and agency leaders came together to create space for an honest and intentional conversation about the root causes of poverty and what it would take to measurably and equitably reduce it. Shortly thereafter, Governor Inslee's Poverty Reduction Work Group (PRWG) was born, tasked with creating a 10-year strategic plan to reduce poverty and inequality in Washington State.

The Blueprint for a Just and Equitable Future Steering Committee has been a driving force in shaping the initiative's vision. Can you describe

how the composition, roles, and activities of that committee have driven the work forward?

Pfingst: At our very first meeting, PRWG members prioritized two foundational principles to guide development of the strategic plan: (1) centering racial equality; and (2) having people experiencing poverty direct the work. Toward both ends, philanthropic funds were raised to support the creation of a 22-member Steering Committee facilitated by one of PRWG's strategic partners, the Statewide Poverty Action Network. Recruitment for the committee intentionally focused on the demographic and geographic diversity of people experiencing poverty throughout the state, with a majority of Indigenous, Black, and Brown Washingtonians and other groups historically excluded from economic well-being, such as single mothers and fathers, immigrants and refugees, people with disabilities, rural families, and the LGBTQ community.

The Steering Committee set the direction and priorities for PRWG and provided feedback throughout the

development of strategies and recommendations. To build their own identity and power, Steering Committee members chose to meet separately from the general work group and elected two co-chairs to represent their priorities in all PRWG meetings.

Both groups—the Steering Committee and the general work group—met monthly for nearly two years to design the plan. Members bravely shared their personal histories and the too-often-dehumanizing experiences with the systems serving them, grounding PRWG in the truth and reality of what it means to experience poverty in Washington State. They brought in experts from diverse fields—including health and human services, behavioral health, child welfare, and the juvenile and criminal justice systems to help guide PRWG's priorities, and spoke truth to power with cabinet-level leaders in state government. It was a timely, intense, and necessary back-and-forth process—yielding a 10-Year Plan to Dismantle Poverty endorsed by eight state agencies, a growing number of community organizations, and the state's recovery efforts from COVID-19.

Interested in learning more? Visit APHSA's Call to Action page (http://bit.ly/APHSA_Action) for information and resources developed by other human services agencies to advance their race equity work. This page will continue expanding as we share more voices through our race equity interview series.

The role of the Steering Committee was nothing short of extraordinary—they became the head, heart, and soul of PRWG, and are inspiring leaders throughout state government to include

people historically excluded from well-being as equal partners in state policy, program, and funding decisions.

One of the key strategies of the *Blueprint* is to get external buy-in. Can you talk about your approach to engaging external stakeholders in this work?

Pfingst: Building a well-functioning work group is tricky. Diversity is paramount, especially when working on an issue as pervasive as poverty. So many perspectives are essential to getting the work right. On the practical side, however, size matters for group dynamics, as well as resource limitations. Having a work group large and diverse enough to ensure the plan addressed the root causes of poverty was essential, but so was getting buy-in from leaders we need to take action on the 10-year plan. We knew the PRWG was imperfect in its composition and that broader engagement was necessary to have a strategic plan powerful enough to meet the moment.

We did not need to *be* right, we wanted to get *it* right, so we cast a wide net and took an over-inclusive approach to solicit feedback before calling the plan final. The first product of PRWG was a working draft of the 10-Year Plan that acknowledged its imperfections, embraced critiques, and invited widespread input from people and communities throughout the state. In more than 70 briefings between February and December 2020, the PRWG Steering Committee and general work group members listened to people and communities historically excluded from economic well-being, as well as organizations working on their behalf, and state government—field workers, mid-level managers, cabinet-level secretaries, and legislators to see if we got it right. All of this feedback contributed to the final draft, *Blueprint for a Just & Equitable Future: The 10-Year Plan to Dismantle Poverty* (<https://dismantlepov-ertyinwa.com>), submitted to Governor Inslee in January 2021.

Now that we have a plan, it will remain a living, breathing document that we are working to position as a north star to guide the state through the recovery

toward a just and equitable future. Implementation has already begun, with several legislative wins in the 2021 session related to the plan's eight strategies and 60 recommendations, and growing public-private collaboration to build statewide momentum. The next phase of the work is to continue to support the Steering Committee, build trusting partnerships, and visit progress annually to hold the state accountable to a just and equitable future.

