



City of Mount Vernon

Washington

Racial Equity & Community Impact Report for the Mount Vernon Library Commons

June 2021

JUSTICE, EQUITY, AND OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL PEOPLE OF MOUNT VERNON

INTRODUCTION

As the nation witnesses acts of racism from unfair lack of access to resources and opportunities, it is essential to engage in sincere efforts to understand and to develop an effective and sustainable plan to address systemic disadvantages to be an equitable and anti-racist community. This is especially important in a community that has a majority minority school district.

Racism for many patrons of the Mount Vernon City Library is invisible, while for others, racism is present in their lives. Libraries, although social-minded, have held both blatant and implicit bias. The Library (in collaboration with others in business, education, law enforcement, etc.) has such a vital responsibility to engage the greater community in stopping racism and bias; in moving toward equity, diversity and, inclusion; in ending the unfair treatment of people of color and making City of Mount Vernon a better place for all people.

This brief report examines the new Mount Vernon Library Commons project with a racial equity lens. We were thinking about the City, businesses, schools and individuals throughout the community. We hope this report is a beginning step in a long-term, sustainable, and practical approach to creating a civic institution with racial equity "built-in" from the start.

THE PROCESS

I. Buckets

We realized at the onset that the substantial and important work required would benefit if it were organized into key categories or bucket lists based on input received. Therefore, the provided comments that were grouped into the following "buckets" for this report.

- Economic Justice
- Early Childhood Education
- Child Welfare
- Juvenile Justice
- Environmental Equity

This process helped identify ways to change programs and practices that perpetuate implicit bias and alternatively good programs that support racial equity that we aim to improve through the construction of a new facility.

The buckets represent the areas where the Library Commons Project has the most significant impact on community-wide racism. They do not represent the totality of the project's impact.

II. KEY OBSERVATIONS

There were common themes that became evident throughout the process of collecting information to form recommendations. Acceptance of these observations as truth is critical to the success of any actions taken to advance our community toward equity and inclusivity for black people, indigenous people, and all people of color.

- 1) Based on the lived experiences spoken by people of color in Mount Vernon, the Library concludes that racism exists in the City of Mount Vernon. The public also wants community leaders to take a clear anti-racism position by addressing systemic, cultural, and individual manifestations of racism.
- 2) Many library community members have not experienced racism and yet may unintentionally perpetuate racial inequities, discrimination, and biases. The purpose of identifying sources and practices of implicit bias is not to cause conflict but to ultimately unearth unconscious bias and teach our organizations to use a lens of equity in working together as a community to promote health and well-being for everyone. We acknowledge that the dialogue must always be open to addressing problematic and potentially harmful behaviors. However, we stand affirmed we will help affect positive change.
- 3) Our primary buckets of Economic Justice, Early Childhood Education, Child Welfare, Juvenile Justice, and Environmental Equity do not represent the entirety of the new library commons impacts on the community. Everything from the policies we hold to the staff we hire impacts the community. We acknowledge that real change is a process of continuous improvement. We cannot simply build a building and "fix racism."

III. Reports Concerning Our Focus "Buckets"

1) Economic Justice

The Mount Vernon City Library serves thousands of low-income county residents. Because poverty disproportionately impacts non-white people, this Library disproportionately serves people of color with lifeline services, including access to computers for online applications, assistance with unemployment, wi-fi access for school and education materials, food security programs, and connections with social services. Historically there have been clear racial undertones in all libraries' administration of "resources for all." However, the Mount Vernon City Library has had tolerance and sensitivity as core values for decades. Through its work, it managed to shift use patterns to represent the community at large. The Library is committed to using its resources to meaningfully help individuals and families on a path out of poverty.

Ongoing Work

Along with the Office of the Mayor, the Social Workers assisting the police force, the Library has been working on the barriers that disproportionately impact non-White people and may include access to food, transportation, education, employment, child care, and housing. The Library has developed a toolkit that helps individuals get informed recommendations for social services. In many cases, these services then monitor and individual progress in overcoming

these barriers. We continue to work on this tool kit with the hope of supporting as many Skagit residents as possible. We know our referral network could be more robust, and feedback has noted the Library needs to take an active role in these issues.

