

# Seattle Human Services Department

## Youth and Family Empowerment Division 2017-2018

### Community Outreach Summary

#### I. Background

The Youth and Family Empowerment Division (YFE) of the Seattle Human Services Department (HSD) began its community engagement process in 2017, with a core team of three staff responsible for planning and implementing engagement. The focus of this effort was to learn from communities to inform three funding processes to be released in 2018 and early 2019: Family Support, Community Safety and Food and Nutrition.

YFE staff began the community engagement process by examining City disparity data, looking particularly at communities where there were economic and educational disparities based on race. In addition, staff leveraged their own knowledge of HSD's institutional history to identify communities that the department had not connected with in the past. Using this knowledge and available data, staff created a list of potential communities for Learning Circles. Learning Circles are an interactive and participatory method to engage community members in group settings. Learning Circles include the following elements:

- Held in a space that is comfortable and convenient for community members
- Take a "brainstorming" approach, where there is no wrong response and all ideas and voices are welcome
- Ask open-ended questions that spark dialogue and reflection
- Are flexible and allow for topics that are important to community members to emerge for discussion

The goal of Learning Circles is to build relationships with community and increase HSD's knowledge of community strengths and needs.

Based on that initial list, staff consulted with other City departments and groups to identify gaps in our outreach strategy, and to gather advice about how to best engage these communities.

Consulted departments and groups include:

- Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs
- Department of Neighborhoods
- Office for Civil Rights
- Internal City affinity groups: Native American, Asian Pacific Islander, Latinx
- Our Best - City of Seattle Black Male Achievement Initiative
- Families of Color (parent group)
- King County's Best Starts for Kids
- City staff with community connections

When planning outreach, YFE was intentional in reaching out to groups organized by community members as well as smaller agencies, in particular ones that were not funded through the division. Most of the agencies funded through YFE have opportunities to voice their opinion, and participants of these agencies are often surveyed during program evaluations. Staff wanted to ensure that feedback was as candid as possible and not limited to programs currently funded by the City.

In an effort to reach more people, YFE also considered conducting large outreach events which is a form of engagement that has been used in the past by City departments. After holding internal discussions regarding this approach, it was decided that small groups with specific communities would result in more meaningful conversations and feedback. Smaller groups would also help to ensure the voices of underrepresented communities would be prioritized. YFE staff participated in two larger outreach events early in the process but found it difficult to have authentic, in-depth conversations in that forum.

## II. Organizing the Learning Circles

Once communities and community partners were identified, YFE staff began the process of reaching out and discussing the intent behind the community engagement. These discussions took time, and occurred in person, over the phone and via email. Not all communities or community partners had the capacity or the interest in participating in Learning Circles, and YFE staff respected this, while leaving the door open for future opportunities.

The Learning Circles were organized and convened in partnership with communities. The work done by the community partners was crucial to the success of the Learning Circles; they recruited the participants and lent their credibility and support to the circles. City staff offered guidance to their community partners regarding the size of the circles, the general topic areas of community safety, food access, and family support that would be the focus of the circles and costs that the City could reimburse. The Learning Circles were held at times and locations that worked best for the community; many of the Circles were held on evenings or weekends. When appropriate, YFE staff utilized existing community meetings and held Learning Circles during these meetings.

## III. Facilitating the Learning Circles

A core group of three YFE staff facilitated the Learning Circles, prompting discussion with pre-developed discussion questions organized by investment area: Food and Nutrition, Community Safety, Family Support. The Circles were informal; the questions were used to get conversation started, and staff wrote community members' responses on large chart paper, so responses could be shared and documented.

Questions were designed to be:

- Broad—one question per investment area, and one broader question that focused on the intersectional impact of discrimination
- Inclusive and trauma informed—questions did not require people to share personal stories that could be painful, although space was made for those who wished to do so. Stories were listened to without judgement or attempts to control the narrative.
- Adaptive—the wording of questions changed based on feedback from communities.

