

Office of Equity will ensure means for a healthy community

BY ANDREW RILEY
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

Over the past 10 years, dozens of studies have highlighted the growing disparities between Portland's increasingly diverse communities: rental

discrimination on the basis of national origin, disproportionate levels of violence suffered by our city's LGBT community, a startling number of

"food deserts" east of 82nd Avenue and many more. It's time to tackle these significant issues head-on, and aggressively, and the proposed Office of Equity ordinance is an important first step.

The ordinance proposing the Office is simple, yet powerful. Broadly, it affirms the city's commitment to eliminating disparities based on race, ethnicity, gender and gender identity, national origin, disability, sexual orientation, religion, geography, socioeconomic status. It then establishes that the Office of Equity will work within and across other bureaus and offices, both internally and externally, to combat those disparities. Led by Commissioner Amand

Fritz and a yet-to-be-hired director, the new office would begin developing strategies and accountability targets to achieve the goal of an equitable Portland, with regular reports to the City Council.

The city's past efforts toward diversity and inclusion have a basic shortcoming: those efforts haven't historically been coordinated between bureaus and offices. Discrimination in housing, disparities in access to urban renewal funds, and gentrification may at first glance look like separate issues. Tackling those problems requires more than just a piecemeal approach, since the root causes are often the same, or at least linked. In the same vein, disparities experienced by immigrants and refugees, the LGBT community, and low-income communities are not divorced from one another either, and exploring those links is an important step toward combating inequities.

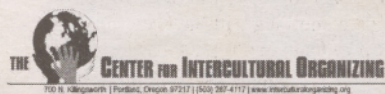
The proposed office isn't a cure-all for all of Portland's woes; but it is a bold, important, progressive way to begin to tackle the issues facing our community. By situating itself within and with existing city bureaus, this office will give the city the tools it needs to begin eliminating disparities and making sure Portland's

livability is available to all of us. Such an Office will also be able to provide concrete accountability goals to the city's work on equity, so that we can measure the progress we are making and identify gaps in our efforts.

This office would also be a natural companion to, not a replacement for the work of social justice advocates. As advocates, we often push government to adopt policies that better the lives of our communities. Having an Office of Equity is fundamentally different: such an Office can open the door to public participation and provide public, internal leadership on equity issues.

An Office of Equity, and equity itself, are critical because we have a shared fate. Equity is both a means to a healthy, resilient community and an end that we all benefit from. Building prosperity for all Portlanders means that we can achieve more, together. If we don't tackle the disparities in our communities now, we run the risk of marginalizing and disenfranchising people.

The Center for Intercultural Organizing urges Portland's City Council to take a bold stand for equity and social justice, and pass the Office of Equity ordinance and work plan.



Andrew Riley is the Public Policy Director at the Center for Intercultural Organizing, a diverse, grassroots organization working to build a multi-racial, multicultural movement for immigrant and refugee rights.

Reflections from the frontlines, armed with empowerment

The Great American TARP Tour was a session of workshops and demonstrations organized by the Western Regional Advocacy Project. Volunteers and staff from Street Roots and Sisters of the Road participated, including Julie McCurdy (right), in the weekend full of events in San Francisco.

BY JULIE MCCURDY
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

It occurred to me in the middle of the Great American TARP Tour in San Francisco last month that this was one of those moments. You know, one of those moments that, years from now, I'll look back and say, "this was the moment." This was the moment that the real possibilities of a nationwide movement could actually happen. And it sure did scare the shit right out of me because with possibility comes a whole lot of work and responsibility.

We are learning that events like this don't just randomly appear and success is not a foregone conclusion. That takes months of prep work and long conversations on phones that may or may not be working properly.

At first when I saw people gathering, my nerves got tight and my lungs refused to replenish themselves; numbed by the thought that I might actually use them in a chant. I took a moment to look around for my courage. My next thought was, "Oh dear god! What have I gotten myself into? This is for real." And then, this soothing sound of drum beats filtered into my senses (never protest without drums).

It began with Walter's hands pounding out rhythms on a drum until fear left and backbone occurred. It stayed in the steady pull of the chants which drowned out doubt. It was in Laveeta's smiling assurance that yes, we are family in this! It was in Bob



Julie McCurdy on the Great American TARP Tour.

standing next to me as I led my first chant (What a rush!). It was in Callahan's crazy grin as he handed me still more information. And it was in the notion that — hell, yes — Paul was right!

Then it occurred to me that we are our only limitation in the changes we seek to make. We have the same access to knowledge powerful politicians do. We have far more practical solutions and we have motivation. Poverty does that to a person's perspective. When the pain of where we're at overcomes the fear of where we're going, change can occur. All we have to do is stand.

Stand and educate ourselves around the issues. We have the means to do that.

We need to be able to move past personality and get to the meat and the bones of these issues. If we can unite and learn to stand past all the bullshit then we have a shot at getting to watch the next generation of Martin Luther Kings, Jr.s, Malcolm Xs, Rosa Parks, and Angela Davis get launched. We have the opportunity to become a part of something bigger than ourselves and our own petty little concerns.

But this is where it gets dicey in my head.

I think we have to educate ourselves to the point where every person in this community can speak to the issues and knows how to educate others.

We could start with the Western Regional Advocacy Project's "Without Housing" manual, which is the best demystifier of the defunding of affordable housing that I know of, and then we can go from there. We need to look towards broad-based outreach for the purpose of solidarity. Look folks, housed or unhoused, the lack of affordable housing affects us all and so do issues of poverty. It makes sense to me now to figure out different solutions. The truth is that the system is too broken to save us, so we have to learn to stand together and save ourselves. The system that we counted on is now being used to oppress us and we continue to let it as long as we don't take steps to create a different way of being and seeing things. The bottom line is that there is a war on poverty. I am in the middle of a war. I don't care who passes me bullets to defend myself. In this war our bullets are knowledge, our bombs are solidarity and the front line is perseverance.

For me, the WRAP Congress helped it sink in that we will only succeed when we stand past our own issues and get to what affects us all. When we stand together with each one of us bringing it all to the table, not just what's comfy or convenient, that is when we can build our power and start to win. I've realized that, "Ain't nothing goin' down 'til I becomes we!" I've realized that we are in the beginnings of giving birth to "we." People get ready! I just watched this happen and I'm ready. Are you?

Learn more about the Western Regional Advocacy Project at www.wraphome.org

street roots
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Office Cat Rooty sends a hearty "thank you" to the great volunteers who run the office's front desk. It's not easy keeping up with all of our vendors, but you guys do a great job. Thank you, team!