

## Application

Please demonstrate your interest in serving by completing the application below. We recognize there may be barriers to completing a written application. Please contact the WREC Staff for assistance in identifying alternatives.

Name: Benny Spencer \_\_\_\_\_ Date: 9-14-25 \_\_\_\_\_

Street Address: [REDACTED] \_\_\_\_\_

City: [REDACTED] \_\_\_\_\_ Zip Code: [REDACTED] \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address (if different from street address): \_\_\_\_\_

Preferred Telephone Number: [REDACTED] \_\_\_\_\_

Preferred Email Address: [REDACTED] \_\_\_\_\_

If appointed, would you prefer to serve a 2- or 3-year initial term?  2-year  3 year  Open to either

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5.  (Up to 2) Subject matter expert, individual with expertise in, and/or specialist in the commission's action areas – please check the subject(s).
  - Justice System
  - Environmental Justice
  - Economic Mobility
  - Food Security
  - County Participatory Processes
  - Mental Health
  - Health/Healthcare
  - Immigration
  - Substance Use
  - Education
  - Housing
  - Language Access
6.  Social justice advocate or activist whose area of focus is racial equity.
7.  Faith leadership

**Describe your lived, community activity related, professional, educational, and/or personal experiences that may support and advance the work of the Commission. You may include a list of experiences if needed in this response to capture additional information.**

I've lived in so-called Bellingham on Nooksack, Lummi and Coast Salish land throughout my life, with the exception of living in Washington D.C. from 2020-2021. I'm mixed-race and feel an ongoing need to continue to build resiliency in affirming my humanity as a Brown person living in an area that is deeply entrenched in whiteness. When I lived in DC, I was studying Public Service and Public Policy while working for a Pro-Choice Lobbying organization, when I got involved in a group called Mutual Aid Movement DC. I got to know some dedicated organizers following the murder of George Floyd who supported me in feeling more of a sense of autonomy and self-affirmation through having challenging and compassionate conversations with me. Through MAMDC's anti-racist political education program, I learned about the genocidal history of policing and government systems in the U.S. – which provided critical context to the public service and public policy education I was working on, and filled in alarming gaps in the education I had gained while growing up in the Bellingham public school system. The organizers I got to meet and work with in DC helped me shift my focus towards building interpersonal mutual aid networks, and I moved back to Bellingham to reconnect with the place and community I grew up around. I had also started gender affirming therapy, which was more accessible in Washington than it was in DC.

Since moving back, I've worked in different reproductive healthcare non-profits, local organizing groups, and finished my Bachelor's Degree at WWU. I worked as a Patient Care Specialist at Mt. Baker Planned Parenthood for a year, and compiled resources to help fill in the gaps that were present in MBPP's services, particularly in the realms of accessing gender affirming care and safe housing options. I designed an Interdisciplinary concentration around Harm Reduction Strategies at Fairhaven College at WWU and graduated in Spring 2025. I've found a deep sense of hope and possibility in learning Harm Reduction theory and practices and have researched public Harm Reduction systems that have been successful in their implementation to build more caring and equitable conditions for people who use substances, particularly amongst Indigenous communities and Black communities. I did onboarding and outreach coordinating for a student organizing coalition against apartheid and the genocide in Palestine during my time as a student at WWU. I'm currently working as a volunteer lead on a neighborhood organizing project called *Bienestar* (which means "well-being" in Spanish) put on through Community to Community Development. In this project, we're connecting people who live near each other, who are committed to dismantling racism and patriarchy, to build political power, identify shared struggles, and organize to

support each other by addressing those issues. I'm currently the campaign manager for Leah Wainman's campaign for City Council Ward 2, which is providing me with the opportunity to learn more about the functionality of electoral politics specific to this area.

**Please describe why you're interested in serving on this commission.**

I'm interested in serving on this commission because I got to meet and talk with Miriam recently. Hearing from them about their experience with working on the Racial Equity Commission made me feel really hopeful and excited about the multi-faceted work that the REC is doing to tangibly and practically address racism in this area. It was particularly mobilizing to hear about the research they've done on policing and incarceration in Bellingham in a conversation with a city council member about the need to divest from carceral punishment and invest in caring systems.

