

The Capacity for Change: Washington State's Department of Social and Human Services Transformation Efforts to Reduce Intergenerational Poverty

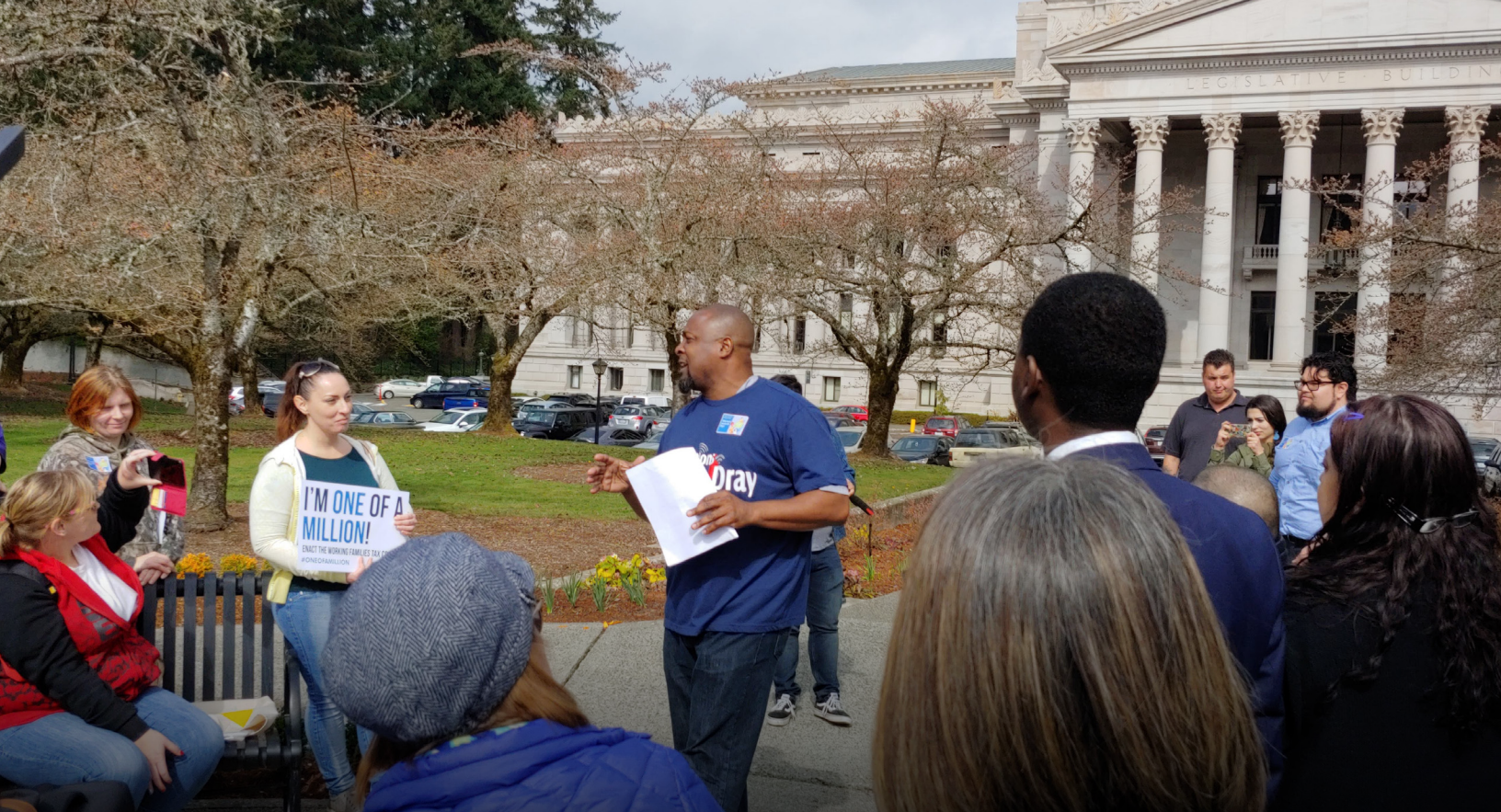
A Case Study Developed for the Kresge Foundation's Next
Generation Human Services Initiative





Contents

- Background 4
- Creating the vision: reduce intergenerational poverty by half by 2025 6
- Building new internal capacities to reduce poverty7**
 - Developing a Data-Driven System for Policy Change..... 7
 - Redesigning Eligibility Systems and Service to Respect Customers..... 9
 - Dismantling Organizational Hierarchies and Uplifting Race 9
- Deepening partnerships to reduce poverty11**
 - Transforming Case Management and Embracing a Two-Generation Approach..... 11
- Bringing stakeholders together for systems change13**
 - The Creation of the Poverty Reduction Work Group 13
 - Aligning Agendas: Meeting the Challenge to Adopt Fresh Perspectives..... 13
 - Sharing Power: Centering Customer Voices 14
 - Building a Movement: Managing the Pace of Change 15
 - Moving Forward: Building Accountability for Outcomes 17
- Exhibits.....19**
- Launch Transforming Case Management20**
- Acknowledgments and Credits21**
- Case Discussion Questions.....22**



The Capacity for Change:

Washington State's Department of Social and Human Services Transformation Efforts to Reduce Intergenerational Poverty

In 2013, David Stillman, Assistant Secretary of the Economic Services Administration (ESA) within the Washington Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS), looked out his office window in Olympia as the last rays of sunlight graced the distant slopes of the Olympic Mountains. It was time to head home, but he felt the pull of reports still on his desk.

Across the nation, it was supposed to be good times economically, yet Stillman saw his client base growing. The most vulnerable people in Washington State were slipping into deeper poverty, a troubling trajectory for the career human services expert who had always been bullish on the future.

He recalled an encounter with a young man at DSHS a couple of years prior:

"I can't make my child support payments," the man said. Stillman gently reminded the customer of his legal obligation. The man threw up his hands. "What's the good of making payments if then I can't feed my kids when I see them?" he cried.

The words had landed like a punch to Stillman, not only because they highlighted the grinding poverty many ESA customers were experiencing, but also because the man had no idea that he could enroll in nutrition assistance within the organization. The meeting starkly illustrated for Stillman a central conflict that too many people interfacing with the ESA experienced: they were not moving out of poverty, and in some cases, they were faring worse.

From some perspectives, the DSHS was at best supplying Band-Aids. According to Lori Pfingst, Senior Director at the ESA, human services systems "were never designed to promote social and economic mobility," but rather "to manage people's poverty."

“This will not be the legacy of the ESA,” Stillman thought as he grabbed his keys and headed home.

It was a mantra Stillman had been repeating since meeting the man struggling over child support. And it had propelled him forward in seeking new ways of working to not only decrease poverty but also increase economic mobility and family wellbeing for ESA customers.

Part of that work meant reforming operations within the ESA and part of it meant partnering to implement system-wide accountability for improving outcomes for customers across the human services system. As he worked inside the ESA, Stillman also began meeting with an ad-hoc group of agency leaders and others looking to usher in such shared accountability. In 2015, they together articulated a bold and hopeful goal: *Reduce poverty statewide by half by 2025 in a way that eliminates disparities.*¹

Stillman immediately made this the goal of the ESA. In 2017, the Governor made poverty reduction a strategic priority for the state.

