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# King County’s Journey in Institutionalizing Equity and Social Justice

Evidence in Public Administration

The United States has a history of programs and movements that have contributed to addressing poverty and well-being, including access to quality jobs, housing, and education, such as the New Deal and the civil rights movement. Despite areas of improvements, deep and historically based chasms by race and class persist today. Evidence of this is the increasing levels of income inequality and systemic racism and bias in government institutions, manifested by the disproportionate number of people of color who are incarcerated.

These trends come at a time when growing evidence shows that robust, sustained economic growth flourishes in places with the least inequality. Also, there is increasing urgency to address inequities, as the growing demographic shift puts the United States on the road to being majority “minority” in less than 30 years.

What happens when local government decides that a top priority is addressing issues of racial justice, equity, and opportunity—especially when progress is stalled at the national level? The story of King County, Washington, offers one illustration.

King County provides local and regional services to more than two million people across 39 cities and unincorporated areas in transportation, criminal justice, public health and human services, natural resources, and more.

Building on Isett, Head, and VanLandingham’s (2016) work on how evidence can better inform public administration, this article considers evidence in several important ways. King County’s approach to equity and social justice has been driven by both data and values. Almost a decade of experience within King County—as well as other jurisdictions around the country with equity initiatives<sup>1</sup>—has made addressing equity and racial justice increasingly a discipline based on evidence and promising practices.

In addition, this article lays out the evidence for *why* governments should focus on equity and social justice. King County’s theory of change—backed by the evidence of working “upstream” and addressing root causes—provides a *how* that is more effective than many traditional government approaches and interventions that focus “downstream” at the individual level.

The King County experience acknowledges the inherent tension between innovation and evidence-based action. We know that past practices by institutions and society have contributed to inequities, so part of the task is to create new, better, and more inclusive processes while dismantling the barriers to opportunity. Innovation, by definition, demands new approaches, interventions, and strategies and thus the creation of new evidence. King County’s equity and social justice work is built on careful engagement and listening to both community and employees—using their experience or evidence to create more effective policies, programs, and interventions, as well as to drive the necessary transformational cultural change.

## King County’s Story

Although King County has overall better economic, health, and quality of life conditions than the rest of the country and the region benefits from world-class businesses and institutions, these assets mask deep and persistent inequities—sometimes more pronounced than in the rest of the country. Comparing the 10 zip codes with the highest average household incomes to the 10 zip codes with the lowest household incomes, there is a difference of more than \$100,000 within King County. In a similar comparison, life expectancy also varies by race by up to 12 years.

Why are these differences important? These gaps by race and place are a concern because they correspond to significant differences in opportunity. Place and race matter in King County, and they are predictors of income and a wide set of outcomes, including life expectancy and education (King County 2015).

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Why should this matter to everybody? Inequities hurt everybody—not just people on the lower rungs of the social and economic ladder. Regions and countries with greater economic equality, for example, have more sustained and robust economic growth. Everybody gains from creating a place where all people can lead better lives and contribute their best (Benner and Pastor 2012).

Population-level data such as those cited earlier were key evidence that led to King County’s equity work. In early 2008, King County executive Ron Sims launched Equity and Social Justice (ESJ), an initiative to begin to use an equity lens in departments’ policies and decisions, organizational practices, and engagement with the community. With equity tools that employ qualitative and quantitative data, King County asked of its policies and decisions, who is benefiting and who is not? In governance, who is being engaged and who is not? And, to create a more prosperous and inclusive region for all, King County government asked how those who have been most disenfranchised—low-income residents, communities of color, and immigrants and refugees—could be prioritized in decisions and practices.

In 2010, led by King County executive Dow Constantine and the County Council, ESJ became an integrated part of the county’s work with the approval of the countywide Strategic Plan and ESJ ordinance. The ordinance reaffirmed the commitment to create a more just organization and community by expanding access to “determinants of equity”—those social, physical, and economic conditions necessary for everyone to thrive.

In late 2016, King County, led by the ESJ Office, launched its 2016–22 Equity and Social Justice Strategic Plan.<sup>2</sup> This plan was created with input from more than 700 employees and 100 organizations. The deep engagement with employees and the community provided a body of data, evidence, and practices on how King County could become a more equitable employer, service provider, and regional partner.

## The Approach and Frameworks

King County defines inequities as “[d]ifferences in well-being that disadvantage an individual or group in favor of another; these are systemic, patterned and must be changed. Inequities are caused by past and current decisions, systems of power and privilege, policies, and implementation of those policies.” By contrast, “equity” is seen as a “system of fairness. Equity is the full and equal access to opportunities, power and resources so that all people achieve their full potential and thrive.” Moving toward equity thus demands intentional and systemic pro-equity processes, practices, and tools that disrupt the status quo.

The approach in King County rests on three premises. First, King County ESJ is both data informed and values driven. Data alone cannot drive practices, but data are central. Data are qualitative and quantitative—from the voices of community members and employees and from local health, demographic, and other sources. Based on the data, King County aims to focus on where the needs are greatest—among people of color, geographic areas and low-income populations, and immigrants and refugees. Acknowledging that universal approaches that apply to a whole population can still result in unacceptable gaps, universal outcomes are combined with

targeted interventions. This approach is referred to as “targeted universalism”—where goals are defined for all, obstacles are identified for specific groups, and strategies are tailored with assets to address barriers.

