

INCORPORATING EQUITY AT A REGIONAL LEVEL: INSPIRATION & ACTIONS

OVERVIEW

The following case studies are the result of interviews with staff at ten Economic Development Districts (EDDs) and Regional Development Organizations (RDOs) around the country to conducted to gain a better understanding of how they are incorporating principles of diversity, equity and inclusion in their work and programs. These interviews represent just a few of the 400+ EDDs and RDOs, but provide insight into why and how these organizations are doing this important work.

KEY FINDINGS

Every organization approached the work differently but several themes and commonalities emerged. When developing a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) statement, it was crucial to have buy-in from the Executive Director, Board, and staff, although different parties could lead the effort. RDOs prioritized both internal (hiring practices, creation of a DEI committee, staff training) and external (public participation and engagement strategies) efforts. Many identified the importance of local partnerships and consulting with local groups already focused on equity. Identifying and allocating funding to do this work remains a challenge, but read on to learn ways regional organizations are addressing this obstacle. NADO Research Foundation hopes this publication both uplifts this ongoing work and encourages others to embark on work in their own community.



CHITTENDEN COUNTY REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION, WINOOSKI, VT

Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission (CCRPC) combined its CEDS, Metropolitan Transportation Plan and its Regional Plan in 2013 thanks to a Partnership for Sustainable Communities grant. This plan, called the ECOS (Environment. Community. Opportunity. Sustainability) Plan was required to address equity, and 'Ensuring Equity' became two of the ten guiding principles. Number 8 of the 'Strategies and Actions' is to: "Ensure That The Projects And Actions In All ECOS Strategies Assess Equity Impacts, And That The Design And Development Of Programs Are Inclusive Of All And Engage Underrepresented Populations."

The Commission publishes an ECOS Annual Report, including the 2020 Annual Report focused on inequities, and is interested in finding more tools to better assess impacts to underrepresented communities. While equity focused work wasn't generally seen as a priority in 2013, that changed in 2020 with the murder of George Floyd. CCRPC joined with the City of Burlington and 30 other County organizations declaring racism a public health emergency. Using MPO funds, CCRPC brought on a DEI Consultant who completed an equity assessment of the organization and led a CCRPC sponsored Equity

Summit in November 2021. Takeaways from the Summit and work by the Consultant led to an [Equity Assessment Report](#) with recommendations that were presented to CCRPC's board in 2022.

CCRPC is working to address equity with internal and external partners. CCRPC has an equity leadership team made up of Board members and staff, with the intention to soon include community members. The Commission has also partnered with the Vermont Racial Justice Alliance, which is beginning convenings with 30 organizations this spring. While CCRPC has been making progress to address equity in the region, it has also come across challenges. This is still an evolving issue and CCRPC is still determining how to incorporate equity into its CEDS. They have contracted with Vermont Professionals of Color Network to help with public engagement as they begin to prepare the next CEDS, with a particular goal of incorporating perspectives of under-represented business owners.

Links:

[Racial Equity_page](#)
[ECOS Plan](#)





LAND OF SKY REGIONAL COUNCIL, ASHEVILLE NC

LOSRC has committed itself to eliminating racial disparities and supporting disadvantaged individuals and communities. After the killing of George Floyd, the Council's Executive Director issued a [memo](#) condemning the event, outlined the Council's commitment to eliminating racial disparities and supporting disadvantaged individuals and communities and identified that the "region has significant racial disparities in most every aspect of our society". It has developed an online [Story Map](#) to share data based on racial disparities within the region to promote a conversation to better understand these challenges and how to address them. The BIPOC population in the region is small, which has resulted in challenges working with census data, but the Council intends to continue to update the report and hopefully include additional information.

