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Case Study: Washington State Department of Transportation's Plans and Policies for Statewide Transportation Equity

The Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) centers equity in its operation, practices, and policies, demonstrating its commitment to increase transportation equity across the State. WSDOT leveraged recent legislation to elevate equity as a key priority across the agency.

In 2021, WSDOT updated [Executive Order 1087](#), which extends Title VI prohibition of discrimination on the basis of national origin to include discrimination based on Limited English Proficiency (LEP). [Executive Order 1119](#) followed, setting forth WSDOT's anti-racism and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) planning policy. In the same year, WSDOT partnered with Western Washington University's Center for Economic and Business Research (CEBR) on an [equity research study](#) broadly exploring WSDOT's equity practices and operations. The study recommended pathways for future research and further equity action within WSDOT. The research study and policy changes, at both the State and agency level, led to WSDOT's creation of a new [DEI Plan](#), a new [Community Engagement Plan](#) (currently under review by the Washington State Environmental Justice Council), and new Title VI programming that supports additional equity initiatives.

The Washington State legislature also passed the [Healthy Environment for All \(HEAL\) Act](#) in 2021 that commits to reducing environmental and health disparities and improving the health of all Washington State residents. The HEAL Act also required State agencies, including transportation agencies, to create and adopt community

PROJECT SNAPSHOT

- WSDOT used State-level equity policy to spur its equity-driven planning initiatives.
- WSDOT incorporated an equity focus as a fundamental part of its strategic planning, including its [DEI Plan](#), [Community Engagement Plan](#), and [Active Transportation Plan](#).

IMPLEMENTATION HIGHLIGHTS

- HEAL Act Established by State Legislature
- WSDOT's [Executive Order 1087](#) paved the way for more language-inclusive planning and programming including a [language accessibility plan](#) and statewide available resources, including:
 - [LEP Fact Sheet](#)
 - [LEP Language Map](#)
- WSDOT's [Active Transportation Plan](#) sets performance metrics to monitor progress and lists strategies toward more equitable active transportation infrastructure.

engagement plans by July 1, 2022. The HEAL Act further called for the establishment of an Environmental Justice Council to provide guidance on community engagement plans as agencies create and adopt them.

Background and Demographics

As of 2020, the State of Washington had a population of over 7.5 million residents. Washington is projected to reach 9.1 million residents by 2040. Seventy-five percent of new residents live within the five largest metropolitan counties: Clark, King, Pierce, Snohomish, and Spokane counties. Washington's population is growing increasingly diverse with 30 percent of the State's population representing non-white ethnicities and races: 77.5% White (non-Hispanic), 10% Asian, 4.5% Black, and 13.7% Hispanic¹. It is also the third-most linguistically diverse State in the country with over 163 different languages spoken². Fourteen percent of Washington residents live in poverty and 17 of 39 counties are considered "high poverty" areas. The State also faces challenges around housing affordability, as increasing housing costs in urban areas push people into less expensive suburban and rural areas with more limited transportation options.

Advancing Equitable Practices

Equitable Long-Range Planning

In order to keep up with the rapid growth and needs of its population, WSDOT committed to addressing six transportation system policy goals through its planning process: preservation, safety, mobility, environment, stewardship, and economic vitality. The [Washington Transportation Plan](#) Phase 2 – Implementation 2017-2040 guides statewide, multimodal transportation processes. It highlights the need for community engagement with the public, government agencies, and various organizations. Currently the plan is in Phase 2, the implementation phase, which emphasizes four focus areas: maintaining and preserving assets, managing growth and traffic congestion, enhancing multimodal connections and choices, and aligning funding structure with a multimodal vision. By acknowledging the need for more multimodal infrastructure across the State, the plan sets the stage for more accessible and equitable access to transportation. Support and feedback from agencies, Tribal groups, advocacy groups, a steering committee, and advisory group informed the final elements of the plan.

Active Transportation Plan 2020 and Beyond

WSDOT's [2020 Active Transportation Plan](#) serves as a compass for the agency's development of new pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure. This plan draws on extensive research on the benefits of active transportation, evaluation of emerging tools and best practices, community engagement, guidance from a stakeholder steering committee, and technical support from various WSDOT and agency partner staff. While the plan focuses on engineering questions and solutions around available facilities on State routes, it acknowledges the equity implications of accessible active transportation available for all.