Second, drawing from public health knowledge, the big drivers for people’s health and well-being are not genetics or access to a doctor but instead the social determinants of health. King County has defined 14 “determinants of equity”—for example, safe and efficient transportation, affordable and healthy housing, good-paying jobs, and early childhood development—affecting how people live, work, learn and play. Access to these determinants of equity is necessary for all people to thrive and achieve their full potential regardless of race or income.

Third, government, nonprofits, and philanthropy have tended to react to problems in silos and address poor individual and family-level outcomes while not addressing the underlying systems and structures. For the greatest impact, King County is focusing “upstream” to address root causes as well as policies and systems (CDC 2009). Moving upstream means, for example, focusing on early childhood investments that prevent costly treatments later in life and expanding strategies that reduce involvement in the criminal justice system and keep families safely together.

## ESJ Strategic Plan

King County’s ESJ Strategic Plan lays out how equity will be advanced through internal practices within the organization and in the community—building on a growing body of local and national evidence that we know will make a difference in equity. To achieve better outcomes, county government aims to integrate and implement pro-equity practices in its major functions where it can effect change, ranging from leadership, operations, and services to plans, policies, and budgets (Figure 1).

With workplace and workforce equity, for example, research and experience show that when there is diversity of people, cultures, ideas, and experiences, organizations are stronger, smarter, and more culturally responsive to communities (Rock and Grant 2016). King County is committed to focusing efforts on those who have historically lacked equitable access to jobs and development opportunities and on employees at lower pay ranges.

The ESJ Strategic Plan has pro-equity policy agendas in eight areas, ranging from economic development and jobs to environment and climate. To date, a significant portion of the county’s programs supported by local, state, and federal funding have been in response to negative outcomes—severe mental illness, homelessness, chronic illness, and youth who have dropped out of school or who have been involved in the juvenile justice system. However, research shows that promoting well-being, intervening early when issues arise, and making strategic investments at critical points in children’s development are the most effective ways to prevent these problems from arising.

The Best Starts for Kids ballot measure—a new levy and funding stream—approved by voters in November 2015 is a strengths-based approach that maximizes the assets and knowledge of the richly diverse county. Among the desired results for Best Starts for Kids,

**THEORY OF CHANGE**

**HOW KING COUNTY IS BUILDING EQUITY...**

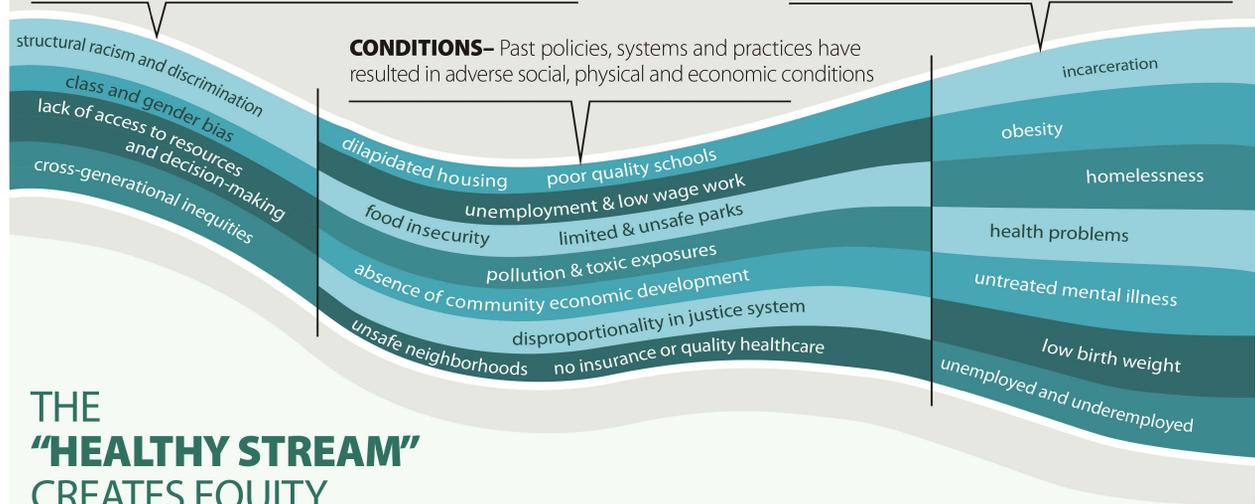
**RACE AND PLACE MATTER IN KING COUNTY.**

**People of color, low-income residents and immigrants and refugees persistently face inequities in key areas, such as education, income and health.**

**THE “UNHEALTHY STREAM” CREATES INEQUITIES**

**POLICIES, PRACTICES & SYSTEMS**– Policies, structures and systems – including those in government – have sustained and even contributed to inequities

**OUTCOMES**– Organizations and their programs historically have tended to react to problems and treat poor individual and family-level outcomes