The Council has a DEI committee that meets monthly, consisting of Council leadership, a contracted HR firm, and staff. The Committee is reviewing hiring and contracting policies, and updated the policy manual in 2021 to reflect the changes. MPO and RPO participation plans were also updated in 2021 and reflect the Council's efforts to ensure outreach to all communities. The Council intends to continue using zoom to conduct public outreach, hoping to ensure it is reaching communities that are still vulnerable. It has

conducted internal DEI training for staff since 2021 and has begun bringing in outside consultants to conduct it. The training has raised awareness of terminology and how individuals interpret messaging differently. Additionally, the Council has begun hiring more diverse staff and is becoming more intentional as an affirmative action employer.

Although the Council may face difficulties, including recruiting minority applicants in a largely white and rapidly developing area, it sees the possibilities to affect change by continuing to partner with outside organizations, including the City of Asheville, local non-profit organizations, and community groups. Members of the community have reached out to Land of Sky for assistance in DEI training and the Council may begin to help them develop their own DEI statements. As part of its workforce programs, they have held hiring fairs at public housing developments, and partnered with the Asheville Chamber Inclusive Hiring Partners program and ARC INspire, which are both focused on re-entry, second chance hiring and supporting those with substance use disorders. LOSRC is also a member of the Generation Plus team, which is working to reduce isolation, build social networks, educate and advocate for the LGBTQ+ 55 and older population. The Council's focus on the BIPOC community, racial disparities and underrepresented communities will allow it to refocus its work to ensure that it is positively affecting these communities.

Links:

[Racial Disparity in the Land of Sky Region](#)
[State of Black Asheville](#)





MID-COLUMBIA ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT, THE DALLES, OR

The District's motivation to create a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) statement and plan increased after the death of George Floyd and the social unrest that occurred during the summer of 2020. Staff at the District met in November 2020 and decided to begin creating a statement, with support from their Board. In March staff presented the statement to their Board, in addition to publishing it on the website and in the personnel policy. The District has an ongoing monthly staff meeting to discuss topics related to DEI and to talk about how to include equity in their work, including, for example, hiring practices, business lending, transportation and diversifying boards and committees.

The District just finished the process of updating its CEDS, and within it, they identified two major themes: resilience and equitable outcomes. To better identify community needs while developing it, the District used CARES funding to contract with a local non-profit to conduct focus groups with underrepresented communities to get their feedback on the document/CEDS development. This has resulted in better identification of local needs, including the need to translate select District documentation into Spanish.

The District recommended that other Regional Organizations doing similar work leverage relationships with organizations that already have ties to underserved and/or minority communities. The District is currently researching funding opportunities to pay for staff time and to possibly pay for a consultant to assist in creating a DEI plan.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Statement

MCEDD's mission is to promote the creation of family-wage jobs, the diversification of the economic base, and the growth, development and retention of business and industry within the five-county district. We are committed to doing this work in a way that promotes equitable outcomes for the diversity of all businesses and residents in the region. Diversity: While race and gender are historical markers of diversity, we believe that diversity includes categories such as age, disability, nationality, intellectual perspective, socioeconomic background, religion, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Inclusion empowers the voice of all members of a community.

Equity: We believe that equity is achieved when systemic, institutional, and historical barriers based on the categories above are dismantled and no longer predict socioeconomic, education, and health outcomes. We also believe that diversity among our staff and various boards and committees strengthens our work through a variety of perspectives. We will approach our mission through this culture of diversity, equity, and inclusion for the benefit of all residents, businesses, MCEDD employees, board and committee members.

Links:

[DEI Statement](#)





MID-OHIO REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION, COLUMBUS, OH

Diversity and Inclusion have been at the forefront of MORPC's work for several years. Local leaders in the Columbus, OH area issued resolutions declaring racism a public health crisis in 2020 after the killing of George Floyd. MORPC also released a statement, which was included in its existing Diversity, Equity and Inclusion plan and on its website, alongside an existing Diversity Statement. Local municipalities and MORPC members began reaching out for resources, training and speakers on topics related to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. To provide this, MORPC partnered with YWCA Columbus to provide social and racial justice classes for MORPC employees, member organizations and community partners. In 2021, six classes were offered to around 200 people on the subject of antiracism and racial equity. Together with the Atlanta Regional Council, MORPC led the Racial Equity Conversation Series in response to interest expressed from executive directors across the nation.