During facilitation of the sessions, YFE staff committed to listening with humility and recognized that community members were the experts on the strengths and needs of their communities. Part of successful facilitation meant not controlling the direction or content of feedback and acknowledging the legitimate criticisms that community members made. Staff did not critique feedback that was provided, instead holding neutral positions and viewing all feedback as an opportunity to learn. Community members were remarkably generous with their time and their knowledge, despite having negative experiences when providing feedback to City departments or elected officials in the past. During many of the Learning Circles, community members reported feeling used for political purposes or being solicited for their input and then having their input ignored. Community members were clear that they would like to see City staff participating in community events and being available to communities throughout the year.

A two-hour block of time was scheduled for each Learning Circle. Roughly 50% of the Learning Circles went beyond two-hours as participants were interested in completing thoughts and themes. Host sites offered meals or snacks to attendees as appropriate to the time of the gathering and provided recommendations for culturally specific foods.

#### IV. Lessons Learned: Planning and Facilitation

After completing all Learning Circles, we went through a process to identify lessons learned that could inform future community engagement. There four high level themes that arose from this process:

1. Different communities receive questions differently: We need to be aware that different communities have different preferences for how questions are worded. We also need to be nimble and have the ability to adjust in the moment.
2. Two staff at each session works best: Having two staff present ensure there's enough time and attention for everyone to be able to be heard and for comments to be recorded.
3. Diversity in staff attendance supports authentic connections: Having diversity in our staff allows for people to connect with different personalities, ages, genders, races and ethnicities which increases the likelihood that community members can connect with a staff person they felt comfortable speaking with.

4. Be aware of other City engagement efforts: Another lesson came from learning more about how general communication with the City is received. HSD is not the only department asking for community members' time and distinguishing the context for the current engagement as well as acknowledging community fatigue in some areas took time and effort.

Recommendations:

- Be authentic, humble listeners.
- Smaller groups work best (<20)
- Go to where groups are naturally gathering, so the burden of having to attend additional meetings is not placed on community members.
- Be flexible when scheduling and conducting outreach.
- When possible, work directly with communities to organize engagement. If you can't work directly with community members, work with organizations that are based in community and are not currently contracted for the service area. Removing currently funded agencies as the "middlemen" helps ensure the discussion is not just a critique of currently funded services, and keeps the conversation open to all possible uses for HSD funds.
- Have a dedicated budget to offer for any anticipated costs: childcare, food, interpretation, space, transportation, etc.

## V. Lessons Learned: YFE Investment Areas

"The City has to make an effort to learn community needs and hire from the community to serve the community." --Participant, Khmer Buddhist Temple Learning Circle

"Thank you for coming to listen to us." - Youth, Red Eagle Soaring Learning Circle

While the Learning Circles focused on the three investment areas scheduled to have funding processes released in 2018-2019, communities also provided information on other YFE investment areas, such as Youth Employment and Youth Development. The following section summarizes the key takeaways from Community Engagement, grouped by investment area.

### **Family Support**

Family Support is an area of interest to many of the communities involved in the Learning Circles. Common feedback included the need for:

- more family-friendly spaces (and greater access to them)

- more parental education and family mentoring
- greater support for kinship caregivers
- help facilitating parent/child communication

Emphasis was placed on creating culturally relevant spaces and programs that help foster inter-generational connections in different communities. Cambodian culture, for example, generally relies on neighbors helping each other, but that type of support may not exist in the same way in Seattle, which makes it difficult for community members to know where to go for help. Some cultures cannot take out loans unless they are no-interest, so the availability of loan programs may be limited.

### **Youth Development**

Feedback in youth development focused heavily on improved school involvement and providing resources for staying healthy mentally and physically. Communities consistently expressed a desire for additional or expanded after-school program availability. Ideas included extended community center hours, free programming, and greater access to parks and recreation services. Many Learning Circles mentioned mentoring and other types of emotional support, through family programs or trauma-informed care in mental health, as important factors as well.

