

Lane County Strategic Equity Lens Implementation Project



June 2021

Public Management (PPPM 633)

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About the UO – Lane County Policy Lab

The University of Oregon's School of Planning, Public Policy and Management and the government of Lane County started a partnership in 2018 to provide applied learning experiences for students, applied research settings for faculty and staff, and technical assistance to the Lane County government.

This project was funded in part by the UO – Lane County Policy Lab.

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Introduction

Lane County adopted an Equity Action Plan in January 2021, declaring its commitment to improving equitable outcomes for its constituent populations. Under the Equity Action Plan, employees in Lane County will work to implement an equity lens into their daily operations. As of June 2021, Lane County's Equity Action Plan has not been incorporated into all aspects of county governance. Nevertheless, a few jurisdictions in Oregon have fully implemented an equity lens into their governance.

After evaluating how other jurisdictions implemented their equity lenses, our research group reached out to individuals in Lane County, Multnomah County, and the City of Portland who had experience working in the field of equity and inclusion. We also had the opportunity to speak with members of Lane County's Equity, Access, and Inclusion initiatives to understand their goals for the equity lens better. Based on these personal interviews, our group developed four recommendations for Lane County to implement its Equity Action Plan.

Literature Review

Government services that were ostensibly meant to serve the public good, like federal housing and transportation policy, are known to have made racial inequality worse. Although the 14th Amendment guarantees Americans equal protection under the law, the Constitution has little to say about how government administrators are obligated to serve the people. By 1968, the New Public Administration movement called on public managers to consider administrative action on social equity (Frederickson, 1990). Frederickson recognized that American representative democracy failed in its efforts to undo systematic discrimination against minority populations (1971). Further, Frederickson suggested that New Public Administrators should recognize that they are not neutral actors, and actively seek to change the structures and cultures in places that consistently obstruct social equity (1971). By doing so, these bureaucrats would also be choosing to advance and protect social equity as a value of American democratic society.

Today, the National Academy of Public Administration identifies social equity as one of the twelve grand challenges in the field and urges public managers to make a commitment to promoting social equity in their organizations, including the use of equity lens tools (NAPA, 2021). Civil rights scholar John A. Powell draws a distinction between the "false universalism" of

government programs that disproportionately aid whites and entrench existing inequalities, and targeted universalism (powell, 2009). Targeted universalism is “inclusive of the needs of both the dominant and marginal group but pays particular attention to the situation of the marginal group” (powell, 2009, p. 802). Anti-discrimination policies rooted in constitutional rights fail because Blacks and whites are not similarly situated in a racialized context. Transforming society starts with a transformation of the racialized self and this can be done by providing “space – institutional space, political space, social space and conceptual space – for the emergence of new relationships and a new way of being that exists beyond isolation and separation” (powell, 2012, p. xviii).

It is an important first step that Lane County has taken to put these concepts into practice by adopting an equity lens framework. The next steps would ask employees to be able to apply an analysis of inequity to target interventions. powell encourages institutions to find ways to talk about race that are not divisive and to target universal service programs in a way that considers the situation of the recipient (2009). In practice, this requires disaggregation of county data and equity tools to train staff to see inequities in context. Without this approach, county employees would be less effective stewards of taxpayer funds, an adjacent strategic requirement for Lane County employees (Lane County, 2019).

Managers must lead by example, encourage commitment over compliance, and create a culture of motivation to learn from all sources (Glennon et al., 2018). County employees are active decision-makers whose choices impact the well-being of county residents. Some county employees may make decisions that inadvertently re-traumatize a vulnerable county resident. Other employees may be highly motivated to pursue healing and restoration for fellow community members, but do not yet have the tools and channels to do so. Department leaders face the challenge of teaching other employees how to apply the equity lens tool within the situational requirements of each respective department. These departments may exist in separate information siloed from one another, carrying out different objectives using distinct methods. Implementation of the equity lens throughout the entire government necessitates strong top and mid-level leadership and an accompanying evolution of organizational culture.

Organizational learning, although it is not widely popular in the public sector, certainly proves beneficial in this context (Hill & Lynn, 2015). Glennon et al. make a compelling case for how and why public managers should embrace the learning organization philosophy:

- Implementing an equity lens framework is an ongoing change process, requiring frequent evaluation and revision of both internal and external policy.
- Continuously striving to be a learning organization allows public managers "to adapt to an increasingly uncertain environment by emphasizing learning processes for the delivery of public value" which, in

turn, will "translate new knowledge into new behaviours" (Glennon et al., 2018, p. 2).

