**History of Equity in Public Involvement, City of Portland 2006-2016**

To have a meaningful discourse about the future of Portland’s public involvement system we must understand the practices that shaped where we are today. We know from people with lived experience as well as the 2016 audit of the Office of Neighborhood Involvement (ONI) that great progress is needed in implementing effective, more inclusive practices. But many programs and initiatives that successfully engaged underserved populations over the last decade saw budget cuts or were otherwise left unfinished. In this moment of city-wide reflection, let us review the efforts of the past to inform our next steps towards equity.

**A Collective Vision**

Upon election in 2005, Mayor Tom Potter initiated a comprehensive review of ONI, called Community Connect. A diverse task force solicited input through 19 different channels, including a listening process with 1,400 stakeholders, half of whom identified with historically underrepresented groups. With copious public feedback as a guide, Community Connect identified overarching goals intended to increase engagement with diverse populations and grow communities’ capacity and ability to influence decision making. Council and the City Auditor directed ONI to adhere to these goals, and the bureau adopted them into its mission, beginning a newly invigorated and formalized effort to serve all Portlanders.

**Investment in Equity**

Community Connect influenced the creation of many new programs and staff positions. ONI hired several people individually dedicated to communities of color, immigrants and refugees, people with disabilities and youth. A small grant program called “New and Diverse Voices” began funding projects that built capacity in minority communities. District Coalitions began distributing Neighborhood Small Grants, and at least 35 percent of funds went to under-engaged populations each year.

Most significantly, Council funded the Diversity and Civic Leadership program (DCL), which increases public engagement with underrepresented populations and awards grants to nonprofits who serve and advocate for them. A coalition of immigrant and refugee advocates, leaders of color and neighborhood volunteers created the program after noticing gaps in the existing involvement system. Since 2007, DCL partner organizations have engaged thousands of people in activities to build community identity, train emerging leaders, work on issue campaigns and strengthen relationships with other organizations and government bodies. The program earned a top ten spot in Harvard University’s 2015 Innovations in Public Engagement Award.

**Collaboration among Communities**

When capacity allowed, DCL partners and District Coalitions worked together to strengthen ties and joint advocacy between neighborhood volunteers and identity-based groups. Representatives from both programs populated the Bureau and Budget Advisory Committee (BAC), and developed relationships and understanding over years of work advising ONI’s direction and budget. When budget cuts threatened the DCL program, District Coalitions volunteered to take cuts instead.

ONI recognized that the nature of volunteer-based neighborhood associations made outreach challenging, and that collaboration between communities required investment of resources and money. For three years, the bureau gave each District Coalition funding for projects in collaboration with DCL partners and other groups serving underrepresented communities. Coalitions and neighborhood volunteers successfully partnered with organizations such as the Native American Youth and Family Center, Human Solutions, Sisters of the Road and the Somali Women’s Association. But budget and organizational constraints ended the grant program, which “slowed such creative efforts,” according to the 2015 “Engaging for Equity” DCL report. A desire for deeper connection and collaboration is reflected in the 2016 audit.

**Beyond the Bureau**

ONI staff often worked outside the bureau to advance equity across city government. Staff developed trainings in cultural competency, provided guidance and hired DCL Leadership Academy graduates to consult bureaus on engaging cultural and ethnic minorities—an award-winning initiative. In 2008, the Public Involvement Advisory Council convened City staff and a diverse group of community members to develop strategies for improving public involvement and impact—strategies that were later implemented during the creation of the Portland Comprehensive Plan. Similar collaborations led to the City’s Office of Equity, which works internally to build cultural competency and inclusion.

**Looking Forward**

Some successes of the past decade continue today, such as the DCL and neighborhood small grants programs, but the work remains unfinished. More nonprofits and community groups deserve equitable funding and resources. Though ONI staff aspired to identify and include these groups, the idea foundered from lack of investment and prioritization. `

Crafting a more inclusive public engagement system requires investment, collaboration and substantial participation from citizens of all backgrounds. And it requires a common understanding of what has worked and what has been left on the table. Meaningful progress has been made to include more people—programs worth building and improving on as we work towards our shared goal of an equitable, accessible public involvement system.

**Programs to Advance Equity, City of Portland 2006-2016**

This document lists many of the efforts made by the Office of Neighborhood Involvement (ONI), now called the Office of Community and Civic life, to advance equitable public engagement practices from 2006-2016. Most of these programs ended due to budget constraints or administrative turn over, but their many successes can provide a useful foundation to build an inclusive public involvement system.

**** STRATEGIC PLANNING & PRINCIPLES

**Community Connect Strategic Plan (2008):** The Community Connect task force gathered input from 1,400 people to establish a vision for public involvement recognizing the myriad ways Portlanders engage with one other. Council approved the strategic plan and directed ONI to implement inclusive programming.

The strategic plan adhered to three overarching goals, which ONI adopted into its own mission:

1. Increase the number and diversity of people involved in their communities.
2. Strengthen community capacity
3. Increase community impact on public decisions.

**City of Portland Public Involvement Principles** **(2010):** Council adopted public involvement principles to guide community engagement across all bureaus. The principles continue to serve as a model for communities outside Portland.

