

Date: March 27, 2020

To: Kathryn Harrington
Chair, Washington County Board of Commissioners

From: Washington County Racial Equity Collaborative

Re: COVID-19 and the REC Top-Tier recommendations

Dear Chair Harrington:

As members of the Washington County Racial Equity Collaborative (REC), we present our “Top-Tier Recommendations,” the second deliverable of our agreement funded by the Board of Commissioners FY 2019-20 Budget Priorities.

First and foremost, **our mission is to enrich and strengthen the broader Washington County community by increasing the capacity of communities of color and their level of engagement in the county.** At the same time, the current crisis related to COVID-19 compels us all to respond in ways we never imagined, and with an even greater sense of urgency.

Our recommendations were originally meant to address ways to respond equitably to the “Calls to Action” in the Leading with Race Report, but we are pivoting to address the more critical need to save lives, while not losing sight of our over-arching goal to advance racial equity in Washington County.

The following reflects the REC’s recommendations on equitable actions in response to COVID-19. The REC firmly believes that a focus on equity, i.e. prioritizing people of color and our most vulnerable populations, many of whom represent the front-line workers in our service and gig economies, will accelerate the process of flattening the curve and more effectively protect the entire region.

Recommendations for Washington County Administration

1) INCREASE HOUSING ASSISTANCE

- a) **Establish an emergency fund for a housing emergency assistance program.** Immediate funds to account for populations that can't access government benefits such as unemployment or emergency cash distribution
 - i) There is a need for emergency rent/food assistance to low-income renters in both regulated affordable housing and market rate housing. For housing providers like Bienestar for whom 95% of tenants are Latinx, loss of rental income destabilizes the properties they operate and can even lead to defaulting on their mortgage payments which puts ALL tenants at risk of losing their housing. We request a **significant increase in emergency rent assistance funds**, either funneled through Community Action, or made directly available to organizations that serve people of color and low-income populations.
 - ii) Many immigrant families may not be able to access unemployment and/or may not receive federal stimulus funds being enacted by Congress. This is an important reality for County commissioners to consider when making decisions about families and households that are most at risk
 - iii) Homeowners of color, and first-time homeowners continue to be at risk of defaulting on their mortgages as well as loss of wages, jobs, and other economic factors impact their ability to continue paying. A moratorium on mortgage payments, similar to the one that passed for tenants in Portland, should be implemented as soon as possible.

- 2) SHORE UP THE BUSINESS AND SERVICE SECTORS
 - a) **Provide emergency financial assistance for small business, organizations and workers being negatively impacted.** Immediate funds to account for populations that can't access to government benefits/ unemployment of emergency cash distribution due to current immigration status.
 - i) VAN's community survey in response to COVID-19 has given us feedback from over 100 organizations representing nonprofits, small businesses, faith centers, healthcare providers, and public institutions. From the survey we gathered that the main concern among participants is the financial impact on the region, the impact on volunteer, employees and constituents, and the uncertainty of the length of this crisis. Furthermore, 45% of participants urgent need or anticipate needing financial assistance to make up for lost revenue, and over 40% need financial assistance to deal with emergency actions.
 - ii) Washington County is home to a large number of food-based businesses. While the Governor's order allows for food businesses to deliver or offer take out, the reality is that many of these businesses are food carts, catering services, and temporary hot food establishments (e.g. Farmers Market vendors). The closures of shared-use commercial kitchens, postponements of farmers market season openings, and general lack of customers due to shelter in place measures are impacting the revenue of micro food entrepreneurs who already encounter other barriers such as access to capital and markets. To offset their losses, we request a waiver of licensing fees for the next 9 months (through December 2020) for microbusinesses in catering services, seasonal temporary restaurants, temporary food booths, and mobile food units.
- 3) CREATE INNOVATIVE AND RAPID FUNDING MECHANISMS
 - a) As our local government body, we urge Washington County to look at **innovative processes, rapid turnaround, and more streamlined decision-making to distribute county funds**, as well as extending deadlines on RFPs or shifting to a revolving, open application process
- 4) INCREASE COMMUNICATION
 - a) **The most vulnerable in our community need to hear from Washington County leadership.** Explore ways to communicate in culturally specific ways directly to the community through social media and targeted press statements from the County.
 - i) Leverage and compensate culturally specific organizations and community leaders to get your message to the most vulnerable populations who are often isolated from traditional sources and channels of communication
 - ii) VAN's community survey in response to COVID-19 also gave us an insight on what primary sources people are using to stay informed, CDC, OHA and news media sources (e.g. OPB, NPR, CNN, local radio/TV) are the top three. Roughly 40% specified their sources, and Washington County was not mentioned by any.
 - b) **Information dissemination needs to be available in multiple languages and needs to target at-risk populations, especially those who are hard to reach.** Some of the languages that need to be added in Washington County are Central American native languages, such as Mixteco, Zapoteco, Kiche', Mam, Kaqchikel and Q'eqchi', and Chuukese and Marshallese for Pacific Islanders. There is an imminent concern that some populations are not getting the information needed to respond to this crisis.
 - c) We propose to leverage all channels of information including a **culturally-specific hotline** where people can access reliable and updated information regarding COVID-19 in multiple languages. This hotline number can also help vulnerable communities report abuses from their landlords and could be in collaboration with 211.