Yet to achieve these breakthrough outcomes, a major transformation had to not only be envisioned but also sustainably implemented. Stillman and the leadership team at the ESA had to build their capacity to deliver on the vision – first within the ESA and then in collaboration with partner organizations. This transformation in capacity would require designing new policies, programs, and services; leveraging data and analytics in new ways; changing the way people in the organization worked; and, importantly, redefining the limits – in both practice and mindset – of what the ESA could achieve.

Key to their success would be navigating several pressing questions: What ecosystems, programs, and practices could be leveraged to transform their siloed, regulatory system into one of shared accountability for reducing poverty and inequality? What personal and structural values, power, and leadership shifts would need to occur to enact a person-centered, equity-focused plan to reduce intergenerational poverty? How should the leadership team manage the pace and scope of change, both at the agency and the systems levels? Finally, if new levels of shared accountability were established, how might they embed the practice of sharing power with people experiencing poverty?

Despite facing these difficult questions, Stillman was eager to begin the transformation. “Part of my job is to challenge that limit,” Stillman said. “Because the human tendency is to narrow that amount of change, it’s to seek regularity, this place where everything is predictable and reliable. But in the context of looking at our outcome measures, that doesn’t change any of the outcomes in the way that we want. If we want better outcomes, we need to change our systems. And that requires pushing on those boundaries.”

Background

In 2015, more than 2 million Washingtonians were struggling to make ends meet, and an undue burden of poverty was carried by people of color. Fifty percent (50%) of Indigenous and Native Washingtonians experienced the highest rates of hardship, followed by 49% of Latinx and 45% Black residents, with rates double the state average of 23%.² Intergenerational poverty was common – 46 percent of kids in families receiving food supports in 1997 were on food assistance as adults in 2017.³

And DSHS was taking heat. The ESA is the largest of the seven DSHS administrations with 4,000 staff and an operating budget of \$2.2 billion (2019-2021 biennium) to serve 2.4 million people annually in programs ranging from food and cash assistance to disability services. Everyone expected the ESA to provide an adequate safety net for Washingtonians - the mission of the DSHS was to “transform lives by enabling individuals and families to thrive,” – but the policies

1 The “without disparities qualifier was added by Stillman when he embedded the goal in the ESA strategic plan. For the purposes of this case, we included it from the beginning as the state eventually adopted the entire goal.

2 In Washington, it is common practice to define “economic hardship” as 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). 2015 American Community Survey Data, Table B17024.

3 “Blueprint for a Just and Equitable Future” The Poverty Reduction Workgroup (accessed June 23, 2021) available at <https://dismantlepovertyinwa.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Final10yearPlan.pdf>

underwriting ESA programs made it hard to deliver on the assistance to achieve the ESA's outcomes and move people out of poverty.

New and longstanding policy, program, and funding decisions also inhibited many Washingtonians' economic mobility. Nationally, an uptick in work requirements to obtain assistance and time limit sanctions pushed many into poverty. In Washington, departments were siloed, missing opportunities to provide customers with an array of needed supports. The agency also experienced devastating budget cuts during and after the Great Recession, compromising cash assistance and other resources at a time when Washingtonians needed them the most. Washington's tax system further exacerbated inequality- people with the lowest incomes pay 18 percent of their incomes to local governments, whereas the highest earners contribute only 3 percent. The wealthy not only "save more," but also contribute proportionally less of their incomes towards tax-supported government programs to reduce inequality. ⁴ And racism and paternalism were endemic in human services. Many customers were vilified, hamstrung to jumping through hoops with little to no economic mobility to show for it. Local and national movements highlighting inequality and racism, such as Black Lives Matter and Occupy Wall Street, amplified those stories and made ending these practices even more urgent.

At the same time, there were bright spots. Momentum was growing nationally around an intergenerational approach to ending poverty, and it came with strong data on Return on Investment (ROI): For every dollar invested in "reducing childhood poverty, the country would save at least seven dollars with respect to the economic costs of poverty."⁵ In Washington State, "the economy would be nearly \$40 billion stronger if poverty were reduced and racial disparities in income were eliminated."⁶ Twice, legislators pushed bipartisan efforts establishing state-level accountability for poverty reduction that only narrowly failed. And Governor Jay Inslee expanded a focus on accountability in state government by founding Results Washington in 2013, with a mission "to improve state government by approaching complex issues through collaboration, performance management, and continuous improvement,"⁷ including accountability for poverty reduction.

Finally, the ESA's unique team of David Stillman, Babs Roberts (Director of the Community Services Division), and Lori Pfingst helped to deepen the transformation of the ESA and hasten the launch of statewide accountability for poverty reduction. Of particular note was their commitment to partnering. They sought needed legislative support, the mobilizing ability of community groups and advocates, the voice of people experiencing poverty, and the collective power for change that other agencies could bring to the work. The trio also worked skillfully together. They united around a shared commitment to reducing poverty and increasing family wellbeing and economic mobility. They also fostered a collaborative workstyle and deep trust. While they honored and leveraged their unique skillsets as they pursued transformation – Stillman was a strategic visionary with lofty goals, Roberts the convener of staff and community partners, and Pfingst the storyteller, able to powerfully braid data and the voices of people navigating human services systems – they also gelled around a deep sense of servant leadership, hope, and optimism that change is possible. All three described themselves as learners open to the unexpected and said that they "don't have all the answers," and that their partnership enabled them to courageously face naysayers as well as rally the community to work for better outcomes. Pfingst recalled the support she felt as the three geared up to launch agency and state transformation. She knew working towards the goal in meaningful ways would cause friction in human services among folks who were not ready to disrupt the status quo. "If I challenge people, will you have my back?" she asked Stillman. Smiling, she said of that moment and onward: "He always does."

4 Because Washington's income and sales tax are not proportional to incomes, people experiencing poverty provide on average 18 percent of their income to the state systems of taxation whereas the wealthy pay only 3 percent, deepening inequality, and lessening the contributions the wealthy can make to funding human services and other critical governmental programs. "How Bad are Washington State Taxes? The Worst in the Country, Apparently," National Public Radio (accessed June 23, 2021) Available at <https://kuow.org/stories/Washington-Terrible-Ten>

5 "Estimating the Economic Cost of Childhood Poverty in the United States," Michael McLaughlin and Mark R. Rank, Social Work Research v2(2), 2018 (accessed September 29 2021)

6 "Blueprint, pg. 13.

7 "Mission Statement" Results Washington (accessed June 23, 2021) Available at <https://results.wa.gov/>

Creating the vision: reduce intergenerational poverty by half by 2025

By 2013, Stillman was ready to move the ESA from operating within a scarcity mindset to embracing a robust vision for child, adult, and family wellbeing. He also knew state-level collaboration was necessary to comprehensively address root causes of poverty and reimagine health and human services as an ecosystem of supports to foster intergenerational economic mobility and wellbeing for Washingtonians.

