

## Extreme Heat Scenario-Based Pilot Project in Frontline Communities - Racial Equity Evaluation

### A USDN Innovation Fund 2015 Grant

The USDN Innovation Fund invested \$16,000 in a pilot program in Seattle WA. It was executed with the participation of Baltimore MD and Portland OR. The goal of the pilot was to understand how municipal agencies can better support low-income communities and communities of color during extreme heat events. The final report ([here](#)) is honest and frank about the challenges they encountered. Findings by activity are as follows:

#### Process Key Findings

- The core planning team did not include any people of color (or low-income residents) from the Rainier Beach (RB) or Chinatown/International District (C/ID) neighborhoods, although there were two people of color, from government partner agencies, on the planning team.
- The core planning team made all of the foundational and final decisions for the project, with consultation from a few community partners.
- The majority of the core planning team members agreed, with the people of color on the team strongly stating, that this did not achieve the goal of a community-driven planning process.

#### Workshop Key Findings

- Approximately 39% of the workshop participants were people of color (or low-income residents) from the Rainier Beach or Chinatown/International District neighborhoods. 88% were people of color (or low-income residents) regardless of whether they were residents of either location.
- Participants in both workshops rated their experience and feelings regarding how much their voices mattered mostly positively.
- The core planning team created the final agenda and design of the workshops, including preparing interpreters, facilitating English-speaking small group discussions, and making final decisions. The only significant opportunity for community members to influence the workshop process was through their roles as interpreters (Vietnamese, Somali, and Chinese-Mandarin and Cantonese).
- Community partners appreciated the extra efforts taken to recruit and compensate participants, and expressed the challenge of ongoing community input sessions, yet the lack of any noticeable changes.

#### Project Key Findings

- This project falls into the 'consult' stage of King County community engagement continuum, and did not achieve the goal of a racially equitable community-driven planning process.
- The Chinatown/International District efforts were more successful than the Rainier Beach efforts, primarily due to pre-existing relationships.
- Community partners appreciated the extra efforts in recruitment and compensation, and the project left them still wondering if this is another (unintentional) example of government agencies wanting to say they talked with communities, rather than really listening to what is being said.

#### Project Reflection: *Racial equity is measured by outcomes, not intentions and will.*

Too often it feels like we are trying to tweak a system that keeps reverting back to 'business as usual.' This takes an incredible amount of energy. If the effort does not result in racial equity, it feels defeating and impacts our will to engage in this work. If we were to pull all of the lessons learned together, what we really ought to take away is that our approach to racial equity needs to be redesigned. The new approach must be designed to default to centering the comfort of communities of color, centering control with communities of color, and ensuring transparency for communities of color. For this to happen, communities of color must be the designers, not just the recipient of the design. Staff hiring is an integral part of creating a racially equitable system. Internal planning teams must begin to reflect the racially diverse communities being served.

Finally, government agencies must support efforts already happening in communities of color and stop trying to create separate processes and practices in isolation. In the Seattle and King County area, governments are fortunate to have many great examples of community-driven planning processes, often referred to as community organizing models in communities of color. This means (appropriately) spending time in the community and resourcing community efforts.