

CITY PROFILE ON RACIAL EQUITY

Grand Rapids, Michigan



Grand Rapids City Profile on Racial Equity

Addressing Systemic Racism

In response to a Michigan Department of Civil Rights report on the economic impacts of racial disparities in the city and *Forbes* magazine listing Grand Rapids, Mich. as one of the worst places for African-Americans economically in the United States, in 2015, Grand Rapids developed a citywide effort to improve racial equity. Details of the city's racial disparities prompted then-City Commissioner Rosalynn Bliss to make racial equity a key component of her mayoral campaign that year.

"I was honest when campaigning that I didn't have all the answers to addressing the racial disparities in our city," said Mayor Bliss, who has been Grand Rapids' Mayor since 2016. "I also emphasized that it was about systemic racism, which would need structural change – a challenging but doable task."

Developing Racial Equity Initiative and Tools

In one of her first actions, Mayor Bliss made racial equity a priority. She led Grand Rapids to apply to be part of a *Racial Equity Here* cohort established by the Government Alliance on Race & Equity (GARE) and Living Cities, to help cities operationalize racial equity. She also used her first State of the City speech to highlight the city's new commitment to advancing racial equity.

"The important thing for me – and what I have heard from the community – is that if we are going to eliminate racial disparities, we have to come together to collectively have a communitywide impact," Mayor Bliss said.



Photo courtesy of City of Grand Rapids, Michigan

The city's partnership with the W.K. Kellogg Foundation has provided a support base for exploring and moving forward on efforts toward racial healing and racial equity. Since 2017, funding and other resources from the foundation have helped enable the city to create specific initiatives that solidify its commitment to racial equity.

This support also allowed Mayor Bliss to create the Grand Rapids Racial Equity Initiative (GRREI). GRREI includes a broad, collaborative focus on economic development and workforce training. The initiative helps large local employers, encouraging them to develop and change policies to increase economic equity across Grand Rapids neighborhoods. With direct oversight from Mayor Bliss,

the city's Economic Development Department, and an assistant to the city manager, the initiative has created a broad community of practice for employers to share strategies related to learning about how to eliminate racial disparities.

Grand Rapids developed its own racial equity toolkit tailored to local needs which is used during the budget process. The city's toolkit is based on examples from the GARE toolkit. The toolkit is used to address racial equity in other city processes and projects, including continuous improvement process planning and improving the future state of services, programs, and economic incentives.

Developed in partnership with Urban Core Collective – a group of organizations working together

to end systemic racism – the city’s pilot program focused on equitable community engagement for construction projects. The pilot uses a targeted universalism¹ approach to identify systemic barriers that exclude residents of color from engaging in development processes. It also establishes recommendations to address these barriers. The goals of this process are to:

- Ensure developers know how to engage community residents
- Strengthen projects based on resident feedback
- Engage all residents

Similarly, use of racial equity filters helped a Police Policy and Procedure Review Task Force address disparate outcomes by race, with an added goal of strengthening community-police relations. In addition, the city plans to standardize racial equity filters so elected officials and staff can use them widely and consistently.

Using Accountability and Root Causes to Create More Equitable Economic Development

Grand Rapids city manager Mark Washington took on his role in October 2018 after being a leader for racial equity in the city of Austin, Texas. He believes Grand Rapids needs to create a culture that values equity, includes shared language, and understands the racialized impact of history in Grand Rapids and the United States as a whole. He is also focused on using data to identify disparities in services and outcomes across the city in order to prioritize use of capital and infrastructure dollars in these communities.

As Grand Rapids experiences continued growth, the city wants to ensure that prosperity is equitable.

City: Grand Rapids, Michigan

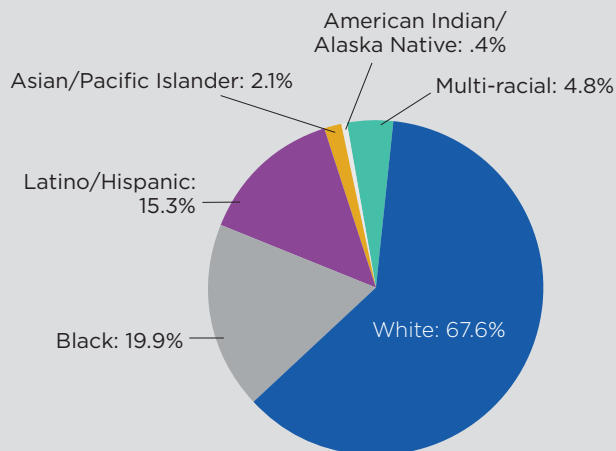
Year Starting Racial Equity Work: 2016

Mayor: Rosalynn Bliss

Form of Municipal Government: Council-Manager

Population: 198,829 (2017 Population estimate, American Community Survey)