For years, the ESA had collaborated under Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF, also known as WorkFirst in Washington) legislation to prepare ESA customers for jobs. Stillman knew such collaboration could be scaled to include more agencies, comprehensive goals, and supports. In 2015, he convened a group of leaders from the Employment Security Department, the State Workforce Board, the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, the Department of Commerce, and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. They were joined by two legislators – a House Democrat and a Senate Republican – and the bipartisan support reflected growing interest across sectors to reduce poverty. The group made “Shared Upward Mobility” their north star for state-level accountability for Washingtonians experiencing poverty and built off the energy of the social justice movements, ROI data, and legislative attempts to set an ambitious goal: *Reduce poverty statewide by half by 2025 in a way that eliminates disparities.*

Stillman embedded the goal in the ESA’s strategic plan. While Pfingst and Roberts were ready to run with the goal, the enormous lift ruffled the feathers of skeptical staff. “Not everyone thought poverty reduction was our job,” Pfingst said. Others worried the definition of poverty as 200 percent of the federal poverty level was an impossibly high standard and were concerned that the equity qualifier meant the ESA could not rely on those already closest to success to meet the goal.

“Join me in failure,” Stillman affectionately, yet pointedly, responded to such staff. He knew this bold charge would intimidate some because it required new ways of working together. Yet, he was also confident that even if the 50 percent reduction of poverty was not achieved, embracing the goal and pairing it with a statewide accountability effort would bring unprecedented progress at the ESA and across the human services system.

The goal both reflected and further inspired energy outside of the ESA to promote state accountability for poverty reduction. In a moment of serendipity, according to Pfingst, growing frustration amongst leaders in the advocacy community, nonprofit sector, and government coalesced in 2015, bringing groups together that had independently been working for years to incite state accountability. Organizations began sharing the 2025 goal, and legislators started talking about putting a task force together to meaningfully study poverty reduction.

Many within the increasingly cohesive antipoverty community, along with Stillman, Roberts, and Pfingst, envisioned bringing the goal to life by “reimagining health and human services through the eyes of the people we serve in the communities in which they reside. And to set up a learning environment where we worked alongside our community partners to figure out where we can improve and maximize the system as it exists but also work toward the system that we need,”⁸ Pfingst said.

“I wonder if we’re going to be able to do this,” she remembered thinking. “But I told David, ‘I am hell bent on getting us to that goal.’”

8 Several quotes in this paper came from a grant DSHS wrote to participate in a Kresge Foundation Leadership Program. If not footnoted, all other quotes are from direct interviews. This statement came from the Washington State DSHS Grant Application to the Kresge Foundation, 2018.



Building new internal capacities to reduce poverty

Developing a Data-Driven System for Policy Change

To prepare the ESA to meet the 2025 goal, Stillman knew he would have to grow the ESA staff's technical capacities. Simultaneously, he would need to lead his staff through adaptive changes to reimagine their role in fighting injustice and promoting economic mobility for Washingtonians experiencing poverty. He turned to data to launch both efforts.

The ESA had a cutting-edge, in-house data shop with a dozen statisticians and researchers; the team produced hundreds of pages of disaggregated data annually. Yet, for all the internal data sharing, the ESA had not amplified the data externally – missing a significant opportunity to contribute to system-wide collaboration around poverty reduction and economic mobility. In 2015, Stillman directed ESA staff to begin sharing data with advocates who had the 2025 goal in mind and “needed to do storytelling backed up with data to move the Legislature” on antipoverty policies.

The trio – Stillman, Pflugst, and Roberts – also began pushing for a deeper examination of disaggregated data to inform public conversations about ending pernicious, poverty-inducing practices. For example, Stillman's staff began examining the data of parents whose driver's licenses were suspended for delinquency in paying child support (a policy states have some leeway in enforcing). They found disproportionate impacts on men of color and zero benefits for anyone. “It's over policing,” driving these customers deeper into poverty, Stillman said. “Let's lift that up through conferences and papers and communicating with our authorizing environment and beg the question across this country whether this tool is actually doing anything beneficial for the children that we're here to be serving.”

As Stillman, Roberts, and Pflugst partnered with advocates and others to share disaggregated data that could incite greater accountability for poverty reduction, they also dedicated time to explaining to ESA staff and stakeholders why they were making these moves. They reminded staff they were not simply producers of data – they were championing an end to discrimination and injustice. “Now there's an awareness of why we are taking the actions we are taking – in order to ameliorate this baked-in discrimination that's harming people disproportionately,” Stillman said. “None of us are here to be bureaucrats. We think of ourselves as ‘advocates’ – we have a bigger mission in mind.”



The trio also modeled how to own failure and use it to demand collective responsibility for poverty alleviation. In 2018, antipoverty advocates requested data on citizens who had been denied an extension of welfare benefits. When the ESA studied the data, they learned that Black and Native American customers disproportionately suffered from having their benefits terminated. It was “systemic discrimination,” Stillman said.

Other leaders might have been tempted to keep the data private and preserve their reputation – at least until they could discern the “why”. It took Stillman, Roberts, and Pfingst only a moment to decide what to do. They released the data.

“We could work on discerning the ‘why’ together,” Stillman said.

While advocates became irate and pushed the Legislature to address the issue, the ESA investigated the causes of disproportionate termination of benefits. They discovered errors and biases were contributing factors. In response, the ESA established additional equity, empathy, and race and ethnicity trainings for workforce case managers, developed new procedural trainings for staff, and created supervisor signoff policies on all terminations. However, they knew error and bias did not account for all the unjust terminations, and advocates and the ESA launched dialogue around getting at deeper roots of the disparities. The ESA led a public conversation exploring how different communities disclose medical, mental health, domestic violence issues, and other extension-granting information and to whom. Because of these efforts, in 2019 the Legislature ended the practice of permanently removing families from welfare receipt and funded additional ways to qualify for an extension, such as experiencing homelessness⁹.

Acknowledging and addressing their failures served a strategic purpose, enabling the ESA to lead urgent public dialogue around critical issues such as discriminatory practices and unjust outcomes for families experiencing poverty, root causes of poverty, and the need to partner more broadly around antipoverty and family wellbeing efforts. Stillman recalled his public call-to-action around the welfare terminations data: “Is it all the ESA’s fault? Or is it a larger set of problems? If you think it is the latter, we have to explore that together. We also have a poverty [reduction] goal and there’s no way we’re going to get that done alone,” he said.

9 While the ESA and DSHS have worked to expand access to welfare supports, some in Washington remained critical in early 2020 of cuts to cash assistance and choices made in how to allocate supports. Yet the landscape continued to shift in 2020, when COVID-era policy shifts ushered in TANF extensions and reduced work participation sanctions, stabilizing many vulnerable families. “Cash Assistance for Families has Plummeted in Washington Even as Poverty Remains High” Via Crosscut. Available at <https://crosscut.com/2020/01/cash-assistance-families-has-plummeted-wa-even-poverty-remains-high>

Redesigning Eligibility Systems and Service to Respect Customers

In addition to redesigning their approach to data, ESA leadership believed the organization could not make progress on dramatically cutting poverty without remodeling their eligibility systems and customer service.