**Please describe one goal you would have for the Commission, one challenge in reaching that goal, and how you envision the Commission achieving the goal.**

**Goal:**

- Develop and propose a plan to local government to address housing insecurity and unsafe drug use in Whatcom County by allocating funding to implement the following— with researched explanations of why this plan would save the city millions of dollars, while also improving living conditions for people, particularly Lummi and Nooksack people, as well as Black people and people of color in Whatcom County:
  - Implementing Overdose Prevention and Emergency Shelter Sites in locations where arrests for drug-related charges are highest, designed and staffed by people with drug-use experience, mental health counseling training, and de-escalation and conflict facilitation training
  - Implement a Harm Reduction Deep Canvassing program to engage in meaningful conversations with Whatcom County residents about drug-use, with the intended goals to build critical theory and learn tangible practices in replacing carceral punishment with care, pleasure and accountability practices, systemically as well as within relationships to the self and relationships with others

**Challenge:**

- Ideologies and policing practices that dehumanize people who use drugs and face homelessness and reinforce ideas derived from the construct of Whiteness that criminalize disruptions to wealthy standards of living

Steps for achieving Overdose Prevention and Emergency Shelter sites goal:

- Research strategies of successful implementation Overdose Prevention and Emergency Shelter sites in areas with similar population density to Whatcom County, with a critical metric of success being the experiences of people who used those services, wherever personal accounts are possible to be obtained
- Research the amount of money needed to implement the above sites
- Research spending that the Bellingham Police Department and other police departments in Whatcom County put towards responding to calls and making arrests related to substance-use
- Design presentation around how the implementation of Overdose Prevention and Emergency Shelter sites would lower and prevent unsafe drug use, therefore decreasing calls and arrests related to substance-use, to be used in presenting to local government officials as well as providing public education to residents of Whatcom County
- Propose to local government to fund the implementation of these sites based on the above research, with researched explanation of how the necessary funds would be more effectively allocated to these sites than to the BPD budget in order to increase public health and safety
- Hire contractors to build these sites, and hire staff to run the sites with the above funds, with the hiring criteria outlined in the project goals
- Once sites are running, measure success by documenting experiences of people who use them, while making sure to ask for peoples' consent to document their experiences. Track what people who use the sites are struggling with, and continually build ongoing strategies to address needs and connect people with resources from inside and outside these sites by using this data

Steps for achieving Harm Reduction Deep Canvassing goal:

- Publish education around Harm Reduction on social media, and use social media engagement to recruit canvassing volunteers
- Hold Harm Reduction Deep Canvassing trainings – possible locations could be the Whatcom Peace and Justice Center or MakeShift
- Hold regular deep canvassing events, cutting canvassing turf strategically to meet project goals
- Track program success using metrics such as canvasser experiences and the experiences of people reached through canvassing

The County Executive and Mayor of Bellingham will bring forward member recommendations for approval by their respective Councils. Once an applicant has been approved by both Councils, they will be officially seated on the Whatcom Racial Equity Commission.

Whatcom Racial Equity Commission staff will be in contact with appointed members about onboarding and support for their role.

Pending the approval of membership slates from both Whatcom County Council and Bellingham City Council, **the first Whatcom Racial Equity Commission meeting for new appointed members is projected for November of 2025.**

## Looking for more information?

For additional information or questions, please contact our team at [info@whatcomracialequity.org](mailto:info@whatcomracialequity.org)

## Application

Please demonstrate your interest in serving by completing the application below. We recognize there may be barriers to completing a written application. Please contact the WREC Staff for assistance in identifying alternatives.