Food security is also a significant challenge, and we are focused on doing what we can to use existing programs to work better. Unlike many areas of the country, a few dollars of seeds and a small patch of land can genuinely impact a family's food security because food security directly impacts economic security. That is why the Library started and has grown the Skagit Seed Library into the most extensive free gardening resource in the county. In the first half of 2021, they impacted more than 200 families distributing over 3,500 seed packets. However, community feedback points to a much greater need. Students are less likely to continue a degree if food difficulties arise, especially in higher education.

Impact of the Library Commons Project

The Library Commons Project is designed to increase access to several critical programs by expanding access. Community highlighted advantages include 1) increased access to broadband, 2) increased access to community resources including social work navigators, 3) increased access to community food programs including the potential of hosting a Meals on Wheels Program, 4) increased access to business-grade computing conferencing and business tools. These programs are designed to reach all people. However, they will serve the economically disadvantaged at a greater rate than the general public. Therefore, the project will continue to incorporate inclusive design principles going forward and will continue to look for unconscious design bias that may impact access.

2) Early Childhood Education

Racial disparities in the earliest years come at a crucial time for an infant's development and can affect children across their lifespan. National studies have demonstrated statistically significant findings that non-white children are more likely to experience lower quality early education. This fact is particularly problematic, given that high-quality early education can lead to improved cognitive development, which leads to better school readiness, which, in turn, is predictive of higher educational attainment, economic and health status in adulthood.

One of the key factors in early development is the exposure to language. Early language exposure affects every domain of early learning and the degree to which children elicit stimulation from their caregivers and their environment (developing early social, emotional skills). Thus, the trifecta of language skills, social-emotional skills, and self-regulation are the three vital tentpoles of early learning and school success.

Reading books to children remains one of the most heavily studied and effective ways to impact early development positively. Supporting reading has a more significant impact than access to high-quality programs. The caregiver who reads to a child significantly boosts a child's

vocabulary and provides critical language interaction that doesn't naturally arise even in a well-spoken household.

Ongoing Work

The recommended number of books read to a child in the critical 18 -36-month window is three books a day given the 720-day critical window that leaves a staggering total of 2,160 books read to a child in an 18-month window (repeat readings are ok). An advantaged family would need a public library to support the recommendations, even with an extensive at-home library. We are talking about nearly 5,000 titles read to a child from birth to kindergarten. The Mount Vernon City library has recently launched a 1000 Books before kindergarten. The program is based on the simple premise of reading a book, any book, to your child, most days with the goal of reading 1,000 before kindergarten). This challenge is a very manageable endeavor. This incentivized program helps families engage in this needed intervention. The Library recognizes that more outreach is necessary to create widespread adoption.

Libraries provide free, safe environments that offer repeated exposure to positive interactions during those critical years from birth to age 5. Various story times, access to books, art activities, family areas with opportunities to role-play, build and discover — all of these things foster brain development and early literacy and math skills. We often think of reading to a child as a natural skill. Still, many parents are reading to their very young children the way they've been taught to read aloud in grade school, causing them to struggle with the contrast between the child's natural curiosity and their belief that the child should sit quietly and listen. The more impoverished the family, the more likely they are to be authoritarian in their interactions with their child, which decreases the benefit of language discovery. That is why the Library continues to interact and teach parents about the benefits of reading with curiosity.

Impact of the Library Commons Project.

Currently, in Skagit County, only 31% of children have a formal preschool experience. The project expands a dedicated children's area. We aim to expand the opportunities to learn vital literacy skills in a free and super fun environment. The Library's early childhood learning librarian makes sure all the little ones are developing through playing, talking, reading, singing, and writing so they're prepared to enter school.

Despite libraries' continued service to children, however, many children remain underserved. For example, prereading activities are often not accessible to children whose parents cannot bring them to libraries in the first place. With the vast majority of children under five coming from households where both parents work, too many of the City's children's library access is limited. That is why the Library commons project expands in building access and the Library's ability to launch community outreach. Whenever possible an in-building program will have a digital and physical outreach program facilitated by the technology in the new building, so we can reach to those who might not otherwise have the opportunity to attend a library.

3) Child Welfare

Nationally, the overrepresentation of non-white children in the child welfare system has been well documented across numerous research studies. At the same time, the impact of racial disparity in the child welfare system requires recognition. It also must be noted that non-white families have a more challenging time exiting the child welfare system. One of the critical requirements of monitored parent visits is extremely difficult to do when you don't have access to a public, kid-appropriate activity conducted in a safe indoor space.