The Active Transportation Plan addresses factors associated with traffic fatalities and serious injuries and considers ways to correct for the effects of past infrastructure decisions, particularly in places where those decisions affected transportation access and public health. The plan also establishes WSDOT's first-ever needs assessments on active transportation for the State. The plan further sets performance

¹ [U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Washington](#)

² [Washington Transportation Plan](#)

metrics to monitor progress and list strategies for WSDOT and its partners to move efforts toward more equitable active transportation infrastructure.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Plan, 2022

WSDOT developed the Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion Plan after the signing of WSDOT Executive Order 1119, which led to an agency-wide workgroup made up of employees and volunteers across the organization. Interviews with internal and external partners, conducted by the workgroup, informed the DEI Plan's focus on the following:

- Internal Workforce
- Learn and Grow
- Diversity Advisory Groups
- Data Informed Decisions
- Community Engagement
- HEAL Act
- External Workforce and Contracting

The plan outlines strategies for implementation and improvement of DEI initiatives across the state. In particular, it outlines the structure of its Diversity Advisory Groups (DAG), which serve as advisory bodies to employees supporting DEI goals across the agency. DAG members may engage in additional training and become Certified Diversity Professionals to enhance their capacity and proficiency supporting the DEI goals. WSDOT recognizes the importance of the work required by the DAGs and the labor and time it takes to provide quality services in a timely manner and therefore commits funding each fiscal year. DAG participation is volunteer-based and does not require members to have any DEI-related duties in their positions, which WSDOT has found increases participation.

Community Engagement Plan, 2022

The HEAL Act, adopted by the State legislature, requires State agencies to have a community engagement plan approved by the Environmental Justice Council. WSDOT's previous community engagement plan, released in 2016, provided internal agency guidance on engaging with partners, stakeholders, Tribes, and communities throughout all phases of the planning process. In 2022, WSDOT released a new plan, currently under review by the Environmental Justice Council, which features several updates. A significant community engagement plan update included making the plan available in Spanish.

In the new proposed plan, WSDOT emphasizes identifying and prioritizing overburdened communities. It uses screening tools to integrate environmental, demographic, and health disparity data into the planning process to better understand the needs of these communities. WSDOT also commits to facilitating equitable participation and supporting meaningful and direct involvement from vulnerable populations by facilitating compensation for involvement in qualifying group activities, providing childcare at public meetings, and establishing Citizen Advisory Committees where appropriate.

Title VI Plan

WSDOT's [Title VI Plan](#) was updated in Federal Fiscal Year 2023 and renews commitments to various internal programs including a Workforce Development Office and a Tribal Liaison Division. The plan highlights Titles VI goals across the State and provides guidance on data collection and analysis that meet Title VI compliance, including LEP data collection.

Limited English Proficiency Accessibility Plan

WSDOT's Office of Civil Rights recently led initiatives on a [language accessibility plan](#), which offers guidance to agency employees on creating language access from the beginning of the planning process. The plan provides a comprehensive view of the language needs across the State and guides planning professionals through the necessary steps to engage groups with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) within the planning process. The plan features LEP population data by county, LEP transit user and commuter data, and records on interpreter requests across the State. WSDOT also conducted a self-assessment of current services provided to LEP individuals using the U.S. Department of Justice's [language access assessment and planning tool](#) and identified the need for more language access policy across the State followed by procedures for providing language access services.

Stakeholder Collaboration

WSDOT coordinates closely with Washington State metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) and Tribal stakeholders to integrate equity into transportation project selection and prioritization processes. WSDOT participates in various MPO advisory boards and regional advisory groups and leads an MPO coordinating committee that shares HEAL Act policy and guidelines. WSDOT provides various trainings and support tools to the MPOs, such as the [LEP Fact Sheet](#) and [LEP Language Map](#) to support equity initiatives statewide. WSDOT also meets with representatives of the Tribal Transportation Planning Organization once a year to coordinate on transportation planning for both Tribal and State transportation system needs.

Next Steps

As WSDOT looks to the future, it plans to further implement its new equity policies. Work continues around the activities identified through the HEAL Act, and WSDOT is excited to see how coordination around these equity initiatives continues to grow. With the completion of the DEI plan, WSDOT will next update its strategic plan to align the DEI strategies with the work done in the last few years. WSDOT also continues to seek ways to strengthen its community engagement efforts and align outcomes with equity goals. Additionally, WSDOT plans to provide practitioner guidance regarding equity performance measures for planning professionals across the state, establishing new measures to break away from those that privilege certain groups.

Contact Information

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Resources

[Active Transportation Plan](#)

[Anti-Racism Policy and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Planning Executive Order 1119](#)

[Community Engagement Plan](#)

[Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Plan August 2022](#)

[Executive Order 1087](#)

[Health Environment for All \(HEAL\) Act in 2021](#)

[Language Access Assessment and Planning Tool](#)

[LEP Fact Sheet](#)

[LEP Language Map](#)

[Limited English Proficiency Accessibility Plan](#)

[Title VI Plan](#)

[WSDOT Equity Study](#)

[WSDOT Transportation Plan](#)