By highlighting the public value and reinforcing commitments to change as acceptance of the political will, managers can cultivate an organizational culture that prioritizes equity.

Strategic management expert Mark Moore encourages citizens to engage with governments with the intention of using it to build a valuable and inclusive public sphere. He asserts that since we are members of a society that has a government (that we seek to understand and utilize well), we must not think as individual members of society but as collective members who owe the success to one another (Moore, 2010). Although equity and social justice work is different in some ways when performed by a public servant than a community organizer, governments that pursue equity as an organizational value will benefit from bringing on the brilliance and wisdom of community members willing and interested in participating. This will lead to the development of a pipeline to public service for motivated individuals who have cultural competencies and community engagement skills.

Data and Analysis

To learn more about the equity work done in Lane County so far as well as Lane County's goals for the near future, our group interviewed Mo Young, the Equity and Access Coordinator, Sequoia Hill and George Beverly from the Lane County Equity and Access Advisory Board, and Greg Rikhoff, the Director of Operations. Lane County's Equity Action Plan, which was adopted in January 2021, includes the following three priorities for county-wide governance:

- “Normalize racial equity through training and communication;
- Organize by strengthening the equity program;
- Operationalize racial equity through the establishment and implementation of an equity lens” (Lane County, 2021).

While the Equity Action Plan has not been fully integrated into all levels of work at the County, several pilot projects have been coordinated with the Equity and Access Coordinator to see how the Equity Lens would look in practice. Young noted that time is an important variable to consider when using the Equity Lens. For large-scale operations, like the COVID-19 vaccine distribution or the redistricting process, the best results occur when the planners reach out to the equity team immediately to workshop a plan. Rikhoff similarly recognized the importance of ensuring that enough time is dedicated to equity work. Oregon and Lane County themselves need to address and contend with its discriminatory

history, and it takes significant time to reflect before engaging in equity work that is meaningful.

Among the interviewees from Lane County, a shared sentiment for improving the Equity Action Plan involves the question of accountability and analysis. Lane County currently lacks records for tracking employees' compliance in using the Equity Lens in their day-to-day workplace activities. Additionally, Hill and Beverly expressed their desire to see Lane County's Equity and Access Advisory Board take a more active role in shaping and working with the Equity Action Plan. It is important to consider mechanisms that could be used to hold employees and bureaus accountable to achieve the goals of the Lane County Equity Action Plan while enabling interested parties to participate in the process.

Lane County's implementation of its Equity Lens builds upon the previous work from Multnomah County and the City of Portland. Ben Duncan, the Chief Diversity and Equity Officer for Multnomah County, and Dr. Markisha Smith, the Director of the City of Portland's Office of Equity and Human Rights, shared their experiences implementing and working with their respective Equity Lenses. The Multnomah County Equity and Access Lens was released in 2012, and Ben Duncan shared his experiences working with the tool as a part of the Department of Diversity and Equity. Multnomah County's tool is unique in its language, as it includes empowerment and power as primary concepts to frame equity. Smith, who works with employees to incorporate the Portland Equity Framework into daily operations, shared her perspective on how to encourage county-wide implementation of an Equity Framework. She recommended aligning the varied operations and actions of various departments to the county's main goal of achieving equity to enable leaders to encourage the use of an established Equity Framework throughout daily work.

Duncan and Smith shared similar perspectives about accountability, noting that both Multnomah County and the City of Portland lacked meaningful data to evaluate the success of their respective equity tools. Smith said that the Portland Office of Equity and Human Rights collected quantitative data on the number of employees who attended training but missed qualitative analysis that describes how employees utilize the Equity Framework. Duncan noted that the Department of Diversity and Equity asks employees if they use the equity lens every two years, 86% of employees said they do, but the department did not build a mechanism to evaluate how to measure the results. Looking toward the future, it will be important for Lane County to collect meaningful data and establish evaluation criteria to measure outcomes.