The Great Recession had created a perfect storm. By 2011, more customers were enrolling in benefits in the ESA's Community Services Division (CSD) at the same time that state budget cuts meant ESA had fewer resources to manage the surge. Intake staff were feeling the squeeze; that stress, coupled with biases many people have about people experiencing poverty, as well as intake policies geared towards poverty management rather than wellbeing and mobility, often resulted in dehumanizing experiences for customers in their most vulnerable moments. Juanita Maestas, a human services customer and leader in the statewide poverty reduction movement, reflected on her experience before the CSD reforms. "I was once told by an intake worker, 'If you fill out this one answer wrong, I can push this button and delete your whole case, and you would have to come back and reapply for benefits.' And I couldn't even understand what the form was asking."

To not only reduce poverty but also increase family wellbeing, Roberts knew that her team had to work faster and more efficiently, as well as see customers as whole, dignified people with unlimited capability.

Intake workers had little oversight; they had their own caseloads (causing long wait times for customers who could only work with their assigned staff member), and the efficiency and quality of their service was not holistically measured. To change this, Roberts eliminated caseloads and instead instituted shared workloads, meaning intake staff would assist the next customer in line. She also began using customer survey responses to track intake workers' efficiency, level of service, and respectful interactions with customers.

When adaptive challenges arose, with middle managers feeling bereft of the ability to lead, and intake staff feeling disrespected, and a huge loss when their caseloads disappeared, Roberts launched a culture change campaign to emphasize respect for staff and the people they serve. The campaign reinforced that the CSD was "one team" with a shared mission of economic mobility, and highlighted the key role intake workers played as partners with the leadership team. Over time, the campaign incorporated trainings on brain science, biases, subliminal reactions, and importantly, specific tools for engaging with customers and colleagues. Staff practiced navigating challenging conversations, adopted new strategies to share information with clients and manage their tone of voice, and even instituted hand signals for needed "time outs." In addition, high-level tools and maturity models on launching new ideas and initiatives were introduced to inspire middle managers and intake staff to lead.

Ultimately, managers and staff took over the campaign and created REDI – the Respect, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion program. Staff established initiatives and led conversations focused on race, systemic racism, and respectful, anti-racist work with customers. After the ESA established the 2025 poverty reduction goal, staff were even more motivated to engage in this work. The team began developing an equity analysis tool in policy and procedure development, as well as a REDI curriculum. "Our staff saw this as an opportunity to be seen and for their voices to be heard," Roberts observed. At the same time, surveys of customers and staff alike showed a statistically significant uptick in "feeling respected." Stillman credited the training programs with establishing a foundation for viewing customers and colleagues as having inherent dignity. "We believe we are of equal value to each other, that one of us is not higher or lower than each other," he said, verbalizing a mindset that would become critical in launching Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion work across the ESA.

Dismantling Organizational Hierarchies and Uplifting Race

To grow the ESA into an organization that could promote the autonomy and economic mobility of customers, especially those historically marginalized, there was still work to be done internally around understanding and dismantling racist practices, and flattening hierarchies to promote inclusion. In 2015, the Diversity office in DSHS was renamed the Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. This change signaled urgent priorities: Acknowledgment of racism and power differentials in the organization and in service delivery, and a permeation of equity throughout.

Throughout DSHS, staff were invited to participate in diversity and equity credentialing, and all staff received mandatory training about institutional and structural racism. The training emphasized how discrimination in housing,



medical treatment, lending, higher education, and other areas that were critical to wealth building and wellbeing converged to largely exclude communities of color from economic mobility. DSHS articulated a clear goal, that “race must not determine socioeconomic outcomes, all people should thrive, and those most impacted by inequity should have a say in the development of programs they utilize.”¹⁰ The agency also required EDI principles and goals in the strategic plans of all seven DSHS administrations. The plans were so robust the governor used them and the certification courses to “train all state executive branch leadership management.”¹¹

Rather than provide top-down EDI training within the ESA specifically, Stillman decided to listen, learn, and flip hierarchies, centering the voices of staff in determining EDI priorities. The ESA established a voluntary EDI Community of Practice (COP). The 350-strong, staff-led COP determines what staff will learn and discuss in monthly meetings, plans and executes an annual EDI conference and other initiatives, and group-nominated members address the ESA leadership team monthly to advise them on EDI priorities, problems, and solutions.

The COP helped to develop a binding ESA “Declaration on Anti-Racism, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion,” (Exhibit B) signed by all eight ESA Directors that includes an acknowledgement of institutional racism and a set of organizational commitments ranging from analysis of institutional practices to workplace audits of opportunity barriers. At monthly leadership meetings, COP team members and leadership discuss progress on one of the 15 binding commitments.

The COP signals to all ESA staff that their voices matter and are key to reforming the workplace. As Stillman observed, changing the leadership structure to integrate the COP “generates great conversations and generates better decisions about the work that we do.” Dismantling hierarchies and “nurturing voice” would later become essential for the ESA in deepening partnerships with local service providers, and when leading statewide accountability in poverty reduction.

10 DSHS outcomes goals for staff and customers were borrowed largely from the Center for Social Inclusion. Washington State DSHS Grant Application to the Kresge Foundation, 2018.

11 Washington State DSHS Grant Application to the Kresge Foundation, 2018.



Deepening partnerships to reduce poverty

Transforming Case Management and Embracing a Two-Generation Approach

In addition to developing new internal capabilities related to data; customer service and efficiency; and diversity, equity, and inclusion, the ESA also embarked on a journey to transform the services they were offering to customers to move from managing poverty to advancing social and economic mobility.

In 2015, Roberts and her CSD staff launched a nascent effort to transform CSD's case management approach to include two-generation strategies¹² and strengths-based coaching, which they knew would be key in meeting the 2025 poverty reduction and family wellbeing goal. To enact this shift, they believed it would be critical to not only promote more uniformity in culturally sensitive case service delivery but also to foster the unique voices of customers, local offices, and community-based organizations. Research and data from 16 pilot programs they had funded across the state found that programs that included customers in co-design had better engagement and were more sustainable, so they enacted efforts to understand and ultimately empower clients. From 2015 to 2019, Roberts incorporated feedback from these pilots as well as from caseworkers across the state to develop caseworker trainings on diversity and equity, and increasing the efficiency of administrative functions. While COVID-19 disrupted opportunities to implement advanced training, in 2021, the ESA began working with local office directors to provide these workshops, recognizing that local directors were trusted, understood how poverty manifested itself in their communities, and could provide strategies to amplify customers' strengths. According to Roberts, the work represented a shift towards viewing customers and even communities as individuals and providing "warm, wrap-around referrals and coaching."¹³

Alongside the ESA's efforts to transform their case management practices, the team worked to elevate their understanding of and ability to implement two-generation programs to boost mobility and the wellbeing of human services customers. In 2019, when the ESA received funding from the Kresge Foundation to study a set of two-generation, person-centered, equity-focused human services models to potentially scale they were ready to partner with the four community-based organizations across the state that they had met during earlier listening tours and forums.

