

“Clerk’s Work is Equity Work”

Abbie J. Kurtz

Before the Racial Equity & Social Justice Initiative was adopted by the City of Madison in 2014, Maribeth Witzel-Behl’s City Clerk’s Office had already been doing equity work without realizing it. For example, they offered poll worker training on the north, south, east, and west sides of Madison, while before it had only been at Olbrich. And, they strategized to recruit new poll workers reflecting the community being served.

Enter, RESJI

RESJI helped the City Clerk’s Office gain momentum and gave them effective tools to use in their pursuit of equity. Equity work is at the forefront of their minds, and infuses everything they do. They use the equity tool, the equity lens, and their work plan to fight bias, racism, and prejudice, to achieve equity throughout the city, and even the county and state.

Jennifer Haar went statewide with equity work by promoting voting



City Clerk’s Office works to familiarize the next generation with voting

accessibility throughout Wisconsin. She produced videos in collaboration with the State Election Commission, Disability Rights Wisconsin, and DHS Office of the Blind and Visually Impaired, informing people of their options. For National Disability Voter Registration Week, the City Clerk’s Office held a mock election and registration drive. They worked with the League of Women Voters, The Wisconsin Council of the Blind & Visually Impaired, and Disability Rights Wisconsin, and demoed the use of voting equipment and video language interpretation in partnership with the Department of Civil Rights.

City Clerk Employees’ RESJI immersion

The City Clerk’s Equity Team consists of their entire office. Each Tuesday is Equity Tuesday; they share articles and podcasts with each other. Staff take all of the RESJI trainings, and they do an external, several-weeks long training with Patti Digh: “Introduction to Racism and Its Undoing.” They also attend YWCA’s annual Racial Justice Summit.

RESJI work plan

The City Clerk’s Office develops their work plan in odd years. They meet for eight mornings, studying goals for the next two years. Any inequities they find are targeted for elimination.

Proven Methods to Reduce Discriminatory Behaviors

Knowing **who** you want to reach when starting a diversity or equity campaign is key, according to Dr. Markus Brauer of the Brauer Group Lab on the UW campus.

Changing people’s behaviors is possible, according to Brauer, and should be the focus of equity and diversity programs. But first, who are those whose behavior we wish to change? There are people who are already very interested in equity; go to trainings, work on inclusion, and more. Typically that is around 20 percent of a standard group (i.e. City staff).

On the other end of the spectrum are the 15-20 percent of people who are not open to messages of diversity, equity, and inclusion and there isn’t much that will reach them.

The remaining 60 percent in the middle are referred to as the “moveable middle:” the ideal target audience of diversity initiatives. They are not hostile to the ideas, and neither are they motivated. They may not be aware of ways in which they are affected by diversity or equity initiatives. They might not be aware of behaviors they engage in that make others feel left out.

How do we reach them? Dr. Brauer talked specifically about the interventions done in his lab, while noting that there are other interventions, some studied by other UW professors.

What does affect behavior and bring

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The Community Development Division: Residents First


By Rebecca Below, Department of Civil Rights

In August, the RESJI Distinguished Speaker Series featured the Community Development Division (CDD). Community Development Grants Supervisor Linette Rhodes and Senior Center and Senior Services Manager Sally Jo Spaeni spoke about their roles in helping CDD achieve its vision, that all Madison residents and neighborhoods have access to resources and opportunities necessary to help them realize their full potential.

Linette provided a framework for the service structure of the CDD, including affordable housing, community support services, economic development and opportunities, strong and healthy neighborhoods and overall program administration. Several City policy committees have oversight of various CDD topics. This year, CDD put out its Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing Choice report which included analysis of racial segregation of opportunity in Madison.

- For more information on this report: www.cityofmadison.com/-cdbg/documents/DRAFTSummaryReport-AltoFairHousingChoice4.22.19.pdf.

Sally Jo spoke about how the Madison Senior Center (MSC) furthers its mission of promoting successful aging in the community by providing seniors the supports to avoid disease and disability, maintain high cognitive and physical function and to stay active and engaged in the community. MSC welcomes 40,000 visitors annually and offers nearly 3,000 events each year. While the City provides the funding and support for the building and staff, donations to MSC provide funds for all of the programming. While most programming is geared towards adults age 55 and older, MSC also offers intergenerational programs that include a preschool craft program, an oral history program and an art mural program.