Ongoing Work

To address disparities, the Mount Vernon City Library has been working with the child welfare agencies and families to provide a safe place to have a child visit (with or without a caseworker or visitation monitor). However, the Library is often limited by the physical space and the ability to appropriately provide meal space (a vital component of a facilitated visit which limits its ability to capitalize on fully). Each month, approximately 220 of the county's children are in out-of-home care and are required to have court-ordered visits with their parent(s) and/or siblings. Most visitation plans require a pair of two-hour visits a week. The library space is suited to handle only a tiny fraction of that need.

Impact of the Library Commons Project.

Regular, frequent and progressive visitation is an integral part of the reunification process after a child is removed from their home. Visitation is intended to maintain, strengthen and/or redefine the parent-child relationship during a difficult time for everyone involved. Frequent and consistent visitation is linked to positive outcomes, including improved child well-being and faster reunification when it is in the child's best interest. Furthermore, visitation in an institution where early childhood education is built into the institution can positively influence caregivers. The Library Commons Project is built to strengthen this critical service with better space suited for more visits.

4) Juvenile Justice

It is challenging to address systemic racism without talking about policing, the court system, and how many youths first enter this system. Data shows that the stark racial disparities in our court system start early. In Washington, African-American youth were seven times more likely to be in Juvenile Rehabilitation Administration custody than Caucasians; multiracial youth were three times more likely, and Hispanic youth were almost one and a half times more likely. This fact is clearly significantly disproportionate to the general population and is reflective of biases that operate on multiple levels throughout the entire juvenile court system.

Ongoing work

Justice-involved individuals have lower high school graduation rates and higher unemployment rates than the general population. They also experience higher rates of homelessness and eviction. Most importantly, a link between detention and increased rates of recidivism has been documented. Therefore, one of the significant challenges Juvenile Justice has is providing positive reward strategies that incentivize youth to learn and keep pace with graduation.

For more than two decades, the Library has interacted with Juvenile Rehabilitation to incentivize education participation with a book club. This program has helped facilitate greater education participation and positively impact the pathway of students. In many cases, students read their first non-school book as a part of this program.

Impact of the Library Commons Project.

One of the critical factors for a successful incentive program is flexibility. Adjusting to the daily population, site needs, and even the daily emotions of the kids builds a better program. The new library commons location is designed to be closer to the rehabilitation facility so staff can be even more flexible with services.

5) Environmental Equity

Environmental racism is the disproportionate impact of environmental hazards on people of color. Environmental justice is the movement's response to environmental racism.

"Environmental equity" is not environmental justice. "Environmental equity" is the government's response to the demands of the environmental justice movement. The environmental justice movement isn't seeking to simply redistribute environmental harms but to abolish them.

Ongoing work

People of color bear disproportionate harm from fossil fuels. For example, Black people in the U.S. are more likely than white people to live near oil refineries and petrochemical plants. In addition, people of color are less likely to own cars and more likely to use public transit than their white counterparts, so they generate a disproportionately small share of motor vehicle pollution. But they suffer disproportionately large impacts. Therefore, the adoption of EVs has a more significant impact on people of color. The Library has worked for years providing community education on EV adoption but has not lived by example. We aim to change this reality.

In a 2020 consumer reports survey, people were asked, "Of the following attributes, which, if any, are holding you back from purchasing or leasing a plug-in electric vehicle for your next vehicle? 48% (the largest factor) said "not enough charging stations" was the primary barrier to EV adoption. The Library acknowledges we need to improve in our role as an EV charging provider.

Impact of the Library Commons Project

The Mount Vernon Library commons project aims to convert millions of miles from fossil fuels to EVs by providing a community catalyst EV project. We want to start by creating a public mega electric vehicle charging floor with 85 plus stations. This work is aimed at creating more significant environmental equity.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the goal of the Library Commons Project is to "build a structure that is safe, just and accessible to all in the community and that has measurable and accountable ways it holds our community values" (*Lyn Oslon, proud member of the library community*).

We present this report to the City with both sincere concern and optimism. The City and Library leadership acknowledge their role in affecting change that builds racial equity and inclusion. We agreed that there is much continued work to do, and it is difficult to know how a structure will work in reality. However, the project's important interest aimed at making an immediate impact on racial equality is worth advancing. The continuation of this process with community involvement to include ongoing examination, dialogue, measurement, and change will be essential to the project's long-term success. Yet, at this time, the Mount Vernon Library Commons project seems like a step in the right direction.