

Urban Sustainability Innovator Profile: Desiree Williams-Rajee

When the Portland OR Bureau of Planning and Sustainability began work on a 2013 Climate Action Plan Update, it tapped the Partners for Places Fund for support to create with local organizations a decision-making framework and set of tools to measure, evaluate, and prioritize carbon-reduction actions that advance equity, diversity, inclusion, and fairness.

The Bureau's first step was to bring in Desiree Williams-Rajee, their equity specialist who had been hired to integrate equity into its organizational culture, policy, and program practices, including the Climate Action Plan.

Soon after the City had adopted the Portland Plan in 2012, which identified equity as the preeminent overarching strategy of the City's new 25-year strategic plan, the Bureau created the equity specialist position to walk the talk on its commitment to equity. Williams-Rajee understood her charge to be to help the Bureau explore how it could improve support for diversity and inclusion in its internal processes and make equity central to its programming and policy processes like the Climate Action Plan. "I am an internal consultant, coach, and sounding board for how to apply an equity lens to our work. My job is to challenge all of us to work differently and think outside the box," she says.

Williams-Rajee sits down with teams and helps them to explore how to build equity into what they do, ranging from translation strategies for outreach to evaluating service impacts on various communities. She led the development of a racial equity analysis toolkit that supports this work. That analysis entails identifying impacts on marginalized communities and the decisions made that produce those impacts. "The institutions we work within have a default mode to continue to produce disparate outcomes for communities of color and other marginalized communities. An equity analysis interrupts that, redefines success in terms of what is just distribution of benefits and burdens, and rewrites the rules to make it happen." For the Climate Action Plan, this meant meeting with the community to inform the public engagement process from the very beginning to address privilege and power dynamics in meetings. "Equity is both what we are trying to achieve and the process by which we get there," says Williams-Rajee.

Williams-Rajee also sees her role as supporting the Bureau to live into its mission and values. "I was concerned people would see me as policing their work; I didn't expect how well I would be received." One explanation is the support from top City and Bureau management. Another is that since before Williams-Rajee was hired in her current role, staff have been going through hard processes together to understand structural and institutional racism in the Bureau and community and commit to address it. "Some of this was initiated from within the organization; some by advocacy from the community. Being a part of both helped me prepare for this role." Finally, there is Williams-Rajee's approach: "I'm here to help people do the best they can do. I don't come in assuming what people are doing is wrong, just that there is a possibility to do it even better." Now Williams-Rajee is the cheerleader for holding on to the Bureau's commitment. "We have transitioned from the 'why equity?' conversation to the 'how do we do it?' My job is made easier by the fact that I'm not spending time convincing; I'm spending time motivating us to dig deeper and giving people tools along the way to be successful," reflects Williams-Rajee. The result has been that staff have come to see equity as a piece of doing excellent work for everyone in the community.

Williams-Rajee continues to innovate with her peers in the city. She helped to design an organizational development assessment process that the Bureau is pilot testing this year and the City is hoping to roll out across departments. The assessment helps determine how far a department has come and how to move forward in the next five years. Its innovation is in providing a vision for what the work should accomplish if successful. "Achieving equity is a hard thing to visualize. We have no point in history to refer to, but this tool attempts to create that vision for the City," she says. The goal is for all departments to use it. Williams-Rajee is excited about this process for the Bureau, adding that, "It gives us a roadmap to be an anti-racist organization and a path to create new structures and opportunities that will address our most challenging problems." She also is leading a cross-sector team from the Bureau exploring how to live and breathe these new values as organization. The Bureau sunsetted its diversity committee because it wanted to evolve from the work being a separate committee. In this new initiative, equity, diversity, and inclusion will be business as usual for everyone.

Williams-Rajee has shared Portland's lessons and tools with dozens of other cities, helping to spread good practice for integrating equity into sustainability. In January 2014, funding from the USDN Peer Learning Exchange enabled six cities and two counties from across the United States to convene in Portland to learn about their equity initiatives and share their own experiences and resources. Williams-Rajee expects to continue to share climate equity tools, resources, and lessons.