**THE “HEALTHY STREAM” CREATES EQUITY**

**PRO-EQUITY POLICIES, PRACTICES & SYSTEMS**– For greatest and most effective impact, King County is **focusing “upstream” to address root causes and be pro-equity**

**OUTCOMES**– Individuals and families thrive regardless of race and place

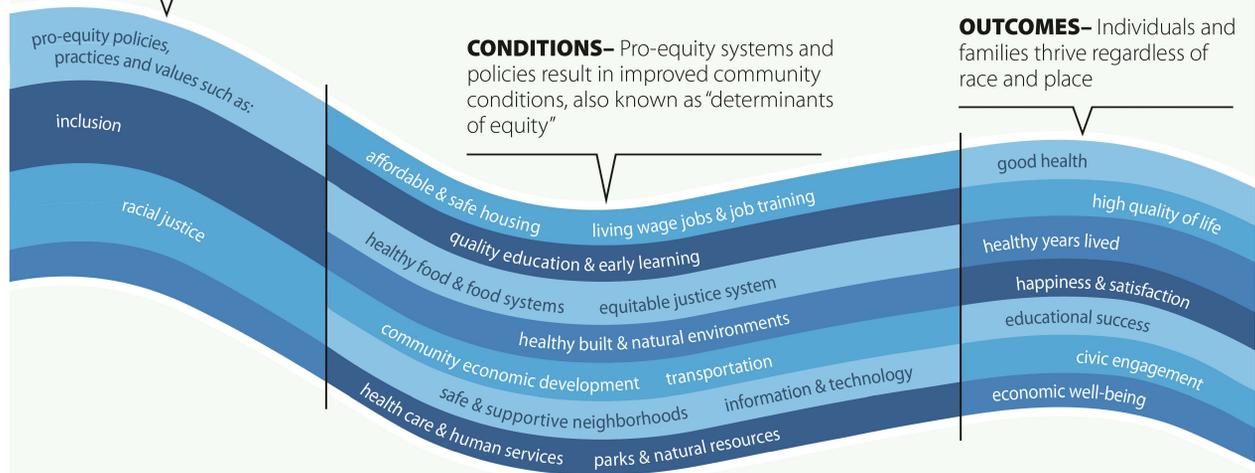


Figure 1 King County’s Theory of Change: Building Equity

babies will be born healthy and establish a strong foundation for lifelong health and well-being. They will grow in a place where everyone has equitable opportunities to progress through childhood in safe and healthy manner, building academic and life skills to be thriving members of their communities. And through place-based and community-driven initiatives, communities will offer safe, welcoming, and healthy environments. Five percent of the revenue will support evaluation, data collection, and improving the delivery of services and programs for children and youth.

In the case of transportation and mobility, King County recognizes that transportation is a key factor in accessing education, jobs, and services that allow residents to fulfill their potential. The region's prosperity is dependent on the ability of workers and freight to move throughout the region. As a result, the county has built an intentional equity focus into the delivery of transportation services. In addition, low-income residents are offered a more affordable way to travel through the ORCA LIFT pass program that provides a reduced fare on Metro Transit buses and other public transportation options. King County also works to create broader and more meaningful access to transportation through improved engagement with communities and provide translations into many languages.

### Elements for Success

With 10 years of experience, King County offers some lessons about what works and is important for success. Importantly, approaches and interventions need to be grounded in science and evidence—data and evidence are both qualitative and quantitative. At the same time, past practices have contributed to inequities, so innovation is a central element in equity work, as is the promotion of a culture to dismantle and transform systems—such as structural racism—that create barriers to people achieving their full potential.

Strong and dedicated leadership is key, as is an engaged and empowered employee base who see themselves as change agents throughout the organization. As Constantine, the county executive, states, equity is not the work of one office or a few employees but must be integrated into everyone's work. Broad and deep cultural change is key with an explicit focus on racial equity, as is cross-sector learning and collaboration, such as what King County has done with health enrollment.

A common equity framework and definitions, a local law or ordinance, and a strategic plan are powerful in creating a common

understanding, focus, transparency, and accountability. These can be supported with equity tools, including equity impact review tools and community engagement guidelines, to provide an intentional and thoughtful approach to addressing inequities in the organization and the community. The goals and measures that have been laid out in King County's ESJ Strategic Plan inform the county with regard to practices and strategies that are making a difference.

While it is too soon to see complete shifts in all community indicators and outcomes, there is some evidence of change organizationally, as shown by employee surveys, and in some of county programs and community outcomes. King County expects its planning, engagement, and equity lens will create positive outcomes in the long term, although there are multiple factors at play, including market forces that can exacerbate the inequities. A major goal for King County is to build bodies of evidence for institutionalizing equity—creating new, better systems and dismantling those that have perpetuated poor outcomes—to create a more fair, just, and effective government and society.

### Notes

1. Government Alliance on Race and Equity, accessed August 26, 2017, <http://www.racialequityalliance.org>.
2. King County, Washington, Equity and Social Justice, accessed August 26, 2017, <http://www.kingcounty.gov/equity>.

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