12 According to Ascend at the Aspen Institute, "Two-generation (2Gen) approaches build family well-being by intentionally and simultaneously working with children and the adults in their lives together. The 2Gen mindset and model recognizes whole family units, as families define themselves, and meaningfully engages parents and caregivers in designing policies and programs that affect them. By working with families to solve problems, access new resources, and sharpen existing talents and skills, the 2Gen approach creates experiences and opportunities for all families to reach their full potential and for communities to thrive economically and socially. Many programs focus solely on the child or the parent. The 2Gen approach does not focus exclusively on either children or adults because their well-being is directly interconnected." "What is 2-Gen?" Ascend at the Aspen Institute. (Accessed September 5, 2021) Available at <https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/two-generation/what-is-2gen/>

13 In 2020, Covid interrupted the Transforming Case Initiative and the ESA is continuing to implement the program today.

These four “NextGen” programs are not only proving that community providers can teach the state how to deliver equitable, targeted, and effective services, but also challenging the ESA to grow capacity to redesign culturally sensitive services that foster customer voice and dismantle practices that limit the ability of local partners to innovate.

For example, the Ttáwaxt Birth Justice Center, an Indigenous, women-led non-profit nestled in the heart of Yakama Nation and serving Indigenous peoples, is leading the way in honoring Indigenous cultural practices to promote maternal health and decrease infant mortality rates.¹⁴ The organization centers traditional knowledge and practices in their community clinic to support women and children in the community. They design services to connect pregnant women with elders, offer other forms of prenatal care such as Indigenous birth classes and doulas, and will provide an apothecary for Indigenous healing practices. Jessica Whitehawk, the founder of Ttáwaxt Birth Justice Center, is at the forefront of decolonizing data and health and human services and is an invaluable partner to DSHS. “Ttáwaxt’s work represents the critical intersection of social and economic mobility with the social determinants of health, and shows the value of elevating Indigenous-led solutions to improve health and human services. Getting the next generation of human services right demands that we center the expertise, knowledge, and leadership of people and communities for whom we’ve gotten it wrong,” Pfingst said.

Another NextGen partner, United Way of Pierce County (Tacoma, WA), has launched work that is informing the ESA’s efforts to integrate customer voice and autonomy in developing economic mobility plans. Through a series of forums called *Resilient Pierce County*, the United Way convened residents to understand neighborhood-level adversities and strengths and create a series of service prototypes that human services experts analyzed and further developed. Now, the United Way is re-engaging residents to refine these models. In the fall of 2021, the United Way will also manage a pilot program focused on family empowerment.¹⁵ As part of this program, they will provide 100 low-income, single parents with \$500 a month for one year to do with as they warrant. The hope is that this program may offer a strengths-based model to inform the state on “how they can make programs work for the people that are being impacted as opposed to, ‘This is the easiest way for us as a system to keep track of it,’” Dona Ponepinto, President and CEO of United Way of Pierce County, said.

“We are working with partners to gather knowledge they need for their own community and use that information to make the vision the community wants for themselves and use it in ways that isn’t going to perpetuate racism and harm,”

- Jessica Whitehawk, Founder
Ttawaxt Birth Justice

The ESA’s internal and customer-facing work propelled the agency into a new mindset and way of working. On the one hand was deeper understanding of systemic racism and its pernicious effects on economic opportunity and human services delivery, and a new and explicit commitment to dismantling those practices within the ESA. On the other hand, procedural efficiencies and transformation efforts leading to a focus on customers as individuals with unique dreams and capacities (as well as challenges) promoted new forms of coaching and collaboration with local partners to amplify the mobility of each customer. Central in all efforts was fostering conditions where those experiencing poverty or exclusion were key in working to end it. And that practice in particular lay a crucial foundation for success when the ESA led a statewide initiative to cut poverty by half by 2025.

14 American Indian/ Alaskan Native Infant mortality rates are almost double that of non-Hispanic Whites, according to the US Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health. “Infant Mortality and American Indians/ Alaska Natives” (Accessed September 10, 2021) available at <https://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/omh/browse.aspx?lvl=4&lvlid=38>

15 The UW of Pierce County will participate in the national Mayors for a Guaranteed Income Project, <https://www.mayorsforagi.org/>



Bringing stakeholders together for systems change

The Creation of the Poverty Reduction Work Group

After working for years on increasing the ESA's technical and adaptive capacity to meet the 2025 poverty reduction goal, the trio's opportunity to dramatically expand their efforts by engaging a diverse set of partners came in 2018. A few months prior, in November of 2017, Gov. Jay Inslee issued a directive establishing a statewide *Poverty Reduction Work Group (PRWG)*. His mandate reflected how entrenched the ESA's poverty reduction goal – and the collective opportunity to promote wellbeing – had become in just a few years:

The serious consequences of living in long-term poverty include persistent, frequent, and severe health problems, increased family stress and negative events, risk for homelessness, and housing instability... Now is the time to invest our resources and energy to make Washington a place where all residents and communities have the opportunity to thrive and reach their full potential.¹⁶

In 2018, Inslee asked Stillman (with advising from Pfingst and Roberts) to join Diane Klontz, Assistant Director of Community Services and Housing at the Department of Commerce, and Tim Probst, Director of Workforce Development Initiatives for the Employment Security Department, in co-leading this new work group. The PRWG would be comprised of human services, government, and nonprofit leaders, as well as human services customers. Meeting monthly, the group would discern how human services systems had failed people experiencing poverty (Exhibit D), and how leaders would need to work differently to enact systems change. Their objective was to develop a ten-year plan for economic mobility and family wellbeing for Washingtonians experiencing poverty. The PRWG was also responsible for advising the new WorkFirst Oversight Task Force made up of members of the legislative and executive branches, which was established by the Legislature to help ensure state-level accountability for poverty reduction.¹⁷

16 "Directive of the Governor 17-13" (Accessed June 24, 2021) Available at <https://www.governor.wa.gov/sites/default/files/directive/17-12%20-%20Poverty%20Reduction.pdf>

17 "HB 1482 2017-2018" (accessed July 1, 2021). Available at <https://app.leg.wa.gov/billsummary?BillNumber=1482&Year=2017>.

Aligning Agendas: Meeting the Challenge to Adopt Fresh Perspectives

At the first PRWG meeting, the leadership team expressed respect for the work the 45 members had already accomplished in their careers, but also set the expectation that they would have to achieve more together. Collectively, they had to develop a plan with bold, new approaches that centered race and social justice and lifted-up the voices of customers with lived experience. They needed to work collaboratively to enact new strategies to undo institutional racism, help people exit poverty, and even prevent the occurrence of poverty. This would require the strong leaders and experts comprising the PRWG to reject some of their own long-standing practices that had failed to deliver on mobility goals.

The PRWG began by adopting a learning approach and a commitment to sharing power in developing the plan. The group frequently referenced the ESA's poverty reduction goal; however, arriving at consensus on strategies to reduce poverty and increase family wellbeing was challenging. Early on, some members faced difficulty letting go of their own ideas, a tendency common in leaders in any industry, Stillman maintained.

He asked the group to refocus: "Even if you're not giving up your perspective, who is willing to set your perspective aside and fully participate in this learning and growing and shaping we are all committed to?" Klontz stressed that working well does not mean total agreement but rather that members understand each other's positions and agree to center racial equity in the PRWG's recommendations, to craft policies that would alter the landscape and enable economic mobility for customers.¹⁸

"What is important here is treating people with dignity and treating them as guests and customers that we care about and want to help."

