



## Racial Equity and Justice in Washington County

Since its incorporation in 2001, VAN has gathered people across sectors in Washington County to confront complex, seemingly intractable problems, such as poverty and homelessness. As an independent nonprofit, VAN has created space for dialogue and collaborative engagement. VAN has spent thousands of hours establishing task forces, forming coalitions, commissioning studies, hosting conferences, marching for unity, and promoting philanthropy. But on May 25, it took 8 minutes and 46 seconds to bring the essence of VAN's work into focus. The killing of George Floyd was a seminal moment in time, illuminated by a global pandemic that infects three times as many Black and Brown people and kills twice as many as compared to their White neighbors. These events have made clear that there is nothing more foundational to VAN's mission than to uproot the causes of racial inequity.

Mr. Floyd is one of thousands whose life was taken in the name of law and order, but it seems his killing has captured the eyes and hearts of a nation like no other before him. Just as people were unable to look away from the camera that recorded his desperate pleas and final breaths, those of us who are White can no longer look away and claim the system is working as it should. Just as Covid-19 has disproportionately impacted the lives of thousands of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), Whites can no longer retreat to the comfort of their privilege and remain silently complicit in a culture that disregards, devalues, and dehumanizes these communities.

Admittedly, VAN began its racial equity work in 2016 after a prosecutor in Washington County's District Attorney's Office posted an inflammatory statement on Facebook that smacked of racial profiling, causing outrage among BIPOC communities and rebuke from law enforcement. In response, the [Building Bridges Coalition](#) was formed, and VAN joined its steering committee which hosted the first of what would become an annual event to bring law enforcement together with marginalized communities to break down the barriers of distrust, repair damaged relationships, and form new bonds through shared experience and mutual understanding. That same year, VAN joined the Washington County Research Committee that contributed to the development of [Leading With Race](#), a research report of the Coalition of Communities of Color (CCC). In 2018, VAN held equity dialogues for community leaders, and the following year, along with Adelante Mujeres, Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon (APANO), Bienestar, and CCC, it hosted two widely attended Collaborative Community Forums on racial equity in which over 40% of attendees identified as BIPOC. From those engagements, The [Racial Equity Collaborative](#) (REC) emerged with seed funding from Washington County Administration to build the capacity of BIPOC communities.

The work of racial equity is likely VAN's greatest challenge as an organization because it calls into question its role as an "impartial convener" and it forces the members of its staff and Board, nearly half of whom identify as BIPOC, to acknowledge the uniquely personal and disparate impacts of racism in our lives. This work transcends our institutional roles and cuts to the very core of who we are as human beings. It is also a fierce reminder that nothing new is created without tension, conflict, or disruption. From the recent demonstration in Hillsboro decrying police brutality to the Black Lives Matter protests that have ignited across the globe, it has been a mix of awe-inspiring peaceful protests and disturbing violence and destructive behavior. While not condoning the latter, VAN acknowledges, understands, and accepts the anger, frustration, and despair that people feel, even among those whose motivations may be less than righteous. VAN sees, perhaps for the first time through a different lens, the culmination of

centuries of trauma and oppression experienced by BIPOC friends, co-workers, partners, and neighbors, and the sight of it churns our collective conscience.

As an organization, VAN operates comfortably within the dominant culture from which it was created, but its Board and staff are awakening to the burden of responsibility that comes with this corporal privilege. While VAN remains true to its mission to engage stakeholders across sectors to collaboratively address critical issues in Washington County, the landscape before us has been irrevocably altered. VAN acknowledges the racism embedded in decades of neighborhood redlining and lending discrimination that prevents people of color from home ownership and the accumulation of wealth. VAN recognizes racism in the persistent disinvestment in schools that serve primarily BIPOC students as part of an educational system that is just as segregated as it was in the 1950s. VAN is a witness to a global pandemic that has disproportionately killed thousands of BIPOC people due to underlying health conditions that are a byproduct of racial discrimination. VAN is a witness to the mass incarceration of Black and Brown men and the callous response of those in law enforcement who have ignored their plea when they cried out, "I can't breathe!" VAN admits that the roots of racism run deep, even in its own backyard of Washington County.

Our world is in a state of unrest, and we are all suffering from the events of these past several months. Yet this experience pales in comparison to the continued trauma inflicted upon BIPOC communities that began centuries ago with the decimation of Indigenous people and the enslavement of Africans. VAN can no longer claim neutrality as an innocent, well-intentioned bystander. It can no longer be complicit by ignoring those aspects of the systems and structures that are imbued with racism and emboldened by an ideology of White supremacy.

Instead, VAN will lean into the discomfort of reckoning with the shameful chapters of history and its own mistakes as an organization, as well as the missteps it will likely make moving forward. VAN will hold courageous space for the difficult conversations that lie ahead and continue to nurture relationships with BIPOC communities and amplify their voices. And as a convener, VAN invites every city, every sector, every organization, and every person to collaborate on this journey to strive for racial equity and justice in Washington County. Our future as a community depends upon it.



Andrew McGough  
Board Chair



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