



**ADVANCE OPPORTUNITY.  
ACHIEVE EQUITY.**

**Why Lead with Race?**

***Challenging Institutional  
Racism to Create an  
Equitable Society for All***

The City of Seattle and the Seattle Office for Civil Rights challenge many forms of oppression, including racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism and many others. The Race and Social Justice Initiative (RSJI) focuses on eliminating institutional racism and racial inequity. We are sometimes asked, “Why lead with race?” RSJI leads with race because of:

1. The pervasive and deep disparities faced by people of color. We recognize that challenging institutional and structural racism is essential if we are to support the creation of a just and equitable society;
2. The many years of community organizing that demanded the City to address racial inequity. To this end, we recognize the necessity of supporting all communities in challenging racism; and
3. The necessity of focus. We recognize that efforts to eliminate racism are essential to achieving an equitable society, and that those efforts by themselves are insufficient. We “lead with race,” and are also working on institutionalized sexism, heterosexism, ableism and other oppressions.

### ***Why focus on institutions?***

RSJI focuses on institutional racism because we recognize that while individual racism deserves our attention, for long term change to take place, it is necessary to elevate the discussion to how eliminating institutional racism can help lead to racial equity. By focusing on policies, practices and programs which advantage white communities while disadvantaging communities of color, we are able to better impact racial inequities.

Just as institutions work to the benefit of white people, they also work to the benefit of men, heterosexuals, non-disabled people and so on. We understand how critical it is to address all social justice issues, and that an institutional approach is necessary across the board. The definitions and tools we use to eliminate institutional racism can also be used to eliminate institutional sexism, heterosexism, ableism and other oppressions. As we deepen our ability to eliminate racial inequity, we will be better equipped to transform systems and institutions towards collective liberation for all.

### ***What about people experiencing multiple oppressions?***

All historically disadvantaged groups – people of color, lesbians, gay men, people who are transgendered, women, people with disabilities, low-income households, to name a few – experience systemic inequity. Many people and communities live at the intersection of these identities, for example lesbians of color, experiencing multiple inequities at once. By centering on race and using tools that can be applied across oppressions, we increase the ability of all of us to work for equity.

### ***Are you saying racism is worse than other oppressions?***

No. We know that racism is deeply embedded in the institutions in this society leading to inequities in all major indicators of success and wellness. We must look at how this country was founded on the attempted genocide of Native people and the enslavement of African people. This legacy was institutionalized in all aspects of our society, and continues to create racialized impacts born from structural policies, practices and procedures, often unintentionally. In fact, race is consistently a primary indicator of a person’s success and wellness in society.

By focusing on race and racism, we recognize that we have the ability to impact all communities, including addressing the impacts of racism on LGBTQ people of color. We are prioritizing an anti-racist strategy in order to create an equitable society for all. This prioritization is not based on the intent to create a ranking of oppressions (i.e. a belief that racism is “worse” than other forms of oppression). For an equitable society to come into being, we need to challenge the way racism is used as a divisive issue keeping communities from coming together to organize for change.

While the RSJI leads with race, we recognize that all oppressions are perpetuated by the interplay of institutions, individuals, and culture operating amidst the weight of history. For all people and communities to experience liberation, we must transform all aspects of our society.

***I am focusing on addressing another form of oppression (for example, heterosexism, sexism, etc.). How does RSJI address these?***

It is important that we all are committed to ending oppression to create an equitable society. It is crucial that as we prioritize our strategies, we maintain an approach that recognizes that all oppressions are inter-connected. Racism is one barrier keeping all marginalized communities from uniting to work towards their own liberation.

Recognizing the structural interplay between all oppressions, RSJI has supported many communities in addressing issues of racial justice and the inter-relationship between racism and other forms of oppression. RSJI has done workshops and presentations for a wide range of communities, including women, LGBTQ, people with disabilities, and so on. We continue to leverage resources to challenge all forms of oppression to create an equitable and just society for all.

***I am primarily focused on addressing another form of oppression, but am supportive of efforts to eliminate racial inequities as well...How can I be supportive of RSJI?***

For City of Seattle employees, we encourage you to: join or actively support your department's RSJI Change Team; attend RSJI sponsored trainings and events; insure that the Racial Equity Toolkit is implemented in your department and in your community; get to know your department's RSJI workplan and how you can help with implementation.

Whether a City employee or not, intentionally center the experiences and perspectives of people and communities of color as you do work towards ending oppressions other than racism. Strengthen your ability to understand how racism intersects with other forms of oppression and privileges, and how policies might have unintended consequences for communities of color. Support the efforts of the Race and Social Justice Community Roundtable in ending racial inequity in Seattle.