- Tim Probst,
Director of Workforce Development Initiatives,
Washington State Employment Security Department

At times, Stillman, Klontz, and Probst had to model that approach, taking turns letting go of their ideas in front of the general committee. It worked well, and members came around to trusting "that the group as a whole is going to find the answers. They may not be the answers you thought they were going to find, but they're going to be really good answers," Probst said.

Members who could not embrace work to advance racial equity, or who were uncomfortable sharing power with people experiencing poverty, did not stay the course. Pfingst said, "We would meet one-on-one. I'd try to explain why this is so important. Ultimately, of the two or three who left, we decided, 'Ok, if you cannot be here then maybe you should not be here. We cannot change the work to make you more comfortable.'"

Sharing Power: Centering Customer Voices

In October 2018, the PRWG expanded to include a steering committee of human services customers to set the direction, strategy, and goals for the PRWG, conduct independent research, and challenge ideas. Although the general committee (comprised of the original 45 traditional leaders and experts) decided in the first PRWG meeting that they wanted to incorporate such leadership, it took them eight months to develop an RFP, fundraise to compensate the group, and meet with each of the 22 steering committee members before onboarding them.

Once it was established, integrating the steering committee, and establishing trust, became critical. The majority of steering committee members had been harmed by the agencies represented on the PRWG, and asking these customers to challenge the general committee's ideas – an important component of the job – required trust. As Stillman shared, expecting human services customers to trust the general committee, and for general committee members to agree to not rescind power when things got uncomfortable – was novel. The flipped hierarchy would only work, Pfingst believed, if the steering committee believed the general committee respected them and wanted to undo harm members had experienced.

Stillman, Roberts, and Pfingst's experience at the ESA in centering the voices of people historically excluded from

18 For additional details, please see Exhibit E: The Race Equity toolkit, Available at https://www.governor.wa.gov/sites/default/files/documents/PRWG_ToolkitPPT_12-20-2018.pdf

economic and social wellbeing proved invaluable in leading this effort. Pfingst spent the first two steering committee meetings (absent the general committee) listening as the steering committee shared the myriad dehumanizing experiences they had endured while navigating human services agencies, many of which were represented on the PRWG. As the co-chair of the steering committee, Juanita Maestas described it, “Lori [Pfingst] took hits from us. She listened, and that’s what people needed – somebody to listen to us. So, we started bringing back [ideas and recommendations] to the larger group, and we would explain ‘This isn’t right. This is what people are going through.’” Before the workgroup and steering committee collaboration, “There was nobody actually to speak up and say, ‘Here I am, here is my story, are you ready to listen?’” she said.

As Pfingst put it, “I believe in the principles of how we do our work because it centers people’s humanity -- we believed the stories they shared. Too many times, people experiencing poverty are judged, vilified, or stigmatized for their circumstances -- the PRWG chose not to do that, and it was pivotal.”

“I believe in the principles of how we do our work because it centers people’s humanity -- we believed the stories they shared. Too many times, people experiencing poverty are judged, vilified, or stigmatized for their circumstances -- the PRWG chose not to do that, and it was pivotal.”

- Lori Pfingst

Senior Director at the ESA, human services systems

General committee members also had to experience personal transformation for the power sharing to work. Transformations began when general committee members began listening to personal stories and the struggles the steering committee encountered in human services programs. Having space to listen, Klontz said, alongside deeper learning about institutional racism and historical trauma, helped general committee members understand it was largely different circumstances and opportunities – not intellect or effort – that separated the two groups.

Systems change, Pfingst said, is largely “us” changing our mindset, and then “choosing to work differently together to disrupt the status quo,” and a racial equity consultant helped further these transformations (Exhibit E). Both committees participated in racial caucusing facilitated by the consultant. In these forums, white people could ask questions and raise ideas and solutions without causing further trauma to BIPOC folks in the PRWG, and BIPOC members could garner the support and solidarity necessary to lead conversations that could be tense and exhausting. As general committee member Sen. Manka Dinghra described it, when members were forced to reflect on how they were all complicit in perpetuating racism and inequality, the initial conversations were “polarizing, and very difficult.” However, the caucusing facilitated self-reflections, and sharing “pivoted” the tone. Over time, members became both more vulnerable and bolder in navigating respectful conflict and in their proposals. General committee members shed the idea they had to know everything, though getting there was painful at times.

At one point, one member, shaken over the stories shared by steering committee members asked, “Have I been doing it wrong this whole time?” “Maybe,” Pfingst responded. “I think all of us have played a role in upholding the status quo...which means it’s up to all of us to disrupt it.”

General committee members came to trust that the steering committee were the experts. “I relied on them to say, ‘You’re way off base. You’re not hearing it right. This is what we live every day,’” Klontz said. For example, during one meeting, steering committee members suggested that housing stability programs should prioritize helping new renters develop strong credit, rather than establishing home ownership plans, a suggestion of the general committee. In another meeting, the steering committee cautioned against using “the sad story”¹⁹ to describe human services customers, instead wanting the focus to remain on structural factors inciting poverty.

As a result of the steering committee’s engagement and the authentic collaboration and trust established, the PRWG developed original strategies and recommendations that were not present in previous antipoverty plans.

19 PRWG minutes, (Accessed July 1, 2021) Included as an attachment in link to July 2019 PRWG Minutes. Available at <https://www.governor.wa.gov/issues/issues/health-care-human-services/poverty-reduction-work-group>



They proposed bold ideas such as reallocating funding “upstream” to community organizations and a Universal Basic Income (UBI) pilot, universal broadband internet, integrating behavioral health into early education curriculums, and providing funding for culturally responsive foster homes, among hundreds of other suggestions. In 2019, some skeptics said these recommendations were farfetched – a claim many are walking back in 2021, post-COVID-19 and the racial reckonings incited by the murder of George Floyd. Today, these recommendations work, Pfingst said, “because we had the authentic voices of people experiencing poverty and centered race and social justice at the heart of this work.”

Building a Movement: Managing the Pace of Change

In addition to centering the voice of human services customers and seeking their leadership, the general committee embarked on a journey to learn more about the root causes of poverty – especially intergenerational poverty, the permeation of racism across sectors, and research-based interventions. As Dinghra put it, “the emphasis was on creating robust, strong families, and not just helping people survive, but thrive and have a plan for self-sufficiency.” This demanded a deeper understanding, and new perspectives, which would spark fresh ideas.

Consequently, non-traditional human services partners like the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, the Health Care Authority, and the Office of the Attorney General joined the PRWG. In addition, the work group visited sites such as the Washington Corrections Center for Women, where incarcerated women were piloting a program on understanding trauma and family reunification, The NW Harvest, which was working to dismantle systemic causes of “food injustice,” and the Lummi Nation, where work group members learned about historical trauma, epigenetics, and the need for community-led and culturally appropriate human services.

As the PRWG invested a significant amount of time to listening and exploring, the leadership team had to navigate committee members’ anxiety over the pace of change and their tendencies to default to scarcity mindsets and the status quo. Many members struggled with “learning without doing,” or envisioning programs and practices that were not focused on meeting customers’ urgent needs. They wanted to help people *now*. During budget cycles these mindsets became apparent as agencies focused on making minor tweaks to funding requests rather than envisioning transformational systems-change. To inspire and reorient members, Probst shared that he also worried until he reminded himself that there were already people focused on customers’ immediate needs at every agency, and that the PRWG’s job was to disrupt the system. Stillman stressed that that committee was building an antipoverty and economic mobility *movement* – and laying the foundation takes time and bold thinking around outcomes. The more members saw the work as movement-building, “the idea of doing more than a tweak to programs here and there started to feel safer,” Probst said.