Beyond understanding what an "equity lens" looks like in practice in a city or county, our group needed to understand how organizational change occurs, as Lane County's Equity Lens is very new to most of the County governance. We had the opportunity to speak with Sarah Salisbury, Lane County's Quality Coordinator for the Department of Health and Human Services to understand change management and organizational change. The Lane County Equity and Access Advisory Board, which meets once a month, also discussed ways to

incorporate the Equity Lens throughout Lane County’s daily operations. Sarah Salisbury, an expert on change management theory, explained how organizational change needs to be facilitated through the ADKAR method of change. ADKAR refers to the five stages of change, “Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, and Reinforcement,” that individuals need to pass through before cultural and structural change can occur. Lane County’s Equity Action Plan passed through the first step, Awareness, through the public adoption of the plan, but leaders in Lane County need to incentivize, “desire,” before the Equity Action Plan can be incorporated throughout the county.

The nature of “siloes” departments within Lane County can become barriers to structural change. The Equity and Access Advisory Board is working to update employee training materials to share information between the departments and foster an environment that encourages shared learning and participation. Salisbury similarly observed isolation between departments in Lane County and hopes that the implementation of the Equity Lens can foster new cooperation between departments. Additionally, Salisbury noted that organizational change occurs when individuals within organizations change their mindsets and create a new culture for employees. Lane County management will need to train leaders and managers to support their employees when implementing the equity tool and changing the organizational culture.

Figure 1
Word cloud generated from interviews



Figure 1 highlights the primary themes that appeared throughout our group’s interviews. This word cloud, provides a visual representation of the frequency of words spoken throughout the seven conducted interviews. Aside from the keywords of “equity” and “inclusion”, the primary sentiments expressed by our interviewees were, “accountability,” “facilitation,” and “goals”. Our group prioritized these themes of accountability and facilitation when drafting our recommendations for incorporating an equity lens into Lane County governance.

Similarly, our group attempted to align our recommendations with the goals expressed by Young, Hill, and Beverly, who are actively working to utilize the equity lens in their work in Lane County.

Recommendations

1. Develop an equity, access, and inclusion department. Lane County currently has an equity and access coordinator (Mo Young) and has budgeted for a director. We suggest Lane County continues to develop this department and hire more full-time staff. This will show that the County is fully committed to equity, access, and inclusion and has the staff time committed to helping make sure the Equity Lens is implemented as smoothly as possible.

2. Implement a system to collect, process, and track utilization of the Equity Lens and all its parts. Currently, employees are slated to complete three hours of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training a year (in addition to the required Equity 101 training for all County employees), but there is no process in place to trace how employees are connecting with the training afterward. As the county seeks to onboard employees with the Lens, implementing a system to follow how employees *actively* engage with it will give the County the insight needed to know how to improve and expand on the Lens in future iterations.

As the County already offers other DEI-focused training, it can utilize the software available to track training completed. Then it is recommended to ask employees to provide feedback on how they have utilized the training and Equity Lens in their work throughout the year. This self-evaluation could occur once a year between an employee and their department manager. Department managers would then provide reports to the equity, access, and inclusion department and work with them to address any immediate concerns. This allows for timely reactions or precautionary actions to ensure success with the Lens.

Additionally, we recommend having in place a method to collect general feedback on how satisfied employees and clients are with the Equity Lens – both with the level of engagement observed and desired. This provides County departments with the knowledge of what other departments are doing well and how they can learn collaboratively.

3. Encourage professional development. Lane County employees participate in three hours of DEI training a year and a new Diversity 101 course starting this summer. Our recommendation is to encourage employees to seek and attend lectures, conferences, and optional county training surrounding current DEI topics. An important aspect of DEI learning is continued education.

When employees complete the training once a year, there is no space for them to build on this training. Providing more opportunities for employees to learn and discuss DEI, the more comfortable and likely they will be to implement the equity lens in their department and day-to-day work.

- 4. Future research.** Through our research and discussions with local leaders, there is more to learn on how best to strengthen the Equity Lens. Therefore, we recommend that University of Oregon School of Planning, Public Policy and Management students continue to support Lane County Administration with Equity Lens evaluation. Future researchers can consider consultations with local governments that used equity lenses including, but not limited to: King County, Washington; Des Moines, Iowa; Boulder, Colorado; San Antonio, Texas; and Toronto, Ontario.

We also recommend conducting interviews with administrators of other types of organizations, such as school districts. These entities may have learned lessons about equity lens evaluation that apply to county government as well.

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