

CITY PROFILE ON RACIAL EQUITY

# Tacoma, Washington



**NLC** NATIONAL  
LEAGUE  
OF CITIES

REAL RACE, EQUITY AND LEADERSHIP

# Tacoma City Profile

For the City of Tacoma, the push toward racial equity demonstrates the power that lies in the hands of concerned residents. Over a year before the city government took public action, local leaders were urged by community members to analyze the racial disparities in Tacoma’s hiring practices. After examining the lack of adequate representation in both race and gender among city government employees, they knew that a change was needed. With community members acting as catalysts, Tacoma has become dedicated to the cause of “Equity and Empowerment” for all residents.

## Turning a Push for Racial Equity into Policy

The push from the community in 2013 led Tacoma’s mayor, Marilyn Strickland, and then Councilmembers Lauren Walker Lee and Victoria Woodards to take the lead on driving Tacoma toward racial equity. She believes that to make progress on equity, elected officials must have the courage to talk about the issues early and often. Her approach was to discuss the need for equity initiatives with a variety of boards and departments, making the case for why equity will help the city achieve its goals. To develop the case most effectively, her team utilized research methods to paint a vivid picture of their resident’s sentiments.

Using the 2014 National Community Survey, Tacoma took stock of where racial equity in access to city services and infrastructure fell on the residents’ list of priorities. A resounding 71% of those polled noted that this issue was important to them, providing a solid foundation of community buy-in for Tacoma to move forward.<sup>1</sup> From this data, the city began to develop the Equity and *Empowerment Framework*, a plan to make “equity a consistent guiding principle” across the city.



### Community Conversations in Tacoma

The Equity and Empowerment framework lays out 5 explicit principles to guide the city’s policies, programs and practices:

1. The City of Tacoma Workforce Reflects the Community It Serves
2. Purposeful Community Outreach and Engagement
3. Equitable Service Delivery to Residents and Visitors
4. Commitment to Equity in Local Government Decision Making
5. Support Human Rights and Opportunities for Everyone to Achieve their Full Potential

These goals were only the start of Tacoma’s commitment. In order to institutionalize these efforts, former Mayor Marilyn Strickland, worked to create a government office to enact

policies under this framework. Strickland believes in creating a structure that facilitates accountability by making it the job of a specific department to hold all other department heads accountable.

## Ensuring the Longevity of Racial Equity Through Institutionalization

In 2015, Mayor Strickland and the City of Tacoma launched the Office of Equity and Human Rights (OEHR) to unify government departments around the cause of creating better outcomes for all. Led by a director and 9 full time staff members, OEHR aims to “identify and eliminate the drivers that perpetuate racial inequity and provide opportunity and advancement for all.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [http://cms.cityoftacoma.org/OEHR/AnnualReport/COT\\_OEHR\\_AnnualReport2016.pdf](http://cms.cityoftacoma.org/OEHR/AnnualReport/COT_OEHR_AnnualReport2016.pdf)

OEHR established three “sections” to accomplish its objectives: the Program and Policy Section, Human Rights Section and Equal Employment Opportunity Office. Each section serves to accomplish the goals set out in the Equity and Empowerment framework, with a laser-focus on the historical inequities that have shaped Tacoma.

City staff conducted research on past city policies and brought to light the impact of redlining and racially restrictive covenants in the 1930s. As a result of these findings, OEHR set out to reverse many of the barriers to homeownership faced by people of color in Tacoma, by staffing the Human Rights Section with a Fair Housing Investigator, Civil Rights Investigator and Landlord Tenant/Crime Free Housing Coordinator. The Human Rights Section notes its responsibility as investigating employment and fair housing complaints, and providing tenants and landlords the tools for ensuring safe, healthy, equitable and crime free housing rentals.

OEHR develops programs using the strategy of “targeted universalism.” This theory urges the creation of targeted strategies (policies and programs focused on making improvements for specific groups) to achieve universal goals<sup>2</sup>. Targeted universalism comes in the form of establishing a chapter of the National Forum of Black Public Administrators and the formation of Latinos Unidos del South Sound to provide culturally relevant policy recommendations.

The targeted universalism strategy also led OEHR to

## City: Tacoma, Washington

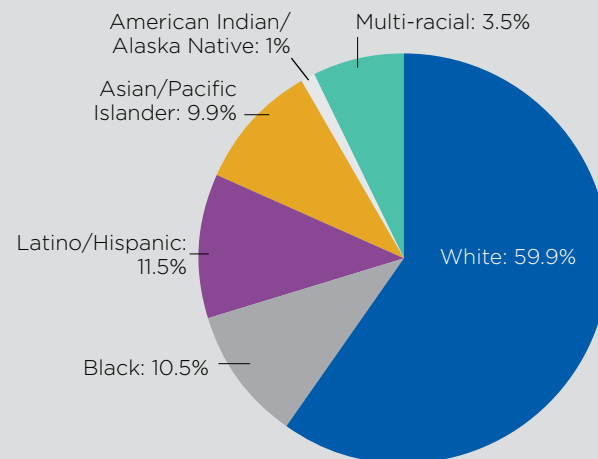
**Year Starting Racial Equity Work:** 2013

**Mayor:** Marilyn Strickland

**Form of Municipal Government:** Mayor-Council

**Population:** 203,481 (July 2015)

### Demographics:



analyze city spending by including questions on racial equity in the city’s budget development progress. The goal was to guarantee that city departments have a clear understanding of the impact of budget changes on underrepresented communities.