At the same time, the steering committee balanced this perspective by insisting that PRWG strategies could not *only* focus on the long game. People also need “immediate relief” – breathing room for customers “to address the longer-

term issue of getting out of poverty.”²⁰ Consequently, the workgroup integrated both short and long-term goals into their 10-year plan to dismantle poverty.

Moving Forward: Building Accountability for Outcomes

In January of 2021, the PRWG released their *Blueprint for A Just and Equitable Future: 10 Year Plan to Dismantle Poverty in Washington*.²¹ (Exhibit C). This plan outlines eight strategies and 60 recommendations for an accountable, collaborative approach to reducing poverty, without disparities. Already, the Plan has been recognized nationally as a best practice,²² and the state, human services agencies, and community organizations are implementing grants, programs, and services in alignment with strategies and recommendations in the plan. For example, a Technical Advisory Group for Defining/Measuring a Just & Equitable Future (TAG), convened by DSHS in 2020 and comprised of PRWG members and others interested in PRWG goals and strategies, has been working on laying the groundwork for a new public-private collaboration on poverty reduction and family wellbeing and mobility work.

PRWG members have collaborated, for example, to advocate for progressive antipoverty action in the 2021 Legislative session, where an unprecedented \$365 million was dedicated to equity efforts. The range of economic mobility and wellbeing programs authorized was significant, and included education, affordable housing, healthcare, and broadband access, to name just a few sectors, as well as a Working Families Tax Credit and a new capital gains tax²³ that will push dollars to early childhood efforts.²⁴

Agencies, advocates, and community organizations are also working more collaboratively on poverty reduction work and integrating the goals of the *Blueprint* into their Strategic Plans. For example, the Employment Security Department (a co-lead of the PRWG), partnered with people experiencing poverty and other PRWG groups, to co-design the Economic Security for All statewide program providing \$5.9 billion in workforce grants to organizations moving families beyond 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level. These efforts align with strategies three and six of the plan, which include “increasing economic opportunity by targeting equitable growth and wealth-building among people with low incomes and building an integrated human services system that addresses the holistic needs of families in poverty.”²⁵

In 2021, a group of state agencies, at the request of the PRWG steering committee, met regularly to discuss strategy six of the *Blueprint*, the holistic care continuum. The multi-agency group has designed work plans to create a human services system of care with more seamless connections between agencies in order to promote both customer mobility and hope, while dismantling poverty and racist practices. The PRWG reviewed and co-designed the next iteration of these workplans.²⁶

As Stillman, Roberts, and Pfingst work with their collaborators to solidify and advance PRWG strategies and recommendations, they are also maintaining focus on the internal transformations at ESA that were foundational to the ESA’s contributions to this effort. They have continued to build the organization’s capacity to leverage data and analytics to prevent policies from inciting poverty. The ESA persists in measuring and improving staff members’ efficiency, level of service, and respectful interactions with customers. As an organization, they are activating new

20 PRWG June 2019 Meeting Minutes (Accessed July 1, 2021). Available as a link at <https://www.governor.wa.gov/issues/issues/health-care-human-services/poverty-reduction-work-group>

21 Blueprint

22 The Aspen Institute’s 2021 Children and Families Forum highlighted the Plan as a best practice, https://whova.com/web/afcaf_202104/Agenda, as did the APHSA in their August 2021 Economic Mobility & Well-Being Conference <https://www.aphsanawrsconference.com/agenda>. The plan was also featured as a best practice in the Aspen Ascend’s State of the Field: Two-Generation Approaches to Family Wellbeing report. file:///C:/Users/mcca5803/Downloads/State_of_Field_2021.pdf

23 <https://dor.wa.gov/taxes-rates/other-taxes/capital-gains-tax>

24 <https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2021/may/10/capital-gains-tax-a-look-at-how-washington-got-her/> accessed via internet July 12 2021

25 “Economic Security for All Expanding Beyond Four Pilot Programs” via Dismantling Poverty in Washington (Accessed September 10, 2021. Available at <https://dismantlepovertyinwa.com/economic-security-for-all/>

26 “Dismantle Poverty’s Summer 2021 Update” (accessed September 10, 2021) Available at <https://dismantlepovertyinwa.com/dismantle-povertys-summer-update/>

strategies and solutions to achieve racial equity in social and economic mobility. And the ESA is not only deepening the implementation of strengths-based coaching and two-generation strategies but also partnering with and scaling the programs of community organizations already doing the work.

But perhaps the most significant transformational outgrowth from internal ESA work as well as the PRWG remains the practice of sharing power with people experiencing poverty. Today, the steering committee is publicly funded to guide *Blueprint* implementation. One of the PRWG general committee members, Dinghra, now begins discussion in the Senate Behavioral Health Subcommittee with the voices of the people impacted, a practice she took from the steering committee. Several PRWG general committee members have engaged steering committee members in new projects. And the TAG is looking to solder the practice of centering lived experience in policy and program development. They have already secured funds from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Kresge Foundation to develop a “Community Caucus” model (Exhibit F) to focus on outcomes and accountability for the 10- year plan. This Caucus, which would be the first in the nation, is designed to “create equal space for people in communities and state decision making” to expand the practice of centering customer voices in policymaking. The caucus model has received support from Results Washington, which will work with state agencies to implement the practice.

The landscape of human services in Washington is also noticeably more supportive of family wellbeing today than it was before the goal was set in 2015. In 2017, Gov. Inslee signed into law the Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF), a cabinet-level agency dedicated to family wellbeing.²⁷ This new agency’s outcome measures for children and families are incorporated into DSHS and other agency strategic plans to align family wellbeing efforts.²⁸ In 2020, the Washington State Office of Equity launched. It is the second such office in the nation and is dedicated to “working with agencies to increase access to equitable opportunities in order to bridge opportunity gaps and reduce disparities.”²⁹ The Director of this office, Karen Johnson (a former ESA employee), shared that the work of the PRWG has been foundational to the office. “There’s no way we can talk about equity without talking about anti-racism and anti-poverty,” she said.

“Fifty years from now, they’re going to talk about that group in Washington who believed they could shift the trajectory toward equity and justice for all. Every agency, every employee, the customers, the stakeholders have been given a golden opportunity in bringing their collective wisdom together to help us co-create this reality. Because if we can see it, we can name it, we can be it.”

– Karen Johnson
Director, Washington State Office of Equity

Looking to the future, the team is still addressing critical questions about sustainability and impact: What approaches might they take to ensure that government stays focused on the goal of reducing poverty? With diverse activities and programs emanating from the work of the PRWG, who is best positioned to manage the collaborative effort? As this work persists, what steps can be taken to ensure there is not a reversion to the hierarchies that were dismantled by the PRWG?