Your agency has been strategic in using research and evidence in executing your 10-year strategic plan. What are some of the data and research tools you have used to advance your work on race equity?

Pfingst: We are fortunate to work in an agency dedicated to antiracism, and willing to move beyond caring about equity to taking action to achieve it. The journey to advance racial equity in PRWG's work utilized many tools but began with an investment in members' personal understanding for why an approach grounded in racial and social justice was needed to underwrite the strategies and recommendations in the 10-Year Plan. We also invested in an intentional process to support meaningful contributions among members, especially members of color, for whom conversations about race can be especially harmful if not done with care.

We started our journey using data to show racial and geographic disproportionality in the experience of poverty and its effects on well-being and engaged PRWG members in early discussions of root causes of why the data looked the way they did. Existing research was used to explain data trends, but—recognizing data and research are limited in the story they tell—stories from people experiencing poverty were elevated to bring greater meaning to the discussion. Through this exercise, PRWG members identified the failure of decision-makers—past and present—to acknowledge racism, historical trauma, and oppression as root causes of poverty, and the group unanimously agreed to hire a racial equity consultant to guide PRWG through the development of strategies and recommendations.

The consultant took our work to the next level. A racial equity tool and the practice of racial caucusing were adopted to guide the deep, uncomfortable, and necessary conversations needed to identify just and equitable solutions. In between monthly meetings, one-on-one discussions took place to support each member's individual journey in the group, gauge progress, and inform topics and exercises for future meetings. The journey was not without mistakes and frustration, but it was authentic, and the trust built among PRWG members over time kept everyone coming back to the table to create a powerful plan.

It was a transformative experience. One agency member described it as the most “humbling, exhilarating, uncomfortable, and hopeful experience of [her] career in state government.” Along the way, one thing became crystal clear to the group: data and racial equity tools are essential for progress, but they depend upon the personal transformations we must all make to hardwire equity into all the decisions we make. As one community expert explained to PRWG members, “the most important racial equity tool is you...each of you has to personally commit to equity in your heart and mind for it to show up in your work.”

How have the deepening disparities due to the COVID-19 pandemic affected your long-term investment in race equity?

Pfingst: COVID-19 and the nationwide reckoning over our history of racial oppression and injustice has illuminated existing inequality to the point where it is becoming too difficult to ignore. There is growing awareness that the social contract upon which our nation is built is underwritten by inherently unjust and unequal policies, programs, and budgets that undermines Indigenous, Black, and Brown people the most, but that also hurts White people. Our collective well-being is dependent upon a social contract underwritten by equity, in which all Washingtonians benefit from the progress that only a just

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and equitable future can provide. COVID-19 has inspired state agencies to amplify our investments in racial equity and accelerate progress toward that future.

What accountable mechanisms do you have in place to measure your progress over time?

Pfingst: As we think about recovery from COVID-19 and its economic consequences, the 10-Year Plan begs the question: what are we recovering toward? To answer that question, a technical advisory group formed with a shared interest in resisting the gravitational pull of the status quo to define,

measure, and build accountability toward a just and equitable future. The framework is built on the concept of “what’s in the soil bears the fruit.” If we invest in just and equitable conditions, they will yield just and equitable outcomes, a concept that centers the expertise and influence of people historically excluded from economic well-being in decision-making. The effort is a work in progress, but we are hopeful that a new model of accountability toward just and equitable outcomes will emerge and inspire other states to do the same.

For your peers in other human services agencies who are considering beginning

their own journey, what words of advice can you share with them?

Pfingst: Health and human services play an enormous role in supporting a strong, equitable, and just economy. Owning that role, and embracing clients as colleagues to transform state policies, programs, and budgets, is a liberating and deeply meaningful experience. It will challenge your mind, humble your ego, and leave you feeling raw and vulnerable, but it is also a powerful reminder of what brought most of us into the field—to make a meaningful difference in people’s lives. Say “yes” to where the journey takes you and enjoy the ride! 