

## Bringing Equity into Sustainability

### Progress in Portland OR and Seattle on bringing equity into sustainability work is spreading across the United States through individual city work and peer collaboration.

USDN and Partners for Places (P4P) are creating a new way for cities to advance their understanding of and commitment to equity in sustainability—the latest step in a three-year journey that has helped sustainability directors focus on this key third leg of the 3E stool.

Many city sustainability directors were hired to focus on environment, one of the three legs of the sustainability stool. Economic development emerged as more than a passing interest among USDN members in 2011. Continuing the trend toward a more holistic approach to sustainability, equity emerged as a prominent issue among USDN's members in 2012. An increasing number of USDN members have since signed on for regular peer exchange through the USDN Equity and Access User Group – up to 22 in 2015, led by members from Washington DC, Denver, and Atlanta. They are sharing information and learning together about topics including defining equity in sustainability, resident outreach and engagement, metrics, and incorporating equity concerns into adaptation, transportation, and land use planning. Group members inspired each other to include equity questions in a variety of city sustainability programs.

As interest in equity deepened, USDN members began to tap innovation funding opportunities that USDN and its partners created. One such opportunity is Partners for Places, a collaborative matching grant program that connects local government and philanthropy to invest in sustainability projects. USDN and the Funders' Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities designed this fund together ([read more](#)). In its second RFP, Partners for Places made a grant to the City of Portland OR to integrate equity metrics, criteria, and implementation in the 2013 revision to the Portland/ Multnomah County Climate Action Plan and create with community-based organizations a decision-making framework and set of tools to measure, evaluate, and prioritize carbon-reduction actions that advance equity, diversity, inclusion, and fairness.

After Portland staff members presented on the city's equity work at the 2013 USDN annual meeting, staff from seven cities and two counties applied for a USDN Peer Learning Exchange grant to go to Portland for training on how they have integrated equity into its climate action plan revision process. Participants included staff from Indianapolis, King County WA (non-USDN member), Minneapolis, Park Forest IL, Portland OR, Santa Clara County, Seattle, Tucson, and Washington DC.

A key lesson that participants took away from the City of Portland equity learning exchange was that city staff needs training on structural racism before they can take productive action to address disparities and improve equity. This training greatly improves the chances that the tools Portland presented – using GIS to map inequities, implementing an equity decision framework, stakeholder power analysis, departmental and city-wide equity audits, new community engagement strategies – will make a difference. Disparities analysis and power analysis are helpful tools, but only with the right community process and political readiness to make change built around them. The foundational framework for the tools developed first in Seattle and then in Portland and Minneapolis is the Racial Equity Impact Assessment (REIA) tool created by Race Forward (formerly the Applied Research Center) available [here](#).

To advance equity in sustainability, cities first need to:

- **Build dedicated cross-departmental and citywide teams that learn together about structural racism.** The orientation and training for the teams builds a common understanding of structural and institutional inequities and provides a common methodology to dismantle these inequities. Multiple organizations across the United States offer this kind of training, including Crossroads Antiracism Organizing & Training and the Racial Equity Institute.
- **Undertake a citywide equity self-evaluation.** Armed with a common understanding, the team is prepared for a fruitful self-evaluation or equity audit, which allows team members to explore how structural racism manifests locally, including ways to address it, barriers, and pinch points.
- **Develop an action plan and performance goals.** The third step is development of an action plan building on findings from the self-assessment. The city action plans can be broad (a new comprehensive plan committed to equity) or narrow (a key infrastructure project committed to equity). The team must continue to meet to gather lessons and plan next steps.

Now USDN and the Funders' Network are planning a targeted Partners for Places RFP to give more cities the opportunity to take these three steps to advance equity in sustainability. Dozens of cities have expressed interest.