### Education as a Key to Equity

With Mayor Strickland’s dedication to examining Tacoma’s hiring practices, Tacoma broadened its focus to eliminating structural racism through the education of city staff. OEHR recently published the *Handbook for Recruiting, Hiring & Retention: Applying an Equity Lens to Recruiting, Interviewing, Hiring and Retaining Employees*. This handbook has been used to

guide Tacoma’s practices and to distribute to governments and organizations with similar goals. Mayor Strickland recognizes that city staff should represent its residents as a whole and in individual departments. She notes that in Tacoma, prior to their equity efforts, employees of color were mostly found in community relations positions, rather than public safety or public works positions.

OEHR has also developed a series of presentations to keep current employees knowledgeable of and committed to the goal of racial equity. In 2015 the office conducted a presentation to government staff on “the history of federal state and local policies of institutional racism and other discriminations,” ensuring that employees understood the

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.cityoftacoma.org/government/city\\_departments/equity\\_and\\_human\\_rights/equity\\_and\\_empowerment\\_framework/](http://www.cityoftacoma.org/government/city_departments/equity_and_human_rights/equity_and_empowerment_framework/)

<sup>3</sup> <https://blog.nationalequityproject.org/2011/06/22/targeted-universalism/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.racialequityalliance.org/jurisdictions/tacoma-washington/>

context guiding their work. In 2015, OEHR developed and piloted an “Equity 101 Training” with the goal of educating over 500 employees about the difference between equality, equity and the removal of systemic barriers.<sup>4</sup>

The Office of Equity and Human Rights forged ahead in 2016, assembling a multi-agency team of staff, who participated in various racial equity trainings including Race: The Power of an Illusion; Leading with a Racial Equity Lens; Equity 101; and Culturally Specific Services Contracting. Prioritizing education has led to many improvements in the Tacoma city systems, including the creation of the Equity and Empowerment Capacity Building Fund to bolster non-profit organizations serving underrepresented Tacoma residents.

### “Nothing About Us, Without Us” – A Philosophy for Community Engagement

The City of Tacoma has brought its racial equity efforts full circle by bridging the gap that once separated the community and its government. Programs like Project PEACE (Partnering for Equity and Community Engagement) serve to peel back the layers of mistrust and build understanding between police and underserved communities. In 2015, Project PEACE held a series of six community conversations, bringing more than 800 community members, police officers and city staff together to hear community feedback and learn from one another.

The initiative has taken deliberate steps to ensure the incorporation of all perspectives, by establishing an executive committee comprised of youth and adults of color, to plan events and facilitate community building discourse. Project PEACE’s committee members cover the gamut of unique identities in Tacoma, ranging from leaders of the Puyallup Tribal Council, the NAACP, the Rainbow Center and the Asian Pacific Cultural Center. This program highlights the city’s commitment to engaging in courageous dialogue that ultimately brings the community together.

As a mixed woman of African American and Asian American descent, Mayor Strickland was not new to having conversations about race and inequity. She knew the importance of helping her white colleagues and allies become comfortable and familiar with having those discussions. Mayor Strickland believed in the ability to break barriers when both people of color and white allies find the words to address their issues and make Tacoma a more equitable place for all residents.

Partnering with the Government Alliance for Racial Equity (GARE), the city of Tacoma has immersed itself in the cause of “changing the way [the city] does business.” Tacoma’s practices today show an in-depth understanding of the way that institutions have marginalized communities of color, and an even deeper commitment to reversing those effects.

## Summary: Tacoma

**1 A Solid Foundation of Unified Goals:** Tacoma’s racial equity efforts started with establishing the Equity and Empowerment Framework, laying out a set of clear goals that would guide the city’s work.

**2 Government and Community Partnerships:** Tacoma created the Office of Equity and Human Rights (OEHR) to execute the policies laid out in the Equity and Empowerment Framework. The office uses its capacity to provide a platform for community organizations through the Equity and Empowerment Capacity Building Fund.

**3 Acknowledging a history of inequity:** Tacoma utilizes presentations and trainings to educate city staff on inequitable policies that have shaped city government.

**4 Institutionalizing Equity:** While analyzing how to make Tacoma’s staff more representative of the city’s population, Tacoma developed the Handbook for Recruiting, Hiring & Retention: Applying an Equity Lens to Recruiting, Interviewing, Hiring and Retaining Employees, to institutionalize these practices and educate other groups.



REAL RACE, EQUITY AND LEADERSHIP

NLC’s Race, Equity and Leadership (REAL) initiative serves to strengthen local elected officials’ knowledge and capacity to eliminate racial disparities, heal racial divisions, and build more equitable communities. Learn more at [www.nlc.org/REAL](http://www.nlc.org/REAL)

This City Profile is part of a larger series made possible through the generous contributions of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation.