

Building on A Unique History As an Integrated Village

The Village of Park Forest was established in 1948 to house military veterans as the nation's first planned community after World War II. Park Forest was initially designed as one of the few communities without restrictive covenants by religion. Building on that ten-year tradition, Park Forest was racially desegregated in 1959 when the first African-American family was invited to live in the village through efforts by some members of the local Unitarian Church. Perhaps as a result of the planned integration of Park Forest, the town faced a smaller degree of white flight in the 1980s than did many other suburbs. Much like other cities, Park Forest faces a lack of diversity in the village's staff, which is currently predominantly white even though the current village population is approximately 65 percent black.

Park Forest began its explicit work to advance racial equity in 2016 when Park Forest Mayor John Ostenburg gathered a group that included elected officials, all senior administrators, and chairs and vice-chairs of volunteer commissions and presented a brief training to them, based on what he had learned from a National League of Cities' Race, Equity And Leadership (REAL) council session he had attended earlier in the year. Struck by what he perceived as many similarities between Ferguson, Missouri and Park Forest, and concerned that the good intentions of Park Forest staff and residents might not be enough to avoid furthering systemic racism, Mayor Ostenburg designed the training to convey to staff and community leaders the ways in which they might be unintentionally perpetuating systemic racism without knowing it, and what they could start doing to address it. As an example, he pointed out that as an intentionally integrated city, early municipal staff kept track of each new African-American family that moved into the city in order to make sure that realtors weren't trying to concentrate black residents in one area or



Photos courtesy of the Village of Park Forest.

another, a common practice in many parts of the country at that time. Although this record keeping was discontinued in the 1980s, the importance of moving to race-neutral practices made the mayor question whether there were other policies or procedures that might be obscuring existing racial inequities.

Developing Infrastructure to Change Village Systems

Following the REAL training, the mayor developed a REAL Steering Committee to begin examining racial inequities that may be perpetuated by the village's governance. The Steering Committee, which meets monthly, consists of three elected officials (two Trustees and the Mayor),

four members of the village's professional staff (village manager, police chief, director of planning and economic development and director of recreation and parks), and two citizen representatives (chair of the commission on human relations and vice chair of the cable communications commission), along with two young adult residents of Park Forest. During 2017 and 2018, the Steering Committee has been reviewing the history of the Village and seeking to identify those things which may have unintentionally hidden elements of structural racism and white supremacy lingering within the governance structure of Park Forest.

Drawing on the village's history, issues in the community and

potential problem areas, the Steering Committee has been developing steps for increasing citizen participation and identifying ways to provide more racial equity training for elected officials and staff in the city.

Reviewing the Village's Policies, Procedures and Practices

Three sub-committees made up of elected officials, staff and community members were created in tandem with the Steering Committee; each of the Steering Committee members serves on one of the three subcommittees, each of which has a different charge. The first subcommittee is responsible for policies and is reviewing the direct language of the village's ordinances to unearth any explicitly discriminatory language.

The ordinance subcommittee is using the backgrounds and expertise of each committee member to better understand language that may unintentionally be discriminatory. For instance, there was subjective language in some of the licensing ordinances like the word "immoral" which could be influenced by a dominant white culture. In another case, the subcommittee identified gendered language throughout their ordinances, prompting a change in language.

The second subcommittee, focusing on procedures, is reviewing strategies currently in place for implementing policies to see if the protocols for implementation may be contributing to any racial inequities. And the third subcommittee, reviewing city practices, is looking at staff behaviors in implementing these policies to identify any unintentional disparities.

City: Park Forest, Illinois

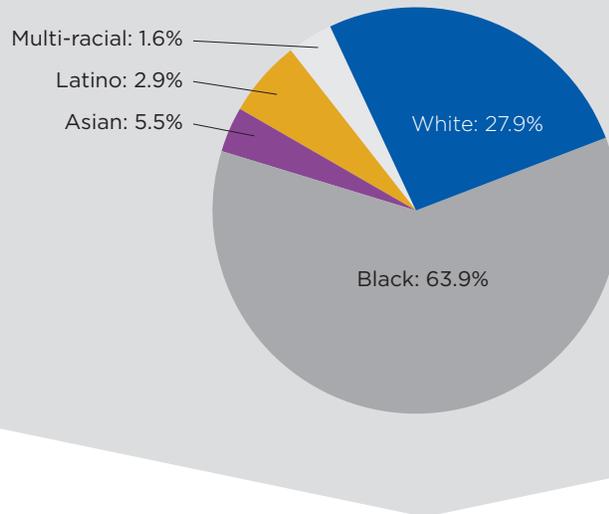
Year Starting Racial Equity Work: 2016

Mayor: John Ostenburg

Form of Municipal Government: Council-Manager

Population: 21,682

Demographics:



Staff members on each of the subcommittees are charged with conducting outreach to colleagues within their professional fields to identify best practices and learn from other communities.

Through this process the village identified policies that could be discriminatory in impact, such as the use of the word "unwholesome" to refer to prohibited businesses. In a similar process designed to support sustainability in building codes and practices, the village conducted a complete ordinance review and passed a Unified Development Ordinance in 2017, which was able to alter some codes that were restrictive.

For the two subcommittees looking at procedures and practices, the details around implementation and resident perception are critical. The 1997 Illinois state law dictating that local ordinances are subject only to local

adjudication gives the village some latitude in determining cases where infractions disproportionately impacting residents of color could be addressed without levying penalties. In one case, some Latino residents were facing building code violations. When the city understood that some of the Latino residents may not have received the requisite permits due to a language barrier, the village decided that the government may not have been communicating effectively to all of its constituents. In some cases, the village waived fines as a result. They also utilized a bilingual staff person in conducting adjudications to address the communications breakdown.

One of the challenges for a small city like Park Forest is finding enough accurate data to understand disparate impacts of policies and procedures by race. While some of the village's police data has race/ethnicity fields attached to it, and the local

health department had some records of race and ethnicity data, though until recently it was shut down for cost reasons, there is little additional capacity in other departments for data collection.

While this does not completely address the data gap, the practices subcommittee has been creating a series of public questionnaires to get qualitative data from residents on how they may have experienced inequities when dealing with local government.

Transforming Community Attitudes

One member of the subcommittee reviewing ordinance language is Park Forest Police Chief Christopher Mannino, who was appointed to his current post in 2017. With a long-term focus on procedural justice, the chief sees his work both in leading the police department and in reviewing potentially discriminatory ordinances as critical, given the fact that people experience the justice system differently and because local government often has played a role in perpetuating unfair differences.

“We in law enforcement have historically been part of the problem. It is incumbent upon us to fix the issue. Allowing those conversations to take place and showing we’re concerned about it – that we’re aware and concerned about the issue – is important,” said Chief Mannino.

In addition to signing onto the Illinois Association of Chiefs of Police pillars of law enforcement and ensuring de-escalation and crisis intervention training for all

police officers, Chief Mannino has also begun taking steps to involve the public in the city’s conversations about racial equity.

In the spring of 2018, a woman called the police to report “two black men, one in a hoodie,” sitting on the steps of the train station. With a concern that the report may have been less a public safety consideration and more about personal discomfort, the Chief used the opportunity to frame a public discussion by posting on Facebook about the incident (in which there were no police interactions, nor arrests as all parties were gone by the time police arrived on the scene). The chief felt that the nearly 100 comments generated on his post were an opportunity to build empathy in a situation where it was important to both assure a resident of her safety but also to avoid racial profiling of the youth. In this way, he used the social media discussion of the incident to create a conversation about how “we can treat everyone with dignity and feel like they are a valued member of the community.” The chief said, “I used that call to be able to start a public discussion...to get people to think about [their bias]. It’s easy to think about the woman who’s scared – in the movie scene, she’s the one who’d be portrayed. But what’s it like to be the kid who just sat down to use his phone and then the police came? And what it’s like to be the police officer?”

After the white nationalist violence in Charlottesville, Mayor Ostenburg worked with the Commission on Human Relations (CHR) to create public forums for racial equity issues to be openly discussed. The

Highlights

1 In a small village with limited resources, Mayor Ostenburg has helped staff and community leaders in Park Forest prioritize racial equity and make systemic changes.

2 Despite a unique history of intentional racial integration, Park Forest staff realized that unintentional perpetuation of systemic racism is something they need to address head on.

3 Police Chief Mannino has taken a proactive attempt to lead on racial equity by engaging the public in discussions about the kinds of perspective-taking skills needed to help address racial profiling.

volunteer-run Park Forest CHR has held three forums, for which they decided on the topics and panelists. The forums have given the public opportunities to hear from a panel of experts, but also to ask questions and offer opinions.

Finally, as a response to the what occurred in Charlottesville, the Steering Committee identified some streets in a section of the village connected to Abraham Lincoln – an Illinois favorite son – that were named for Civil War Confederate generals. A town meeting was held in early 2018 to get citizen input on what steps should be taken to correct this situation. The Steering Committee has sought input on whether the streets should be renamed, rededicated to persons with the same surname but not associated with the Confederate States, or left as they are.



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

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