

## Development Process of a Racial Equity Commission for Whatcom County

In partnership with the Chuckanut Health Foundation, the City of Bellingham and Whatcom County have been funding, supporting, and participating in a community-led process to develop recommendations for a county-wide racial equity commission. Representatives of the Chuckanut Health Foundation are reporting on the status, community engagement process, and timeline for this work.

### Building Community Priorities into Policy: Background

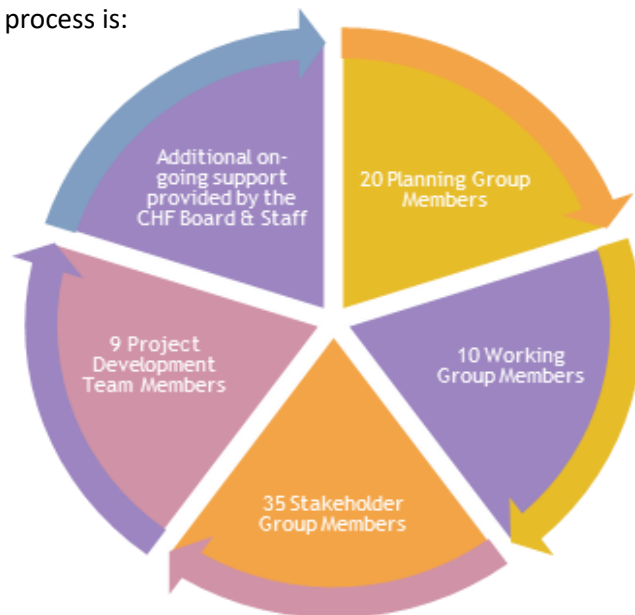
Beginning in the summer of 2020, Chuckanut Health Foundation began work with community organizers, Shu-Ling Zhao and Kristina Michele Martens to establish and advance the development of a local racial equity commission through a “community-owned,” Multi-Stakeholder Advisory Framework. This process outlined multiple tracks of collaborative work and input mechanisms for both the community and local government, including regular Stakeholder meetings, Focus Groups, Town-halls and Ask-Me-Anything’s, PhotoVoice surveys, and digital surveys. All of these activities were designed to create easy ways for community members to provide their perspectives and help shape a partnership between Government and Community to center community voices and priorities in the overall process of creating policy.

Government, organizational, and community partners provided guidance, feedback, and resources to support the community member stakeholder process; these individuals participated as “Working Group” and “Planning Group” members.

Participation by community members, especially those with lived experiences related to issues of racial equity, played an essential role as they were largely the drivers of this effort. This group of community members, the “Stakeholder Group”, had the primary role in crafting recommendations. By prioritizing Stakeholder Group input and their collective understanding of these issues, our process was able to represent and honor the lived experiences of our community throughout the work and in our final set of recommendations more fully.

The Vision for this community-owned and driven process is:

**“People of all races in  
Whatcom County  
live, thrive and belong for  
who they are,  
as they are.  
*Without fear. Every day.*”**



## Stewarding the Process

This work has been facilitated by a *neutral convener*; a role filled by the Foundation for the development of recommendations for establishing a Whatcom Racial Equity Commission. By providing project management, facilitation, administrative support, and funding support, the Foundation’s **Project Development Team** focused on removing barriers for citizen participation in the Stakeholder process. At times, this included providing stipends for participation, as well as a commitment to build understanding and collaboration across different communication styles and preferences, which served to increase group member participation for those with varying levels of prior experience or comfort engaging in local government processes.

Over the 24 months since the process and Commission were conceptualized, a group of 72 individuals have come together in 100+ hours of meetings – plus hundreds of additional hours in Project Team meetings – to intentionally and thoughtfully design a Racial Equity Commission that would work in Whatcom County. In these meetings, people connected, celebrated with, and learned from each other. They also disagreed, debated, and found ways to come together in their shared purpose with both solutions and a deeper understanding of where each person was coming from. What is particularly miraculous is that these conversations occurred over Zoom.

### Summary of Activities:

35 Planning Group Meetings  
 20 Planning Group Members  
 26 Working Group Meetings  
 10 Working Group Members  
 12 Stakeholder Group Meetings  
 35 Stakeholder Group Members  
 Many hours CHF Project Development Team Meetings  
 9 Project Development Team Members  
 Additional on-going support provided by the CHF Board & Staff

## Key Success Factors

- **Multiple “On Ramps”:** We provided on-going and various ways for Stakeholders, community members, organizations, and local leadership to provide input; individuals were able to pick their on-ramp and choose the level at which they wanted to engage.
- **Community Wisdom:** In addition to utilizing existing qualitative resources, our team conducted 31 focus groups (60+ hours) with over 100 unique participants in a comprehensive qualitative process that was designed and co-led by our Stakeholder Group members.
- **Inclusive Participation:** Our Stakeholder Group provided input on the work itself and also played a key role in constructing the resulting documents, translating principles, values, and community experience into legal and policy language; the utilization of a consensus decision model meant that group recommendations were moved forward by all participants coming to agreements.
- **Valuing Time & Experience:** Removing financial barriers for participation by compensating Stakeholders and Focus Group members for their time created an opportunity for individuals, who may not have been able to sustain a volunteer process, to participate in this policy development process.
- **Making Things Accessible:** Learning how to meet people where they were was a process value. We adapted our work process on an ongoing basis using feedback from Stakeholders to better meet their working needs and made adjustments in simple things like communication preferences which resulted in better support for the participants. Finally, we provided content (data, sample documents, templates) to create a foundational understanding for all members so they could each participate with equal footing.
- **Facilitating Trust:** Given the nature of the work, as a Foundation, we were uniquely positioned to create a space where those who may have been previously hesitant about working in a government-related process, were able to express their hesitancy, feel heard and honored in their perspective, and elect to continue engaging with the process. Intentionally engaging in relationship and community connections allowed for some to rebuild trust and/or find hope throughout the work.

## Taking the lead from Community Stakeholders

In June of 2021, Chuckanut Health Foundation convened a group of 35 community Stakeholders to anchor the process of creating recommendations for the formation of a Whatcom Racial Equity Commission. Over the course of 12 months, this group was provided with resources and facilitation to draft an establishing ordinance; guidelines to be incorporated into a commission’s rules of procedure; a framework for appointing members; and a design for staffing as well as a funding model.

Stakeholders also co-designed additional community engagement mechanisms to ensure the voices of more Whatcom County residents were maximally heard. Significantly, to build the framework for the Focus Groups, the Stakeholders developed nine questions related to equity and belonging, as well as subject area-specific questions which were informed by concepts and concerns raised in previous local government townhalls, listening sessions, community conversations and strategic planning processes.

To accomplish the depth of discussion and expertise required to fully build recommendations, the Stakeholders divided into three working affinity groups based on where each member felt they could provide the most value, and the work they felt most passionate about engaging in:

- **Human Resources & Culture:** Addressing how the Commission would function amongst its membership, how it would be chaired, rules of procedure, membership composition, and staffing recommendations.
- **Functions:** Drafting the founding ordinance with a focus on recitals, the functions and scope of the Commission, meeting requirements and reporting.
- **Community Outreach:** Increasing engagement with the broader Whatcom community outside of the process itself, through focus groups and other community input mechanisms.

The next phase of work is engaging government partners to inform any revisions to the recommendations – feedback and input on the draft recommendations will be reviewed with a subset of the original Stakeholder Group; they will engage in the revision processes to prepare a final ordinance draft for introduction in the Fall of 2022.

## Learning Through Story: Focus Groups

Following the 31-focus group process, which was conducted by our Development Project Team and Stakeholders and included more than 100 Whatcom County residents, Dr. John Korsmo spent 200+ hours analyzing roughly 1,000 pages of raw transcripts, identifying nine overarching themes and compiling 112 pages of data supporting those themes. Dr. Korsmo commented that the WREC Focus Group and data collection process is the most exhaustive and thorough effort he’s seen in Whatcom County.

### The inductive data analysis process:

- Review of roughly 1000 pages of raw data
- Identification of relevant pertinent information
- Organizing pertinent information for each focus group, and for each individual question
- Identification of emerging common themes within each focus group, and for each individual question
- Cross-tabulation/comparison of themes across questions and groups (seeking common themes)
- Articulating themes and salient information for each focus group, and for each individual question

### Participants:

- Over 100 Community Members
- Ages 14-75
- 53.6% Identified as People of Color
- 20% Identified as LGBTQIA+
- 66% were parents, grandparents, or caregivers
- 40.9% had personally or had a family experience incarceration
- 71.8% said they had experienced racism and/or marginalization

The final report includes a focus on three primary conversations relative to the establishment of a Whatcom Racial Equity Commission: 1) community member experience related to racial equity issues; 2) the role a governmental entity like a Commission could play in addressing inequities locally; and 3) what belonging currently looks like in Whatcom County and how that could shift as we engage in meaningful racial-equity work. The inductive analysis process revealed nine themes (share below) based on the salient information in the focus groups. To be considered a theme, the concept had to be present in responses to multiple questions and consistent among distinct focus groups.

***Equal Access and Inclusion***

- [Means of obtaining, receiving, or approaching something safely, or joining in on something – with equal welcome and opportunity. The practice or policy of providing equal access to opportunities and resources for people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized. Entails welcoming encouragement to be a valued participant or contributor.] ***30 distinct groups involving 8 questions***

***Representation***

- [People from a particular place or group are present at and engaged with equal influence of people who represent the numeric majority. May include the action of speaking or acting on behalf of someone not present, in their best interest] ***30 distinct groups related to 8 questions***

***Call to Action and Consequences***

- [A prompt or necessity to take action toward a specific aim. Results or outcomes of an action or condition.] ***30 distinct groups related to 7 questions***

***Safe Places and Accountability***

- [An environment in which a person or category of people can feel confident that they will not be exposed to emotional or physical harm, including discrimination or harassment. May refer to geographical space, physical location, or virtual environment. An obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or account for one's actions, particularly related to acting on awareness/knowledge] ***29 distinct groups involving 7 questions***