Name:Neesha Rando Date:8/20/25

Street Address:

City: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip Code: \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address (if different from street address): \_\_\_\_\_

Preferred Telephone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

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  - Language Access
- Social justice advocate or activist whose area of focus is racial equity.
- Faith leadership

Hello. This is my audio response to the following three prompts. Prompt number one, hello. My name is Nisha Rendell, and I'm interested in becoming a student community member of the Whatcom racial equity commission. I was born and raised in Whatcom County, and I'm a member of the Sikh community. I'm a junior at Ferndale High School, where I'm a member of the National Honor Society and serve as the president of the multicultural connections club. The goal of the multicultural connections club MCC is to raise awareness and celebrate diverse cultures within our school. I feel that this goal aligns with that of the WREC.

Each year, the MCC puts on a multicultural night and invites members of the Ferndale community to celebrate various cultures throughout food, performances, music and storytelling. This is a well-attended event every year. This is hosted by the MCC with the help of diverse clubs such as laaa, chesquian, AIGA and student volunteers, the MCC also hosts our annual MLK Day assembly. Each year we pick a theme that highlights the teachings of Martin Luther King Jr, for example, diversity, community and inclusion. These have all been previous themes. I've been involved in these activities at my high school because I believe that celebrating diversity is an important part of creating a world where everyone, regardless of their background, is valued and has opportunities to help them in different parts of their life. Joining this commission would allow me to make similar connections within the larger community. It would be an honor to be selected as a student community member where I can contribute to fostering an inclusive environment.

Hello. This is my response to prompt number two. The reason why I want to serve on this commission is that I want to be a part of the change that I wish to see in this world, starting within my community, a diverse community values and celebrates differences in background, culture, beliefs and perspectives. Organizations like wrec help our communities by identifying gaps in resources for various groups in Whatcom County. My parents were both born in India and left the country when they were less than 10 years old.

I've learned from their experiences about how they faced many challenges because they grew up with a very different culture, and not everyone understood why their family did things a little bit differently.

This gives me the motivation to help members of our community who come from different backgrounds feel like they are equal to members of the community whose cultures are celebrated and valued and they have the same opportunities for everyone when it comes to education and the future jobs. Most importantly, I think helping the community celebrate different ways of life and perspectives makes our community stronger.

All right, this is my response to prompt number three, my personal favorite. If I got selected, I would propose that we would host an annual community event that celebrates the various communities in Whatcom County, if not at an event, we could host a multicultural day and invite various communities to participate, to highlight their culture, food, music and dance. The challenge in this would be to secure funds to finance the event. We could seek donations from local businesses or raffle baskets, or we could do a small fundraiser. This event would bring members of all communities together at the event, there can be food, games, music, art and entertainment. And for entertainment, we can have volunteers, or we can find a group that's available to perform. Overall, I believe this event will bring a lot of joy and fun within the community, and there's chances to build new connections. All right, these are my responses to the following prompts. Look forward to hearing from you. Thank you.

## Application

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Name: Sara O'Connor Date: 8/11/2025

Street Address: [REDACTED]

City: [REDACTED] Zip Code: [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] (if different from street address): [REDACTED]

Preferred Telephone Number: [REDACTED]

Preferred Email Address: [REDACTED]

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- Describe your lived, community activity related, professional, educational, and/or personal experiences that may support and advance the work of the Commission. You may include a list of experiences if needed in this response to capture additional information.

I grew up a white girl in Whatcom County, a fish swimming in racist water and not even knowing it was there. It took me a long time to begin to recognize it. I was raised with an appreciation of different cultures- my parents had lived in Japan and it was a defining part of their lives- and felt fascinated by my friends in school who had cultural traditions, foods, and celebrations that were different from mine. I remember asking myself what it meant to be white. What was white culture? Pizza and poodle skirts? I knew that my ancestors were Italian, and that my mom was raised with her Italian relatives. She told me how they left their language and customs behind on purpose, to be accepted- to be white. That whole piece of her history had been lost to her. She mourned it and so did I.

But I still didn't really understand. I was an 80s baby, raised in the culture of the melting pot, saw black and brown people on TV and in positions of leadership (the principal of my first elementary school was Ms. Anderson, a black woman who I will never forget!) I understood that racists were still out there, but they were in the South, weren't they? I knew Native kids were treated differently at school, but wasn't that because they separated themselves? I was told that. I dated a Mexican kid in high school and my dad grilled him about his family, driving record, and job. Didn't do that with the white boys who came around. When my mom met my future husband for the first time she commented, "He's so dark." (He's white with dark hair and eyes.) I didn't get it then.

I was in college when I saw open and clear racism directed at someone I cared about. I worked in a grocery store and a customer refused to be served by my black colleague, using a racial slur. I remember apologizing to my colleague, aghast. He shrugged, "Happens all the time." I don't even think I got it then.

It was in 2014 when I started my MSW, which had a focus on racial equity and community leadership, that my eyes were finally opened. I learned a lot about my lack of understanding, and how my whiteness had shielded me and sheltered me. I studied the works of Dr. Ibram X. Kendi, Ijeoma Oluo, Dr. Joy DeGruy and more who helped me understand the depth and breadth of racial injustice and how it's baked into American society. I began to understand how racism is systemic, and much more than individual racist ideas or people, but embedded in culture and history. My learning continues, and I have been a student of racial equity for the last 10 years, and it has come to be an important value in my life.

I am also thankful to have had some great mentors along the way, in particular my boss of many years, b.g. Nabors-Glass, who pushed, challenged, and grew me and my colleagues with deep organizational and personal racial equity work. She gifted me with her mentorship- I'm sure I annoyed her often! She told me once, "If you're pulling the cart with me, I'll be there with you. If you are just hitching a ride, I'm out." I recognized that her patient guidance was a gift I didn't deserve. I used this learning and passion to start a community based anti-racism organization, Connect Ferndale, with my neighbors in 2019. I began my professional career as a teacher, teaching English to adult immigrants, helping them enter the workforce and study and apply for citizenship. In recent years as the leader of a non-profit social service organization in Ferndale, I have become a student of housing, understanding the existing systems, both local and national, the pitfalls, and the challenges we now face that are creating

homelessness and disparity for communities of color and others.

- Please describe why you're interested in serving on this commission.

Racial equity is an imperative. I've spent the last several years doing active equity work in the form of community education and events to connect neighbors to neighbors, but I'm also interested in policy level work and influencing government institutions to move racial equity forward. I'm also interested in continuing to build community with others working toward this goal. I bring a deep knowledge of my own local community, of the issues facing our county, and my background in adult education and social services and hope to build stronger networks of people and organizations who are doing work that advances the goal of racial equity in Whatcom County.

- Please describe one goal you would have for the Commission, one challenge in reaching that goal, and how you envision the Commission achieving the goal.

I hope for the Commission to be a known entity and resource for the people of Whatcom County. The work as it is laid out in the strategic plan is broad and aspirational, but those aspirations are made up of tangible steps that have direct impact. One impact is engaging in the community, and I hope that the Commission can become a landscape shaper, convener, and connector for individuals and organizations that are already doing equity work. We don't need to recreate efforts, but rather align and coordinate, and I believe the Commission can take a central role in creating this coordination. The challenge will be building trust and relationships to know and understand the efforts that are already underway, especially as this work becomes more maligned and therefore secretive, but we can achieve that by continuing to build caring networks of collaborators.

## Application

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Name: Sharayah Lane \_\_\_\_\_ Date: 9/9/2025 \_\_\_\_\_

Street Address: [REDACTED] \_\_\_\_\_

City: [REDACTED] \_\_\_\_\_ Zip Code: [REDACTED] \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address (if different from street address): \_\_\_\_\_

Preferred Telephone Number: [REDACTED] \_\_\_\_\_

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## **Sharayah Lane WREC Application Question Responses** **[transcript from video response]**

OK, these are my responses for my application to the Whatcom Racial Equity Coalition. I described your lived community activity related professional, educational and or personal experiences that may support and advance the work of the Commission.