- For more information on MSC and its programming: www.cityofmadison.com/senior-center. 

Right: The Madison Senior Center hosts community events including art workshops and art openings.




Left: Participants engaged in Ballroom Basics for Balance at the Central Library. MSC partners with Yahara Therapy to bring this program to the downtown Madison community.



Equitable Workforce Practices at the City of Madison

In August 2019, the City of Madison hired Affirmative Action Specialist Tracy Lomax. One of her main responsibilities is to ensure that the City of Madison advances equitable workforce practices. There are several policies and programs she leads to advance this goal. She is responsible for the administration of APM 3-5, Prohibited Harassment and Discrimination investigations and trainings, as well as monitoring the City of Madison's hiring process. It is her responsibility to ensure the City of Madison makes progress on the Equitable Workforce Plan and she also leads the Civil Rights Coordinators team.

Each department has one Civil Rights Coordinator, who is the liaison between the City of Madison Department of Civil Rights and their department. The main requirement for being a coordinator is a passion for and about equity, diversity, inclusion, and affirmative action; wrapped in dedication and commitment to further these practices every day at the City of Madison.

For more information about Civil Rights Coordinators, visit the Department of [Civil Rights intranet](#) page on [employee.net](#). 

Equity tools used for hiring, budget, absentee voting, polling sites, and more

Through the equitable hiring tool, the City Clerk’s Office hired hourly workers to process absentee ballots. Working with Human Resources, they dropped the usual criteria that applicants needed a personal vehicle or license, and applicants were not screened out or ranked, expanding the diversity of people to be interviewed and ultimately hired. For hiring workers for absentee voting, they eliminated the typing test, requiring rudimentary computer skills.

RESJI’s equity lens is used in all of the City Clerk’s day-to-day decisions.

From the broad effects of a budget to helping citizens fill out complex forms, the City Clerk’s Office aims to fight inequity. They establish budget priorities for both the office and community, trying to ensure no one is inadvertently harmed by inequities. And, they have an additional person at Common Council and the Alcohol Review Board to help people navigate the registration forms.

Elections are where the City Clerk’s Office has an enormous influence on equity. After reading a 2017 *Washington Post* article detailing city clerk’s offices’ bias against voters with non-white sounding names in the 2016 presidential election, Witzel-Behl adopted the idea during election times, that “system stronger than humans,” recognizing that people under stress are more likely to rely on bias. Witzel-Behl’s office prioritized lunch breaks and employees working no more than 60 hours/week. Staff email signatures include answers to commonly asked questions so responses are standardized.

The Clerk’s Office developed equity criteria for polling places:

- they need to be walkable for people in the ward,

- they should be on bus routes,
- people shouldn’t have to cross major highways,
- and there should be low potential for overcrowding.

The Clerk’s Office established in person absentee voting sites, mostly in libraries. Streets East has been a great partner, making their site available for eastside voting.

“They meet for eight mornings, studying goals for the next two years. Any inequities they find are targeted for elimination.”

They chose these locations because accessibility and familiarity are the keys to increased absentee voting. The sites are close to people’s homes, on bus routes, there is free, nearby parking, they are open after work hours, you can bring your children, and it’s not a bureaucratic space. All feel welcome. One worker noticed that someone came in, observed others voting first, then felt comfortable enough to register. Others go to the library for different reasons, and wind up voting. Others will see the voting sign outside of a library, and will come in to find out what they’re voting for, think about it for a few days, then come back to register and vote.

By adopting the tactic “Listen more than you talk, and read between the lines,” at a UW Campus listening session, the Clerk’s Office discovered that although they had provided three

on campus absentee voting sites, people on the Health Sciences Campus still found it difficult to vote absentee. “Listen, process, return to what was said” is their method to ensure equity. They always ask, “Who is at the table, and is it more equitable to go to their table,” so you can make decisions with, not for, the underrepresented.

Voter turnout was 92% in the last election, versus under 70% for the last governor’s race in 2014. Absentee ballots returned in person more than quadrupled, from 9,000 in 2014 to over 37,000 in 2018. Absentee voting continues to rise throughout the City. Each new election brings new record voter turnout.

New RESJI inspired projects

The staff at the City Clerk’s Office are constantly placing all they do under an equity lens scrutiny. Their new policies and procedures focus on overlooked populations. They are working with UW’s McBurney Center, serving students with disabilities, particularly the blind and visually impaired. First language Hmong, Spanish, and Mandarin speakers (they make up the largest ESL speakers in Madison) are also a priority. An equity analysis to ensure equitable ballot access for those filing paperwork to run for office is also in the works.

Seeing results from their equity work results in a positive feedback loop. The City Clerk’s Office has accomplished much, and they are always seeking to do more to further equity. ■■■

NEWS & VIEWS

Contact newsletter editor Donna Collingwood at dcollingwood@cityofmadison.com



Racial Equity & Social Justice Initiative

Calendar of Opportunities

NOVEMBER / DECEMBER

November is **Native American Heritage Month**

11/13/2019

RESJI Part 2, 9am-noon, MMB 153
Applying Racial Equity & Social Justice.

11/18/2019

Speaker Series: Anthony Cooper, Focus Interrupted Coalition: Interrupting Violence. 1:00-2:00 pm, Room 206, MMB.

11/20/2019

RESJI Part 2, 9am-noon, MMB 153
Applying Racial Equity & Social Justice.

11/20/2019

Transgender Day of Remembrance

11/21/2019

CORE Team meeting, 11:30 am-12:30 pm. **Tools & Training Lunch & Learn**, MMB 206. Bring a dish to pass.

11/22/2019

RESJI Part 1, 9am-noon, MMB 206. **What are Racial Equity & Social Justice?**

12/16/2019

Speaker Series: Christy Clark-Pujara, UW-Madison Department of Afro-American Studies, 1-2 pm. Madison Municipal Bldg., 206

12/18/2019

RESJI Part 3, 9am-noon, MMB 153, **Transformative Leadership & Communication.**

12/19/2019

Department of Civil Rights year end **coffee and cake event**, CCB Room 523. Come Join us!

1/20/2020

Martin Luther King Celebration Capital Rotunda.



RESJI's CORE Team held a "kick off" event in September. There was great attendance and lots of energy. The CORE Team will resume monthly meetings.

Proven Methods *Continued from page 1*

out the more positive actions we seek? According to Dr. Brauer, there are several different "interventions" that can change behavior in a positive way.

Norm Based Interventions seem the most applicable for our work. Social norms have a powerful influence on behavior. If we can change people's perceptions of what is normal we can change their behavior, he said.

You start with a **public commitment from leadership** to diversity. And that must be accompanied by a visible effort to remove institutional barriers.

Michelin tires, in an effort to retain diverse staff, created a video relaying that diversity helps Michelin achieve its business objectives. Every employee watched the video. This was their **public commitment** to diversity.

Michelin also employed an outside company to do CV testing. The content (candidate qualifications) of all CVs was comparable. However, it turned out that departments had bias in hiring. The company stated that bias in hiring is unacceptable, and laid out a plan to change it. They did the study again after three years, and the problem was remedied. Most importantly, they communicated what they did. That was their **visible effort** to remove institutional barriers.

Sometimes a public commitment is a diversity statement on the web site.

Best examples are aspirational. For example, "company X strives to hire applicants from diverse backgrounds."

Another way to change norms is to communicate that peers enjoy diversity, support the institution's pro-diversity initiatives, and seem to behave in an inclusive manner.

The Brauer Lab tested a **social norms** video. The video consisted of students giving testimony that they enjoy diversity on campus and enjoy campus pro-diversity initiatives. The video also included interviews with experts and scientists on campus who described studies indicating that acts of discrimination on campus are committed by a very small number of employees, whose values are fundamentally different from the rest of the campus community.

Students who saw the social norms video reported a more positive experience of the climate, more sense of belonging, reduced anxiety, better health, and reported that their peers treat them more positively.

A bias awareness video was also tested, but did not have the same outcomes.

Dr. Brauer shared other ways to change discriminatory behavior. City staff can view the full presentation:

- <https://tinyurl.com/y4ujm7ob>