Demographics:



To that end, the city is building an equitable economic development strategy as it builds a process to amend its comprehensive plan. The vision for Grand Rapids in 20 to 30 years is a city designed through a lens of racial equity. Some of the groundwork for these efforts was laid by the 2015 *GR Forward* initiative, which aimed to create a ten-year community plan and investment strategy to grow the downtown area and reinvest in restoration of the Grand River. Complementing its internal racial equity work, the city co-invests in many of the *GR Forward* recommendations, allowing data to drive more equitable investments.

As a participant in NLC’s Rose Center Fellowship, the city also worked with faculty to help design a transparent process around use of public dollars for development that could produce more equitable outcomes. A 2018 project enabled the city to identify potential

racial disparities in the allocation of economic development incentive funds. Moving forward, the city is developing evaluation criteria and plans to implement recommendations to ensure public investments are used to further community goals.

Grand Rapids’ leadership hopes to build on this work by embedding accountability into a scorecard that will make it easy to track progress. It also plans to develop metrics that are disaggregated by race or ZIP code, and then publicly reporting those metrics and embedding them in the city’s strategic plan.

Neighborhood Summits: A Power Shifting Tool

Grand Rapids’ approach to racial equity demands that city leadership understand all the institutions at play in addressing inequities, not just local government. Building power in communities of color is a key aspect of the city’s racial equity

values. Through initiatives such as the Grand Rapids Neighborhood Summit, its Neighborhood Match Fund, and its Neighborhood Leadership Academy, the city strives to expand the narrative of racial equity beyond city hall. The goal is for that message to be heard loud and clear throughout communities and throughout businesses, schools, and other key institutions.

Stacy Stout, assistant to the city manager, helped to develop the annual Grand Rapids Neighborhood Summit, which involves 500 community members. The event seeks to advance racial equity and shift power within the city throughout its planning and execution. Grand Rapids solicits proposals from the community to develop practical, skills-based workshops such as how to repair your home to avoid selling, preventing displacement. During the summit, residents can learn what's required to develop powerful organizations that engage in civic life and create opportunities for community-driven solutions. The 2019 summit included popular theater-style activities for participants to practice learning how to intervene when they witness or experience an instance of racist or oppressive behavior, also known as a microaggression. The event also acknowledged that the city is built on indigenous land by opening with remarks by an elder of the Anishinaabe community rather than a Grand Rapids elected official.

The city has created several other opportunities to embed racial equity within neighborhood association policies, practices, and approaches. The Neighborhood Leadership Academy, a partnership with the Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University and neighborhood associations, seeks to build skills like recruitment, fundraising, and board operations. Another component of the city's work supported by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation is an initiative to create neighborhood associations in neighborhoods of concentrated disinvestment. The goals are to:

- Strengthen communities through better organization
- Support communities' access to opportunity
- Improve skills to negotiate for more community resources in development processes such as community benefits, investments, and jobs

By supporting and developing initiatives focused on shifting power to residents, increasing resources and improving organizational skills for communities of color, the city of Grand Rapids hopes to ensure that racial equity efforts are community-led and grounded in their specific needs.

Summary: Grand Rapids

1 Mayor Rosalynn Bliss started Grand Rapids' racial equity work during her first year in office in 2016. The first two years of the city's work included a focus on community power building and the development of racial equity tools.

2 The city's annual Neighborhood Summit elevates resident voices and provides meaningful support for community members to understand their own power and build power collectively.

3 The city manager's office is developing accountability measures to build on the city's racial equity toolkit and embed racial equity as a lens throughout the city's continuous improvement processes.



GRAND RAPIDS NEIGHBORHOOD SUMMIT

Photo courtesy of
City of Grand Rapids, Michigan

1 Targeted Universalism — Targeted universalism is a strategy “that is inclusive of the needs of both the dominant and the marginal groups but pays particular attention to the situatedness of the marginal group.” Targeted universalism moves beyond “formal equality that would treat all people the same as a way of denying difference” to an approach that “incorporates difference and evaluates the outcome as well as the intent.” — From *Post-Racialism or Targeted Universalism*, 86 Denv. U. L. Rev. 785 (2008)