So lived experience.

I was born a mixed raced woman in the USA. My mother is Native American; my dad is African American. I grew up on the Lummi reservation. I'm a member of the Lummi Nation. And those two things or those many things have informed my walk in the world. They have impacted all of my life experiences dealing with race in this society. It's always been a bit of an interesting intersection to reside within. I didn't know my dad until I was 18. So, I grew up on the reservation, in my family and in my tribal community. But I also don't look Native. And so, I've held these realities every sort of step of the way in my walk of life.

I first became interested in racial justice work during my first years in college. I'm learning about systemic and historic racism and how these systems and how this construct has impacted my life. I've experienced homelessness, I've experienced incarceration. I've experienced addiction, and when it became clear to me that racial equity was sort of at the core of all of these experiences that I was having, it was an opportunity to both educate myself and others more about systemic injustice and racial equity and understanding how all of these things play a role.

As I continued on through my education, I had the opportunity to work professionally with an organization in Seattle called Sankofa Impact. I was really drawn to this organization because it was experiential in nature. So, we would take interracial intergenerational groups of people to the American South and sort of walk through the civil rights movement, learning from people who were present and who worked through the movement and also learning through experiencing place and space of what happened in our country at that time. This continued my professional sort of work and education in racial equity through learning and understanding how to communicate across difference, how to connect the lines between our history and our present and how to make decisions on how my work would be informed by these experiences moving forward. So, I believe that I bring a racial justice lens with me into everything that I do.

My educational background now I got a masters in public administration. My focus was on tribal economic development and in all aspects of my work, it has this lens of how do we advance racial equity? How can I advance racial equity in any space that I'm in? And that's how I've tried to live my life. I've had the opportunity to start nonprofit organizations to continue to grow and develop in my professional career. And that's always one of the first questions on my mind and, and one of the first sort of topics for discussion and, and really operationalization is how are we going to do our work with a, with a lens and a focus on advancing racial equity in this space. And I think that there are spaces that we can, we all occupy that, you know, this work can and needs to be

done at all levels and in all aspects of our society. So, I try to bring this work with me wherever I go and in the professional and educational spaces that I've had the opportunity to participate in.

Please describe why you're interested in serving on this Commission.

I am interested because this is my life's work. This is something that is very near and dear to my heart and having the opportunity to work with others on advancing racial equity or addressing racial inequity in Whatcom County is something that I feel very strongly about and very passionate about. I have deep roots in this community, both with the tribal and bipod communities and just getting the opportunity to work with others on tackling some of these issues and doing so in a measurable way is something that I would really love to be a part of.

And please describe one goal you would have for the Commission, one challenge in reaching that goal and how you envision the Commission achieving the goal.

So one goal that I have for the Commission is to, I wish I could have two, but I'll stick with one.

One of the issues that I have seen since moving back home and being a part of this community for many, many years is the disconnect between our collective work and our community and our society throughout Whatcom County and our tribal and Indigenous relatives and neighbors.

So I don't feel like there is adequate representation or participation with Native peoples within our communities. This is Native land and this is our ancestral homelands. And there's a there's a disconnect there. I think that Native people and the rest of our community don't have the representation that they should have. And I think that there are so many things that we can learn that we don't give ourselves the opportunity to learn from Native people.

And so one goal that I would have for the Commission is to have to be 1 of the first organizations to have true representation and to reflect true relationship with our Native relatives and neighbors.

One challenge in reaching that goal, of course, is going to be the historical divide that's there.

And I envision the Commission achieving that goal through persistence, through respect and through continual continued collaboration.

I think one of the reasons, rightfully so, that native folks don't work with a lot of outside organizations is because their motives have been very questionable over the years and their persistence in relationship has not been where it needs to be.

And so I envisioned the Commission being an organization that really represents the values that native people hold and that can demonstrate that through relationship, respect and reciprocity.

So that's one of the goals. I have many others, but that's one of the goals I would hope to bring to this work. So, thank you.