***Inequities***

- [Referring to instances of injustice, unfairness, or unequal treatment, including historical discrimination.] ***28 distinct groups related to all 9 questions***

***Organizational Structures/Systems***

- [The methods by which work flows through an organization or community. Processes and ways of operating in order to achieve goals of an organization or community.] ***28 distinct groups related to all 9 questions***

***Awareness/Funds of Knowledge***

- [Conceptualization and knowledge including that which has been historically and culturally developed to enable an individual or household to function within a given culture] ***28 distinct groups involving 8 questions***

***Prejudice and Racism***

- [Relating to preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience. Discrimination, or antagonism directed against a person or people on the basis of their membership in a particular racial or ethnic group, typically one that is a minority or marginalized population.] ***28 distinct groups related to 7 questions***

***Burden on People of Color***

- [Referring to the emotional or physical load carried by Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color. May include labor or hardship that is not equally distributed among general, or non-BIPOC population.] ***22 distinct groups related to all 9 questions***

Bringing it all together: What will make a successful Racial Equity Commission?

Our presentation will provide additional details about what community learnings have been and how they have informed the recommendations. An outline is provided below.

**Critical Success Factors: *variables or circumstances necessary to enable a positive outcome for a development program or strategy***

- Transition of community priorities into policy
- Increased diversity and representation in work activities to drive more relevant and effective solutions
- Increased communication, transparency, and community accountability on process
- Increased community involvement/ownership of development process
- Lived experiences of racism and marginalization as essential component of process and decision-making
- Responsible fiscal management with limited resources in budget shortfall

**Desired Outcomes: *what this needs to achieve in the way we need to achieve it***

- An ordinance founding a Whatcom County Racial Equity Commission
- An ordinance where the scope of work and definitions of the problems faced by people of color matches that of the impacted community's definition
- Credible structure and process as defined by those the commission seeks to serve
- By demonstrating equity in process, gain increased credibility and trustworthiness of elected officials; shifting from source-of-problem to partner-in-solution
- Alignment between elected / appointed officials and the community
- A Racial Equity Commission that can continue work in perpetuity within the community
- Increased commitment to, and investment in future commission activities by the community at large

**High-level overview of functions/ role / and scope of commission**

- What was important to stakeholders
  - Community engagement and collaboration
  - Identifying areas of concern and “what success looks like”
  - Being data driven with clear measurable objectives and progress indicators even if we're looking at a proxy measure
  - Honoring both qualitative and quantitative data
  - That reporting on progress on any strategic plan also be reported to the community so the community is holding the body accountable as well

**Considerations for composition**

Across all slates of members:

- Factors considered:
  - Racial Equity, and work on social determinants of health, is cross-sector work and so the Commission requires multi-sector balance
  - The Commission also needs involvement across multiple demographics to represent Whatcom County (varying age, geographical regions, etc.)

- That committees will eventually be convened out of membership to address racial equity in a variety of subject areas. Those committees can have non-commission members. This will expand opportunities for engagement to others who want to be a part of process.
- The Commission will need both lived experience in racial equity issues and those with expertise in various sectors and systems to create actionable strategies for advancing equity. Balancing lived experience with System Navigators
- System navigators, like all members of the Commission will be bringing their lived experience to the table
- Finally, focus groups spoke a lot about issues within schools and the health care system. This makes sense because people are more likely to interact with the education and health care systems. We did not ask about health care/ medical care systems specifically in any question and it was consistently brought into the conversation.
- Elements for design:
  - Novice system navigators, subject matter experts, and advocates balanced with seats of community members at the table
  - There is capacity to engage community, identify issues, develop strategies for advancing equity, and seek potential funding partners for providing resource or guidance on funding implementation
  - Community members, community organizations, faith leaders, and educators are some of the best-positioned to lead on *hearts & minds* work with support from commission at-large
  - Liaison Members are positioned to provide important context for recommendations and are an essential bridge between the work of the Commission and the work of government partners
- Appointment Process – three tracks:
  - Liaison (Non-Voting) Elected members
  - Representative
  - Additional Appointments
- 3 relationships within the purpose
  - Commission to Community
    - This centers inclusion AND the hearts and minds aspect of the work
    - Collaboration, engagement, and education
  - Commission to Government
    - This centers the policy aspect of work by creating a recommending body as a partner to the government
  - Community to Government
    - The commission acts as bridge/conduit for collaboration and co-creation between the community and government so we can all move this work forward together

#### Committee of the Whole Work-Session:

The community's input on the scope of the commission, who is going to serve on it, and the appointment process has been significant, and these are key pieces we'll be sharing more about and looking for your feedback on. All the recommendations have been well-vetted by people who have often historically not participated in shaping public policy for a variety of reasons, and as this brief describes, there has been both a breadth and depth of intentionality in bringing these together. We look forward to a robust discussion with you about how to, in partnership, make this Commission launch a success for Whatcom County!