**Public Involvement Statement (2011):** Council required all ordinances, resolutions, reports and other items to include an explanation of how the community was engaged in development.

**** NEW PROGRAMS & STAFFING

**Diversity and Civic Leadership (DCL) Program:** After years of collaborative work among identity-based groups, neighborhood volunteers and neighborhood coalition staff, in 2007 Council approved funding for the DCL program, which 1) awards grants to nonprofits serving historically underrepresented groups and 2) increases public engagement with diverse populations.[[1]](#footnote-1)

* The first four years of the program included funding for a Leadership Academy, which encouraged leaders of color to lend their perspectives and talents to city government.
* DCLs have engaged thousands of people in activities to build community identity, work on issue campaigns and increase contact between organizations and with government.

**Community and Neighborhood Involvement Center (CNIC):** ONI expanded to include new staff dedicated to historically underrepresented communities. New and existing staff collaborated to facilitate diverse partnership-building.

New CNIC positions included:

* Diversity and Civic Leadership Program Coordinator
* Disability Program Coordinator
* Public Involvement Best Practices Program Coordinator
* New Portlander Program Coordinator
* Youth Development/Multnomah Youth Commission Program Coordinator

**Small Grants Programs**

* The Neighborhood Small Grants Program awarded funds annually to hundreds of community and neighborhood groups in Portland. Up to 40% of the grants each year went to organizations serving underrepresented groups.
* The Neighborhood and Community Engagement Initiative (NCEI) gave coalitions funding to partner with underrepresented groups to promote cross-cultural engagement.
* The New and Diverse Voices Small Grants Program (2016) provided one-time small grants to projects serving communities of color and immigrant and refugee populations.

**Restorative Listening Project on Gentrification (2009-2012):** ONI staff facilitated monthly community forums for North and NE Portland residents to share their experiences with gentrification.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Portland United Against Hate (2016):** ONI supported an anti-hate collaborative which is now a network of diverse organizations receiving funding for trainings and incident reporting.

**** JOINT NEIGHBORHOOD COALITION & DCL PARTNER ACTIVITIES

**ONI Bureau/Budget Advisory Committee (BAC) (2006-2017):** DCL partners joined the ONI BAC to advise programming and budget priorities to enhance equity. Members formed relationships and understanding over years of collaboration.

* ONI Budget Advocacy: Each year, ONI’s community and neighborhood partner organizations worked together to advocate for ONI’s budget requests.
* In tight budget periods, neighborhood coalitions volunteered funding cuts to preserve and grow the DCL program.

**ONI Retreats & Summits**

* DCL/Neighborhood Coalition Retreats (2009 and 2011)
* All ONI Partners Retreat (2015)
* Community Summit (2015)

**East Portland Neighborhood Office Advisory Committee Expansion (2014)**: CNIC staff helped coordinate inclusive process to expand formal advisory for EPNO, later called EPCO.

**** TRAINING & SUPPORT FOR OTHER BUREAUS

**CNIC-Developed Trainings for All City Staff**

* “Moving Beyond Diversity to Equity” Trainings
* Cultural Competency Trainings

**ONI Staff Consulting for other Bureaus**

* Government Best Practices Program Coordinator: Staff position to consult with other bureaus to develop community engagement policies and programs.
* CNIC Support: Staff provided guidance in engaging all Portlanders.
* City of Portland Equity Plan Toolkit

**Cultural Competency**

* Community Engagement Liaisons (CELS): ONI recruited DCL Leadership Academy graduates to consult bureaus on engaging cultural and ethnic minorities in Portland.[[3]](#footnote-3)
* New Portlander Program & Equity in Practice
* DCL Community Input Events:DCLs and City bureaus hosted culturally appropriate events to gather diverse perspectives on projects and budget processes.

**Public Involvement Advisory Council (PIAC) (2008):** PIAC convened City staff and a diverse group of community members to devise strategies for improving public involvement and impact.

* Portland Comprehensive Plan Update—Community Engagement Chapter 2 (2012-2014): The first time PIAC members and ONI staff implemented the City’s public involvement principles and Framework for Equity to develop binding policies for all future land use planning activities.

**Equity Workgroup (2010-2012):** The ONI director chaired a workgroup that developed the Framework for Equity, which greatly informed the Portland Plan, a city-wide strategic planning effort.

**Race and Social Justice Initiative (2010)**: Inspired by Seattle’s Race and Social Justice Initiative, ONI staff brought speakers from the project to Portland and organized a community trip to Seattle. This contributed to the creation of the City of Portland Office of Equity, which works towards equity within bureaus.

1. In 2015, Harvard’s Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation and the Kennedy School of Government [placed the DCL Program in the top ten programs](https://ash.harvard.edu/news/finalists-top-10-programs-public-engagement-government-award-announced) for the Innovations in Public Engagement Award. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The New York Times and International Herald Tribune featured the project in 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In 2015, the Harvard Ash Center recognized the CELS Program as [one of 124 innovative government programs](https://ash.harvard.edu/news/harvards-ash-center-announces-124-bright-ideas-government). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)