### **Youth Employment**

Community members asked about both education and employment elements for supporting Youth Employment. Education, whether through apprenticeships, GEDs, or support at school was an important factor in considering whether services effectively help youth with employment. The community also highlighted the desire for partnerships with local businesses both for job opportunities and for support of other community programs.

### **Food and Meals**

A recurring theme from the community was a need for meals to be **both** healthy and affordable. There is a tendency for meals and food to be either one or the other, but not both. Several communities called out the gap between income levels where services are available, and the income level where families could afford enough nutritious food. Additional culturally-relevant options are also lacking in the system as a whole. Community members expressed a lot of interest in classes and education around nutrition, cooking, choosing food, etc. The more people know how and when to access the right food resources, the more secure they will feel around food in general. School lunches were highlighted as particularly important aspects of eating healthy but commonly less nutritious.

## **Community Safety**

Community members primarily identified strategies for supporting community safety, as opposed to specific needs. The strategies included:

- increased coordination and collaboration among community organizations;
- better addressing kids' needs by providing mentoring, re-entry supports, and transition supports for school and work;
- improving relationships and positive interaction with police officers and the police department.

Some specific activities identified were similar to those listed around Family Support and Youth Development: increased hours for community centers, greater availability of free programming, and supports for parents to interact with and support their kids.

## **Overall Learnings**

Without exception, each group voiced the need for a sustained, meaningful relationship with the City. Instead of asking community members for advice on a case-by-case basis, community members advocated for a consistent presence of human service, law enforcement and other community-focused staff to have ongoing relationships and a sense of trust with community members. Engagements through ongoing Learning Circles, individual interviews and quarterly check-ins provided insight from community on how the City and its partners could further strengthen relationships. This type of a relationship building would yield benefits for both the City and community in that there would be increased preventative action, decreased waste and a sense of collaboration.

"We need an advocate that can help us see/think further and not faster." - Participant, Department of Adult & Juvenile Detention Learning Circle

## **VI. How We Shared What We Learned**

Part of our commitment to the communities we met with was to share what they told us with other City departments and other HSD divisions. The small team of YFE staff who planned and conducted the community engagements presented to HSD leadership and the HSD outreach workgroup in 2017 and have made themselves available to answer questions and share additional best practices. This team also met with staff from the Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs, the Department of Neighborhoods, the Department of Education & Early Learning and the Office for Civil Rights to share what we learned.

Reporting back the results of the community engagement was planned from the beginning. Communities responded favorably to this commitment from staff to hold themselves and HSD accountable by reporting on not only what was learned but how it was used and how it was shared with other City departments.

The initial plan was to conduct report backs in the Fall/Winter 2017, following the completion of Learning Circles that summer. In addition, the creation, translation and posting of an online survey that was intended to supplement the information gathered in the Learning Circles, took much longer than anticipated. The report that summarized the community engagement process and what was learned was delayed due to internal personnel changes and the emergence of new priorities in the department.

## VII. How We Used What We Learned

### **Food and Meals**

In direct response to the voices of youth at Red Eagle Soaring and CANOES, YFE staff proposed a collaborative pilot program with the Potlatch Fund. The Potlatch Fund is a native-led fund formed in 2002 by Tribal organizations and funders to address disparities and develop and empower Native leadership to make the best use of tribal resources.