MORPC has a Diversity & Inclusion Committee, designed to prioritize diversity and inclusion goals and to implement new internal structures to improve capacity, results and prioritization. The committee consists of representation from the areas of the agency directly involved in monitoring, adjusting, and improving priority goals, including improving the diversity of new employees, increasing diverse

voices and representation on the commission and its committees and in program planning, establishing new goal-specific staff contacts to advance the plan, and providing focused data, context and technical assistance. In addition to this committee, MORPC is prioritizing including discussion of DEI in other Committees and employee groups- including for example the public policy committee.

Diversity Statement:

Diversity refers to the differences that make us unique. Inclusion is the action of engaging and valuing cultural differences. MORPC recognizes, values, embraces, and celebrates diversity by respecting and utilizing all of our differences to enhance our lives and our society.

Statement on Racism:

Over the past few weeks, we have all witnessed and felt the sadness, the outrage, and the frustration concerning the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and so many other senseless deaths and unnecessary trauma across the nation and closer to home. These tragedies impact us deeply and cast a brighter light on racism and its long legacy and impact on every community.

We support our local government members across the region as they work to eliminate racism and discrimination, especially the City of Columbus and Franklin County in declaring racism to be a public health crisis. Racism affects all members of our society and deserves action from every level of government.

MORPC reaffirms our commitment to work to eliminate racism and discrimination throughout Central Ohio by addressing disparities and inequities through our programs and initiatives.

Through our work to convene and facilitate regional conversations, we promote collaboration and urgent effective action.

Through our transportation and economic development initiatives, we work to ensure everyone has equal access to education, jobs, healthcare and other community resources.

Through our programs in residential services, we provide free services to populations historically underserved and overburdened with energy and housing costs.

Through our planning and sustainability efforts, we work to improve air quality conditions that disproportionately affect vulnerable populations.

Through data and mapping, we identify trends and disparities to improve opportunities for resources for everyone.

Through our commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, we provide opportunities for traditionally underrepresented communities to share their thoughts, voices, and perspectives in planning for our region.

Through our Regional Housing Strategy, we work with our community partners to identify gaps in affordable and sufficient housing to meet our current and future market demands.

There is much more work to be done.

We commit to build on our progress, acknowledge and address our shortcomings, improve and measure our impact, and advance new efforts.

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We will bring more focus on identifying and eliminating systemic racism through our public policy and planning work.

In service to and partnership with over 70 member communities in Central Ohio, we stand together with our regional and state partners to address racism, to create a more just and prosperous region, and to strive to make sure all in our region are moving forward.

Links:

[Eliminate Racism website](#)

[Diversity & Inclusion page](#)

[2019-2020 Diversity and Inclusion Work Plan](#)





OLD COLONY PLANNING COUNCIL BROCKTON, MA

Old Colony Planning Council is a regional planning agency that serves 17 communities southeast of Boston, Massachusetts. Recognizing the historical inequity around issues like housing, transportation and climate, the organization created a task force that led discussions about the way OCPC looked at equity. They created a mission statement called Reflection, Opportunity and Action. The staff and Council felt it was not enough to simply call out the inequity but imperative to include actions that they will take to ensure equity in their work. The statement took several months to develop before it was adopted by the Council, with the intent to review it annually.

The statement is just one of the many actions OCPC is taking to address equity and inequality through its work. The organization is determined to bring activism to planning and create positive impacts as a result of its work. OCPC developed a procurement policy that ensures RFPs are intentionally sent to diverse suppliers. OCPC has also created a repository of workforce agencies that intentionally reach diverse candidates when advertising for staff members. One of the goals of the Council's Public Participation Plan is outreach to the region's environmental justice communities, to ensure that low-income, minority, foreign-born, or non-English speaking persons have equal access to the planning process.

When interviewing staff at OCPC, including Executive Director Mary Waldron, they had advice for other Regional Development Organizations wanting to

begin working on an equity statement and/or including equity as a focus of their work. They encouraged organizations to not be fearful to take the first step, to consult with local groups already focused on equity, to listen to people of color and those with lived experience, and to be willing to change previous opinions and perspectives.

Our Vision

- *Our vision is that communities in the Old Colony region are:*
- *Resilient, using social, economic, and environmental resources to respond to, withstand, and recover from adverse situations brought about by natural disasters or economic downturns.*
- *Sustainable, the needs of all people and the natural environment are met now without compromising the ability to meet those needs in the future.*
- *Equitable, social, economic, and environmental opportunities exist for all.*
- *Connected, everyone has accessible, affordable, and sustainable mobility choices.*
- *Responsive, planning efforts are inclusive and reflect the diverse needs of all.*
- *Collaborative, cooperating regionally to tackle common challenges.*

Mission Statement:

- *Reflect on how we work (both internally and externally), identify opportunities for doing better, and take action – ensuring that our commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion remains strong.*

Statement on Equity, Diversity & Inclusion:

- *At Old Colony Planning Council (OCPC) we embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion as organizational values. We recognize the positive intrinsic relationship between these values and thriving communities. We commit to reflecting these values in all the work that we do.*
- *As we reflect on the events of the past week, we know the people that live in our communities are feeling pain. We continue to take action to foster equity and inclusion and counter racism in our community. OCPC's Reflection, Opportunity, and Action (ROA) Task*

Force continues to build on these values by examining what we as a regional planning agency and as individuals can do.

OCPC Reflection, Opportunity, and Action (ROA) Task Force

In 2020, OCPC created a Reflection, Opportunity, and Action (ROA) Task Force to ensure and strengthen its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The mission of the task force is to reflect upon and strengthen its organizational values in its work and policies and find opportunities for improvement. OCPC recognizes the positive intrinsic relationship between these values of diversity, equity, and inclusion and thriving communities, and strives to be a partner and asset to the communities in the region in the planning and decision-making process, where all members of the community have input, feel valued, and receive benefit from the planning process.

The task force set a number of goals including:

- 1. Continuous review of public participation methods to ensure traditionally underserved populations and organizations are heard.*
- 2. Proactive engagement of stakeholders, identifying diverse organizations and people for participation and involvement in the decision-making processes.*
- 3. Intentional development of opportunities for inclusion providing a platform for underrepresented communities to be heard.*
- 4. Foster participation internally empowering staff to share ideas, concerns, and thoughts.*
- 5. Create opportunities around themes of inclusive public participation, community empowerment, and cultural competency.*





PLANRVA RICHMOND, VA

PlanRVA was poised to launch development of the regional transportation plan, ConnectRVA2045, when 2020 became a much different year than expected. Not only did COVID-19 require a complete redo of planned community based public engagement, the Richmond area was also the scene of intense social unrest after the killing of George Floyd. PlanRVA's Title VI compliance activities were also reviewed in 2020 and the agency was notified of a requirement to update its [Title VI Plan](#) to comply with regulations. Around this time funding was received from a grant given by the [Community Foundation for a greater Richmond](#) that was used to develop an Equitable Community Engagement Strategy in partnership with [AvidCore](#). The Strategy represents PlanRVA's commitment to placing equity at the center of community outreach efforts and decision making. An on-call bench of consultants was identified to assist PlanRVA in implementing the strategy and to fulfill other communications and public outreach needs, which also included development of a new social media and media outreach guide and establishment of a new a full time Community Engagement Manager position which was filled in November, 2021.

PlanRVA is working to change the status quo within the organization. Hiring decisions are being made with emphasis on selection based on lived experience as well as education and training. PlanRVA is working to change the status quo within the organization. Staff Lunch and Learn sessions and other training opportunities have been organized to increase employee engagement on topics such as Race, Equity, and Mindfulness, and purchasing decisions are being made with priority given to local,

women and minority owned businesses. Employees are being encouraged to be aware of what 'they and their colleagues are bringing to the table' and surveys have been distributed to increase understanding of conscious and unconscious biases.

PlanRVA continues to work with several consultants who have assisted with a number of the organization's priorities. In preparation for relocating office space and its buildout, it hired consultant Matthew Shapiro of [6 Wheels Consulting](#) to help design an inclusive space for employees and guests, including those with disabilities. PlanRVA is working to develop a curriculum with the [Institute for Engagement & Negotiation](#) to discuss regional history and the history of planning, which would inform their understanding of public engagement, including with tribal nations.

Later this summer, PlanRVA will launch a new Title VI Training Program developed by KLT Group in partnership with the [Virginia Association of Planning District Commissions](#) (VAPDC) and the [Virginia Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations](#) (VAMPO) assuring timely and consistent training and education across the network of state planning organizations in Virginia.

Challenges remain, including building relationships and reputation within the community, especially historically marginalized groups. PlanRVA is working to understand how to best reengage with the public post COVID-19, using digital tools, and reassessing previous methods. They have learned that intentionality takes a lot of time, and funding can be difficult to secure, but are determined not to let these challenges stop this necessary work.

Links:

[Public Engagement Plan](#)





SOURIS BASIN PLANNING COUNCIL MINOT, ND

When Souris Basin Planning Council began updating its Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) in 2019, Executive Director Lyndsay Ulrickson and staff started work on both a mission and an inclusivity statement for the organization. Staff began by looking at other organizations' inclusivity statements as examples and took the time to understand the meaning and differences between words such as equity and equality. The statements were publicly available in 2021 and aligned with work the Council was already doing. However, having the inclusivity statement has helped when building new programs to ensure that they align with the organization's stated goals. In addition, the Council has defederalized its revolving loan fund, changed the name to 'Impact Fund', and identified formal priorities for non-traditional entrepreneurs.

Inclusivity Statement:

SBPC is deeply committed to building excellence and enhancing a positive impact on our communities, region, state, and nation. This requires our team to reflect on equity and inclusivity so we can learn from the broadest perspectives. We must do this by engaging in the most inclusive understanding possible of issues and gaps we are trying to address. We recognize that race and gender are historical markers of diversity, especially in traditionally conservative communities; however, we further believe that diversity includes categories such as age, disability, nationality, intellectual perspective, socioeconomic

background, religion, sexual orientation and gender identity. Inclusion encompasses empowering the voice of all members of a community.





SOUTHEASTERN REGIONAL PLANNING & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT, TAUNTON, MA

SRPEDD staff worked with their Executive Director to do an internal review of planning efforts as they relate to community development and social and environmental justice, to better achieve the organization's mission and to respond to the widespread social justice protests in 2020. This was a staff-led effort where representatives from all SRPEDD departments volunteered to meet on a regular basis to advance efforts and make recommendations to the management team. The main goals were to make concrete changes to be more proactive and effective under existing work programs while also expanding work into new types of projects and initiatives. The District's [Justice, Equity and Community Development webpage](#) allow community members to explore this work.

As a result, SRPEDD updated its Project Scoping guidelines to inform the public engagement process. The formal scoping process enables a well-documented and thorough assessment of data to identify vulnerable and significant populations and ultimately inform the public engagement practices used during the course of a project. SRPEDD also

produced more widely accessible recommendations on affordable housing production, produced its first two ADA Transition Plans (Lakeville and Plainville), and initiated a Regional Resilience Plan. The District hopes to expand activities into restorative justice practices that recognize and celebrate the land's history and differences, including more emphasis on arts and culture in the master planning process and economic development planning.