Even as they consider how to build upon and enhance the capacity-building efforts at the ESA and the broader transformation work of the PRWG, Stillman, Roberts, and Pfingst know their efforts and those of numerous advocates, legislators, and supporters have already made a tremendous impact. Stillman remains bullishly optimistic that the foundation built by the ESA, their partners in this work, and the PRWG will help Washington rise to meet the 2025 goal. “This workgroup changed how government listens to and operates in the context of people with lived experience. Government can do things that are unexpected and difficult but with relatively little resource compared to our budget and do so in a way that potentially has impetus to change the environment across the country,” he said. “It’s been the best thing I’ve experienced in my career.”

27 “About Us: Department of Children, Youth, and Families” (Accessed May 2021) Available at <https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/about/about-us>

28 Washington State DSHS Grant Application to the Kresge Foundation, 2018.

29 “Inslee Names Karen A. Johnson, Pd.D., as Director of New State Office of Equity” Office of Governor Inslee. Available at <https://www.governor.wa.gov/news-media/inslee-names-karen-johnson-phd-director-new-state-office-equity>

Exhibits

Exhibit A

Timeline Provided by Lori Pfingst

Exhibit B

ESA Declaration on Anti-Racism, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#search/stillman/KtbxLzGcGxPGXknHFSwrwGBSTZWQkQZXmL?projector=1&messagePartId=0.2>

Exhibit C

Blueprint for A Just and Equitable Future: The 10-Year Plan to Dismantle Poverty in Washington <https://dismantlepovertyinwa.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Final10yearPlan.pdf>

Exhibit D

System is Designed to Produce the Outcomes We Have (from June 2018 PRWG meeting) <https://www.governor.wa.gov/sites/default/files/documents/RootCauseDiagramMeeting2.pdf>

Exhibit E

Racial Equity Toolkit (Presentation from 12/18 PRWG meeting) https://www.governor.wa.gov/sites/default/files/documents/PRWG_ToolkitPPT_12-20-2018.pdf

Exhibit F

Community Caucus Model (Slides 11-13) file:///C:/Users/mcca5803/Downloads/2021_Mar_1_TAG_proposal_FINAL.pdf

Launch Transforming Case Management

Exhibit A: Timeline (provided by Lori Pfingst)

2015:

- > Growing angst and organizing among government health and human services (HHS) leaders, as well as HHS advocates, about the federal/state response to the Great Recession

2016:

- > ESA establishes 2025 Goal
- > CSD holds statewide listening sessions to learn about the unique experiences of poverty in each region of the state (see attached mid-point reflection)
- > Introduction of [HB 2518](#); the first of two bills introduced in the Legislature to create state accountability for poverty reduction; the bill ultimately fails

Phase I – Research to Recommendations

2017:

- > Winter/Spring – Introduction of [HB 1482](#); the second bill introduced in the Legislature to create state accountability for poverty reduction; the bill ultimately fails, but a watered down version of the bill appeared in budget proviso; the Governor vetoes the proviso
- > Spring/Summer – CSD's Transforming Case Management (TCM) kicks off
- > November – Governor Inslee forms the Poverty Reduction Work Group via [Directive](#); recruitment for PRWG begins

2018:

- > February – PRWG holds first meeting
- > April – HB 1482 reintroduced and passes creating Legislative-Executive WorkFirst & Poverty Reduction Oversight Task Force (LEWPRO)
- > December – WIOA discretionary funds used to fund Economic Security for All

Phase II – Implementation

2019:

- > August – ESA is awarded NextGen grant

2020

- > February: Interagency Human-Centered Design Team forms to begin work to implement Strategy #6 in 10-Year Plan
- > March: Stay-at-home order due to COVID-19 begins, initiating emergency response
- > May: DSHS convenes Technical Advisory Group on Defining/Measuring a Just & Equitable Future, laying the groundwork for a new public-private collaboration
- > Fall/Winter – The larger PRWG community begins to write legislation and budget requests to implement foundational strategies in 10-Year Plan

2021:

- > January – Submission of 10-Year Plan to Dismantle Poverty
- > Winter/Spring – 10-Year Plan gets lift off during legislative session (see [Summer newsletter](#))
- > July – Office of Equity hires Executive Director, Dr. Johnson, who sees 10-Year plan as foundational to Office's strategic priorities
- > Summer/Fall – Ongoing discussions about the evolution of the state's poverty reduction efforts, including the possibility of an Executive Order from Governor Inslee



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Washington State’s Department of Social and Human Services

Case Discussion Questions

Discussion Questions:

1. What did it mean for the Economic Services Administration (ESA) to be a “learning organization,” and for leaders to learn from staff and clients as they were driving internal transformation, and from human services customers as part of their work with the Poverty Reduction Work Group (PRWG)? What may have been their strategic leadership considerations, and what unexpected but fruitful policies, programs, and understandings emerged as a result? How feasible is this approach in your current operating environment, and how can you foster such leadership?

2. The goal of reducing poverty by half by 2025 served as a rallying cry uniting ESA leadership and staff, public and private partners, and the human services customers on the PRWG steering committee. It was strategic and risky. What conditions needed to be in place for the goal to gain traction and have a chance of success? How did the ESA trio of Stillman, Roberts, and Pfingst work to both establish those conditions and leverage that goal for transformation? If you were to create such a goal, what would it be, and what conditions for success need to be in place and established?

3. Lori Pfingst said that “systems change is really us choosing to work differently together,” and that part of the choice involved personal transformation. The ESA trio and the PRWG co-leads set the conditions for people to do equity-focused work at the agency and systems levels and advance along their own personal racial equity journeys. Do you agree both are necessary? How might you replicate that practice in your organization or ecosystem, even if you currently have no time dedicated to such work?

4. What levers did the Department of Social and Human Services (DSHS) use to implement change at the agency level AND at the systems level in the PRWG? How did their experience using those levers at the agency level inform their approach and practice within the PRWG? How did the trio manage the pace of change - at times pushing for rapid change, at others, slowing down and learning to enable transformational thinking and planning?

5. The ESA worked to flatten hierarchies within the organization and the PRWG. Yet while they made significant strides, leaders in both organizations existed. To navigate such balance in organizations undergoing transformation, what authority and responsibilities should leaders retain, and what power should customers assume? In your organization, what changes would need to occur so colleagues, staff, and customers feel valued and powerful, and what leadership structures, roles, and responsibilities should remain for effective workflow, task completion, and accountability in organizations and partnerships?

6. A mainstay of DSHS practice is a laser-like focus on human dignity, centering the voices of the marginalized, and working to eliminate racism in structures and practices. In what ways did this priority inform their practice and programs, and in what ways did the voices of people experiencing poverty themselves inform policy and practice? Why do David, Lori and Babs contend that centering those voices guarantees effective policy and program development? What are the avenues you have to center the voices of the marginalized in your work? What are some structural and personal barriers to doing so?

7. Data was a primary form of currency DSHS utilized to mobilize partners to work to end poverty, and Stillman saw it as a critical tool for exercising his leadership. What is your and your organization's "currency"? How can you amplify or share it more strategically in your efforts to transform human services?

8. Looking ahead, what recommendations do you have for the DSHS team to sustain systems-level accountability for poverty reduction, without reverting to a team or group that "owns" and "manages" the work?



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