

Walking the talk for an Office of Equity and Human Rights

BY COMMISSIONER
AMANDA FRITZ AND
MAYOR SAM ADAMS

City Council will hold a public hearing, 11 a.m., Sept. 21 in City Hall to consider the ordinance to create the Office of Equity and Human Rights.

Portland has the reputation of being a progressive and innovative city, however, not all Portlanders have access to opportunities or feel welcome. People of color and people with disabilities experience higher rates of poverty and unemployment, and have shorter lives compared with other Portlanders.

Despite past and current equity-related efforts of various bureaus in the Portland City government, significant disparities persist. The median income for black-headed households is \$30,000, while the median income for white-headed households is \$46,800 (State of Black Oregon, 2009). Although 26.3 percent of the people living in Multnomah County are of color, nearly 30 percent of people who are unhoused are of color (Communities of Color in Multnomah County: An Unsettling Profile, 2010). The unemployment rate for persons with disabilities living outside of institutions in Oregon is 74 percent (U.S. Dept of Labor). These numbers do not reflect who we want to be as Portlanders.

What city government has done in the past hasn't resulted in the desired outcome of everyone sharing in the riches of our city. Disparities persist in city hiring, promotions and contracting, and services in neighborhoods. To achieve different outcomes, we need a different approach.

We need to design a system that aligns the efforts of all staff in all city bureaus, and guides our investments to end disparities and achieve equity. These are some of the reasons the city is planning to form a new Office of Equity and Human Rights.

This proposal is rooted in the community

discussions of the Portland Plan. The Portland Plan is a 25-year strategic plan due to be voted on early next year. It defines equity as when everyone has access to opportunities necessary to satisfy essential needs, advance their well-being, and achieve their full potential. Equity is both the means to healthy communities and an end that benefits us all.

The Portland Plan calls for the City to implement an Equity Initiative with 19 recommended actions, one of which is the formation of an office dedicated to building the City's capacity to serve all Portlanders equitably. It defines actions to achieve Portland's community values: Equity was the number one value identified by thousands of Portlanders in 2007's visionPDX report.

The purpose of the Office of Equity and Human Rights is to develop a focused, strategic approach to foster equity and reduce disparities in city government; to identify best practices that produce measurably improved outcomes; and to work with city and community partners to promote equity, inclusion and protection of human rights throughout Portland and the region.

The new Office of Equity and Human Rights will incorporate the current Office of Human Relations, and provide staff support for the Human Rights Commission and the Portland Commission on Disabilities. A maximum of three new staff may be hired the first year, after careful assessment of what skills are needed most.

The Office of Equity and Human Rights is not intended to do all equity-related work for the city. Each bureau will continue to be expected to provide their bureau-specific services to all Portlanders. The Office of

Equity and Human Rights will not police or enforce equity-related rules. It will train, provide tools and report results, with required revisions until equity is achieved.

The city cannot achieve equity goals alone. Each Portlander must play a part. We must leverage public/private partnerships, and we must work all with those most affected, to help shape solutions. "Nothing

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about us without us," is the rallying call of one local activist on rights for people with disabilities.

On Aug. 31, City Council heard testimony on an ordinance proposing to create the new office. For three hours, community members, who filled Council Chambers, gave eloquent beautiful testimony about their experience of Portland's challenges, and the need for this office.

City Council will consider the ordinance to create the Office of Equity and Human Rights at a public hearing on Sept. 21 at 11 a.m. in City Hall. All are welcome to participate.

Equity supports a more resilient city – a city that is less vulnerable in times of economic downturn. It is both the means to healthy communities and an end that benefits us all. All should share in the opportunities and riches of our city. The future we share depends on it.

We must save the low-income energy program

BY JESS KINCAID
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

The Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (commonly referred to as LIHEAP) helps individuals stay healthy and in their homes when they need help paying their utility bills. The program provides a vital support for households during tough times.

Each year funding for the program is decided by Congress, and each year the funding level can vary dramatically. This year service providers across the country are at risk of substantial cuts to funding. This means that there could be substantially less funding to help Oregonians in need and substantially fewer staff at agencies to respond to requests for help.

Oregonians need your help in assuring funding for this vital program. If you have received LIHEAP in the past, know someone who has, or would like to voice your support of the program please call your Congressional Representative and share with them why LIHEAP is important in your community.

Oregon's poorest households pay as much as 44 percent of their total income toward their energy bills. Oregonians with unaffordable utility bills are often forced to make the choice between paying for food, medication or utilities which can have costly long-term consequences. People can suffer hypothermia in the winter without access to

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heat in their homes, and the choice to go without food or medication can have immediate and dire results. In addition, loss of utility service can result in eviction for renters, which often results in

homelessness.

Every year Community Action Agencies hear from thousands of Oregonians in dire need of help. Last winter NeighborImpact, an agency in Redmond, had a client call their office for assistance who was completely out of fire wood, the only means that she had with which to heat her home. She said her family had already burned a

dresser and their picnic table and they were considering dismantling their front porch in order to heat their home because the weather was turning cold again. Later the same day, a man stopped by to say that he had a friend who had entered a raffle and had won a cord of wood, but had no

fireplace or wood stove. He wondered whether their team knew anyone who was in need of wood. NeighborImpact immediately called the woman whom they had spoken with earlier that day. They were able to match the raffle prize with the household in need of wood. They were also able to provide her with additional wood through the use of LIHEAP funding. The agency is happy to report that the client's front porch is still intact!

In 2010 the average total household income for LIHEAP recipients in Oregon was just over \$14,000 per year. More than half of clients were either elderly or disabled, and fifteen percent were recently unemployed.

The benefit of LIHEAP extends far beyond those who receive it. LIHEAP payments are typically made through a credit on an applicant's utility bill. By preventing the disconnection and reconnection of utility services, the program helps to prevent the need for costly services at the utility and keeps rates lower for all rate payers. The program can also help to stabilize communities during tough economic times by keeping families in their homes and preventing the need for them to rely on more costly social service programs.

Social Service agencies were able to serve less than one quarter of eligible households when the LIHEAP program was fully funded. If the proposed cuts become a reality we will be able to serve substantially fewer households this year.

If you think you might qualify for assistance and would like to apply, please call your local Community Action Agency. Contact information for services in your area can be found here: www.ohcs.oregon.gov/OHCS/CRD/SOS/docs/EnergyAssistanceReferrals.pdf

Pandemic

By Daniel S.

Our Cartesian gulf of separation still oozes with the slick talk of oil.

Wireless communication towers dial and redial the unlisted numbers of our mutating cells.

Across the earth's razed skin, cancer centers metastasize temperatures rise like fever.

In the land of debris and the home of the paved, what's "healthy for business" has become pandemic.

Tens of thousands Race For The Cure rather than the cause.

Untitled

By Kathryn C.

Why do "they"
Pretend
It is a
Black and white
Planet Earth?

To me it is
Obviously blue