



Report to the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors from the Chairman's Stakeholders Council on Race

December 3, 2019

In February 2019, in the wake of the controversy involving Governor Ralph Northam, Chairman Sharon Bulova invited a group of stakeholders representing residents, staff, and the civic, faith, nonprofit, philanthropic, and business communities to come together to foster open and honest discussions on issues surrounding race, with an ultimate goal of engaging the community to inform the County's application of the One Fairfax Policy (participant list attached). Your invitation suggested a desire for the group to host one or more community dialogues on race, but deferring to the will of the group, you left it up to the us to determine what our actual product would be.

In the group's first meeting on February 27th, a few points became clear:

1. There were varying levels of understanding among participants about the challenges of race and equity in Fairfax County.
2. There were a number of conversations about race already going on within and among various community groups in the County.
3. There was a need to develop a common understanding among group members about the current conditions – as well as some of the factors that caused conditions of inequity.

The group agreed that the first step for us would be to engage in a process that focused on facts rather than anecdotes about the racial inequities in Fairfax County and some of the historic reasons for the persistence of those inequities. The first guest speaker was Dr. Steven Woolf, then-director of the Center on Society and Health at Virginia Commonwealth University, who presented data from his report "Getting Ahead: The Uneven Opportunity Landscape in Northern Virginia", which had been commissioned by the Northern Virginia Health Foundation. Dr. Woolf shared census-tract maps of Northern Virginia and of Fairfax County that displayed a variety of indicators, including demographic data, median household income, unemployment levels, and poverty rate. He pointed out that in some instances, areas of wealth and disadvantage existed in close proximity to one another. For example, in Chantilly, on one side of Poplar Tree Road, residents had a median household income of roughly \$202,000, a poverty level of 2%, an unemployment level of 3%, 64% of the residents were white, and 6% were Hispanic. On the other side of Poplar Tree Road, literally, residents of that census tract had a median household income of \$70,000, a poverty level of 23%, an unemployment level of 11%, and 51% of the residents were Hispanic and 30% were white. Further, life expectancy, (how long a newborn baby can be expected to live) varies by as much as 11 years across the county, from 78 years in parts of Centreville, Annandale, and the Richmond Highway Corridor to 89 years in neighborhoods near Reston Town Center and Tyson's. Dr. Woolf stressed that "islands of disadvantage" could be found throughout Fairfax County — and throughout Northern Virginia and that the solutions that would be most effective

in improving health and well-being would be those relating not just to health but to housing, transportation, education, economics and other structural factors.

At a subsequent meeting, the group had the opportunity to view a segment of the documentary “Race: The Power of an Illusion”. The segment focused on the historic context for housing segregation, highlighting such factors as federal, state, and local laws barring the sale of homes to people of color, exclusionary covenants, and the redlining practices of financial institutions that limited housing options. What followed was a candid and robust discussion of how those factors continue to influence housing patterns and deployment of resources today. Group members also established the importance of learning more about the history of race and racism in the country and focusing our efforts on further exploring on what we came to see as key drivers of equity in Fairfax County – land use and housing policy and practice and fostering constructive communications in the community about race and structural inequity.

In September, the Stakeholders Council invited another group to join our efforts, the One Fairfax Community Roundtable. The Roundtable is a group of community leaders originally convened in 2015 to participate in the development of Equitable Growth Profile of Fairfax County but continuing to meet, recognizing a shared interest in collaborative planning and community action to advance a vision of One Fairfax. The joint meetings of the Stakeholders Council and the One Fairfax Community Roundtable included facilitated discussions with a housing and land use policy expert from the Government Alliance on Race and Equity on the topic of *Strategies for Equitable Housing and Land Use Policy and Practices* and a half-day communications training with Provoc, a nationally recognized communications firm with expertise in communicating effectively about equity. To gain a better understanding of the various groups that were holding discussions about race and racism, and to hear the range of perspectives held, the groups undertook a Network Mapping exercise that identified the sectors, organizations, individuals they personally knew were engaged in such activity.

The members of the Stakeholders Council and the Roundtable engaged with each other and within their personal networks in thoughtful discussions about what they were learning, and the steps that should be taken in order to address structural racism and share these key insights:

1. Race is a social construct and has no genetic basis. No one characteristic, trait, or even gene distinguishes all the members of one so-called race from all the members of another so-called race. Race isn't biological, but racism is real.
2. Racialized practices in government and social institutions have afforded people differing access to opportunities and resources.
3. Colorblindness or pretending race does not exist will not end racism. Racism is more than stereotypes and individual prejudice and must be addressed by identifying and remedying the social policies and institutional practices that advantage some groups at the expense of others.
4. Racism is like a picture that looks different depending on the angle from which you look at it.

5. Racism is driven by fear of the other and fear of loss.
6. Race is the number one predictor of how well you'll do in our society. People of color have disproportionate exposure to adverse conditions – social, economic, environmental, etc.
7. Geography has become a proxy for race because of the history of housing segregation.
8. We have inherited the structure of inequity that exists in the county today, but we do not have to maintain it.
9. One Fairfax has made it easier to talk about equity, but it will be harder to talk about the actions that will get us there and what equity would actually look like in practice and in outcome.
10. In acknowledging the inherent challenges of striving to be an equitable community, the Stakeholders Council embraced a quote from tennis great Arthur Ashe, "*Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can.*" To become One Fairfax, the community must work with the county to:
 - Unearth the common values we share, recognizing that while we may start in different places and have different perspectives, we can all participate in becoming One Fairfax and becoming One Fairfax benefits us all;
 - Help people see outside of the "bubbles" in which they live;
 - Challenge people's attitudes and misperceptions about where people live and why and why people face the life conditions they face;
 - Embrace a policy agenda that focuses deliberately on creating the conditions for every Fairfax County resident to be healthy and successful;
 - Equip and support people to realize and actualize their power and to activate their own networks to have comfortable and meaningful conversations about race and equity;
 - Confront the opposing theories of scarcity vs. limitless possibility and acknowledge the economic impacts of not addressing the persistent inequities present in our community; and
 - Accept a shared understanding of our history, both nationally and locally, understanding that history is usually written by the winners, those who hold the power, and we must contest the dominant narratives that exist about the success and challenges of the county and its residents.

While the work of the Stakeholders Council on Race has come to an end, we recommend that next steps be taken to engage "influencers" in all sectors of the county to assist in the realization of One Fairfax.

We acknowledge the important progress made by the county government since the release of the Equitable Growth Profile in 2015 – the adoption of the One Fairfax Resolution and Policy, the appointment of the county’s first Chief Equity Officer, and the designation and training of Equity Leads in each county department to lead the development of Equity Impact Plans for each county. But if One Fairfax is going to be successful, leaders in the private sector, faith community, nonprofit sector, philanthropic sector, and community organizations need to be engaged in this work, as well, not just to monitor the progress of the government, but also to lead and support the work in their own organizations and sectors.

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