Vision

Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District (SRPEDD) is a regional planning agency made up of civically-minded planners with a variety of professional backgrounds. SRPEDD is guided by a common set of principles:

- Balanced growth,*
- Equity and social justice,*
- Creation of wealth and opportunity for all of our region's community members,*
- Conservation of natural and cultural resources,*
- Community resilience, and*
- Safe, convenient, and accessible transportation for all types of users.*



SRPEDD
Southeastern Regional Planning
& Economic Development District



TRIANGLE J COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS DURHAM, NC

During the national reckoning that occurred after the murder of George Floyd, the Triangle J Council of Governments organization decided that it needed to 'do better', and work to make diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) an organizational priority. Staff met internally and prepared the [Triangle J Organization Response to Recent Events & Commitment to Systemic Change](#), which outlined the organization's desire to affect change. Triangle J already had developed core values for staff, which included mention of diversity and equity. The organization currently has three organizational priorities: Services to Our Member Governments, Data-Driven Decision Making, Diversity, Equity, & Inclusivity, which are intended to inform all work in all program areas.

Triangle J created an internal task force to address DEI, in addition to bringing in consultants to conduct equity trainings and beginning a book club to read relevant works. Funds were allocated to dedicate 10% of one staff members time to this topic, which has included managing the organization's relationship with the [Government Alliance on Race & Equity \(GARE\)](#). As part of Triangle J's involvement with GARE, they are working to incorporate equity principles throughout all their programs.

Triangle J is confronting challenges including that their region incorporates both rural and urban areas, investment in the region that is both bringing in

high paying jobs and pricing others out, and a lack of affordable housing, to name a few. Despite this, the organization and its staff are committed to advancing equity through their work. They hope to incorporate DEI principles into their next CEDS, and well as better integrating all of their planning documents, including DEI goals. Five years from now Executive Director Lee Worsley hopes that the organization's employee makeup will better reflect the demographics of the region, and that they are using a DEI lens when taking actions and convening and leading conversations with local partners around this important issue.

Equity and Inclusion Statement:

"TJCOG is committed to advancing racial equity and inclusion within our organization and across our seven-county region to dismantle structural racism and ensure a more equitable future for all. As a government organization with great influence on public decision-making, TJCOG has a responsibility to identify and address racial inequities that exist. We hold ourselves accountable to this commitment through continuous education for ourselves and our members, the incorporation of foundations of equity and inclusion into our policies and programs, and transparent and data-driven communication."

Links:

[Equity and Inclusion page](#)





WEST MICHIGAN SHORELINE REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION MUSKEGON, MI

West Michigan Shoreline Regional Development Commission (WMSRDC) celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2020. Staff took this opportunity, and a desire to respond to the ongoing social unrest, to expand on its mission statement and develop an Equity Statement. The larger social movement caused staff to regroup and refocus on how they reach out to underserved communities and ensure that they are “doing all that we can do.” The Equity statement was driven by a desire to put into words the equity and inclusion work they were already doing, while ensuring that future work aligned with the statement. Considering that EDA funding is for distressed communities that have historically been underserved, it was an opportunity to interpret work that was already outlined in the Commission’s CEDS. Commission staff put the statement in their newsletter and in every annual report to ensure it remains a central focus. In addition to the Equity Statement, the Commission also expanded on their Mission Statement to address the Why, How and What behind WMSRDC’s work.

WMSRDC Equity Statement

The Commission defines equity as the intentional inclusion of everyone in society. Equity is achieved when systemic, institutional, and historical barriers based on race, gender, sexual orientation and other identities and abilities are dismantled and no longer predict socioeconomic, education, and health outcomes.

The Commission recognizes structural racism and other forms of oppression have contributed to persistent disparities which the Commission seeks to dismantle within our region. The Commission strives to engage community members, especially those whose voices have traditionally been marginalized. The Commission works with local governments, residents, and public and private partners to provide resources, support, and opportunities that create prosperous and thriving communities for all citizens.

The Commission also strives to provide a work environment that recognizes individual differences, is free from discrimination, and is respectful of the rights and dignity of all individuals. The Commission has built our reputation on the foundations of excellence and integrity, and we expect its employees to exhibit behaviors consistent with these standards.

Therefore, the Commission commits to leveraging its resources and assets to create more equitable communities through the programs it administers, as well as to develop racially conscious partnerships and processes that anticipate unintended outcomes to ensure the inclusion of all people in our region and our organization.