With offices in Seattle, the Potlatch Fund's mission is to *expand philanthropy within Tribal Nations and Native Communities in the Northwest by inspiring and building upon the Native tradition of giving*. We requested and received \$92,000 in 2018 to add to Potlatch Fund's existing Community Building, Student Success and Native Arts programs grant-making cycles. As the Potlatch Fund serves Washington, Idaho, Oregon and Montana, YFE's Seattle-specific funding will have a considerable regional impact as it would free up monies toward other viable Native-led projects. There are myriad benefits to this partnership approach including:

- Potlatch Fund's deep understanding of Native American structures and ways of being;
- A grant-making process that is streamlined and tailored to both emerging and experienced organizations;
- Culturally appropriate technical assistance and trainings to Native nonprofits and Tribes;
- Educating mainstream funders such as the City of Seattle;
- Encouraging best practice giving within Indian Country;
- A history of accountability and record keeping that respects both grantor and grantee;
- Building on recommendations from YFE community engagement and the Lay of the Land Research conducted by Equity Matters of grantmaking processes in Seattle communities of color.

As planning commences for the Food and Meals Request for Proposals (RFP), lessons from the Learning Circles will be incorporated into the RFP.

## **Family Support**

Planning for the Family Support RFP began right after the Learning Circles were completed in 2017. Many of the same strategies identified by communities as best practices were also found in the literature review; the needs identified by communities were also reflected in the review of data. These include:

- Services that support families' ability to independently access the increasing number of services and systems they need to interact with;
- Specific programming for different age groups and cultural groups rather than generic "parenting" classes;
- Multi-generational approaches that involve grandparents or other adults as well as parents and children;
- Culturally based programming that accurately and respectfully centers the culture and traditions of a community in service design and delivery;
- Programs designed and delivered by the community being served;
- Support to strengthen and build healthy relationships within the family and within communities;
- Services that help lift families out of poverty.

The Family Support RFP workgroup incorporated these learnings into the development of two strategies, Family Management and Systems Navigation, described below.

**Systems Navigation Support:** training and support to help families learn how to access services and navigate systems on their own. Through this strategy, organizations will help families learn to independently negotiate complex systems that provide needed services. These systems include but are not limited to City and County, education, employment, federal and state social services, health, immigration, law enforcement, and emergency response systems. This support should include at a minimum:

- information about the rights and responsibilities of families within systems;
- the purpose of systems, or what function they serve for families; and
- when and how systems should be utilized.

**Family Management:** training and support to help families build and maintain positive, healthy relationships within their family and with their communities. Examples of the type of needs that could be covered under this strategy include but are not limited to the following:

- needs of kinship care providers
- parent-to-parent relationships
- the challenge of parenting in a new country
- how parents can address discrimination their children may encounter
- parent and child relationships



- parenting different developmental stages/ages of children
- parenting support for all parents and guardians, including but not limited to fathers and male guardians, LGBTQ families, and families with disabilities
- family communication
- parenting with a cultural lens/supporting children's learning about their family's culture and language

In addition to the two strategies noted above, rating criteria included many of the things community members said were important to them, including:

- Requirements for cultural and linguistic representation for agency board members and staff;
- A track record of providing culturally and linguistically relevant services;
- Specific examples of how the culture and language of the community being served is incorporated into services;
- Specific plans to serve multiple generations, fathers and male care givers;
- Evidence of community involvement in the selection, planning, implementation and evaluation of services.

### **Community Safety**

The community engagement process around HSD's Community Safety investment portfolio engaged various segments of community that included recipients of services, those delivering the services and the broader community. This effort is to authentically give voice to those most impacted by violence and poverty through Learning Circles and town hall forums. These events identified and prioritized needs, involved community in the planning process, built on community and neighborhood strengths, and developed collaborative approaches to addressing gaps.

The team encouraged intentional engagements within Juvenile Detention to obtain pertinent information and feedback on activities and strategies to assist in areas of growth and development. These gatherings, in addition to many directed at those most vulnerable and impacted by the disease of violence, will continue to guide and shape future investments through our Community Safety Strategy.

The communities HSD staff spoke with identified the following needs related to community safety: education support, employment support, and re-entry support. These strategies will be reflected in our ongoing engagement and development of future funding processes to ensure Seattle communities are safe, healthy, and hopeful.

HSD and its partners are encouraged to incorporate the latest practices with proven promising and effective research to maximize the impact of our investments.