From VAN's survey, 45% of respondents expressed an urgent need for best practices to respond to the virus, and these are well-connected community leaders. The general population, and especially English Language Learners, are likely experiencing even greater need, and this lack of knowledge represents a public health threat for the county as a whole.

Nationwide research demonstrates how inequality worsens the spread of the corona virus. A recent New York Times article stated “as coronavirus deepens inequality, inequality worsens its spread,” and the “pandemic is widening social and economic divisions that also make the virus deadlier, a self-reinforcing cycle that experts warn could have consequences for years to come.”

In addition to the nationwide research referenced above, the Coalition of Communities of Color (CCC), and several other culturally specific regional researchers (such as PSU, PAALF, and others) have focused on the communities most frequently glossed over in the data because their numbers in the aggregate are small when compared to the regional totals. However, it is only through the disaggregation of these data that Washington County can truly address the needs of its full community.

As well, there is no need to reinvent the wheel: we encourage Washington County to continue to use the seminal report developed by CCC to inform their decision-making on how to meet the needs of its multicultural residents.

5) UNITE AGAINST HATE

- a) We praise Chair Harrington’s video messages addressing stigmatization and that we are all in this together, and we propose that the county **offer and advertise a safety hotline** (which is not routed to law enforcement) so people who experience racist or xenophobic violence related to COVID-19 can call for assistance. Reports of harassment and assault, as well as rhetoric against Asian Americans, have increased during the new coronavirus outbreak with terms such as the “Chinese virus” that stigmatize Asian communities and endanger the lives of Asian American residents. By offering a safety hotline, Washington County can compassionately respond to the racist, xenophobic backlash from this disease.

6) KEEP THE CENSUS AT THE CENTER

- a) We recognize the importance of taking the 2020 Census and the impact COVID-19 may have on getting a complete and accurate account. We ask that you **consider the hardest to reach** and ensure that they are not left out, and we urge the County to redouble its efforts in this regard and reflect this in census messaging.

Finally, we deem it urgent to ask County Commissioners to **support immigrant families** by advocating on their behalf to ensure that none of the services and emergency response strategies offered by the county be added to the Public Charge Rule.

We know that our recommendations and requests come at a time when so much is being asked of you, but the County’s recent passage of its Equity Resolution leads with race, and we are grateful for the chance to provide these recommendations as a way to embolden your actions. We look forward to working with the Board of Commissioners and County staff during this crisis in our community to help save the lives of people of color, and by virtue of our inter-dependence, the lives of all residents in Washington County. Please let us know how we can support your tireless efforts!

Sincerely,

Marcus C. Mundy, Executive Director



Coalition of
Communities of
Color

Bridget Cooke, Executive Director



ADELANTE
MUJERES

Glenn Montgomery, Executive Director



Vision
Action
Network

Nathan Teske, Executive Director



BIENESTAR

Chi Nguyen, Executive Director



Cc: Board of Commissioners
Stephen Rhodes, Interim County Administrator
Sia Lindstrom, Interim Assistant County Administrator