



# The Tools to Fight Racial Inequality

BY NATASHA VON KAENEL

**T**his last year has seen a reawakening in the national conversation about race. And while this renewed attention is positive, there has been little change in the rampant racism that permeates both our institutions and culture.

Julie Nelson, the Director of the Government Alliance on Race and Equity, might have the reason why.

“The vast majority of people, when you ask them, ‘Do you support equality?’ They will say, ‘Yes,’” she says. “But what we need to work on is the institutions and structures that create racial inequity.”

In Seattle, Nelson worked to develop a tool to bring conversations about race into government. The Race Equity Toolkit “bakes equity into the decision-making process” by forcing policy makers to answer questions about race equity and the impacts of their policy on communities of color. When using the toolkit, policy makers involve members and stakeholders from impacted communities directly in the development of policy and legislation, and work to identify and fix problems before they even start.

The Race Equity Toolkit may soon be implemented right here in Sacramento. A few weeks ago, Nelson met with Sacramento city council members and community leaders to educate them about the toolkit and its impacts across the country. The event was put on with the help of The California Endowment’s Building Healthy Communities initiative, which aims to create change in the laws, policies and systems that impact health for residents in communities facing inequities, including South Sacramento.

Currently only a handful of cities use the Race Equity Toolkit, but Nelson believes the best way to create race equity in this country is for that number to keep growing.

“When looking at the history of government in the United States, government has played a key role in creating and maintaining racial inequities,” she says. “So for us to get to different outcomes, we have to work across the breadth and depth of government.”

## “WHAT WE NEED TO WORK ON IS THE INSTITUTIONS AND STRUCTURES THAT CREATE RACIAL INEQUITY.”

*Julie Nelson, Director, Government Alliance on Race and Equity*

This may sound lofty in theory, but in practice it is surprisingly simple — and effective. For example, take garbage pickups in Seattle. Before analyzing its data, Seattle’s public utility hadn’t realized there were more missed garbage pickups in lower-income communities of color than in others. But with the Race Equity Toolkit, this disparity became obvious, and policy makers began working to address it.

They brought together all involved parties and found that the higher population density in lower-income communities of color meant the routes needed to be planned differently. Nelson emphasizes that this wasn’t a case of individual racism. Many of the garbage collectors lived in

these very same communities, and were upset when presented with this disparity. But with small tweaks to route planning and practices, the problem was fixed.

“Every single job has a relationship to racial equity,” Nelson explains. “So this toolkit sort of calls out what that relationship is, and makes sure that instead of perpetuating inequities, we are advancing racial equity.”

## BUILDING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

In 2010, The California Endowment launched a 10-year, \$1 billion plan to improve the health of 14 challenged communities across the state. Over the 10 years, residents, community-based organizations and public institutions will work together to address the socioeconomic and environmental challenges contributing to the poor health of their communities.

Julie Nelson leads a workshop for Building Healthy Communities grantees on ways to break down institutional racism in communities. Photo by Louise Mitchell



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