
City of Montpelier

Equity Assessment

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Conducted by Creative Discourse

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Purpose & Goals of Work with City of Montpelier

Creative Discourse conducted an equity assessment designed to examine and understand the needs, concerns, and perspectives of a range of City stakeholders in seeking to advance equity and inclusion within the community and across City departments and divisions. This assessment sought to center the voices and experiences of Montpelier residents who identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and people who hold other marginalized identities to assess the impact of current efforts, initiatives and practices. Our stated purpose was as follows:

Build the trust, relationships and shared understanding needed for Montpelier's local government and community members to understand the ways racism, power, privilege, and other forms of injustice impact the community. Create momentum for Montpelier to become a more equitable, welcoming place where all residents are able to participate in the civic life of the community and be well served by city government.

The following goals were also included for the development of an equity strategic plan, the first two being the focus of the initial equity assessment.

- 1. Identify effective strategies to engage with and include underserved and underrepresented communities in Montpelier.**
 - 2. Capture the concerns and needs of underserved and underrepresented communities in Montpelier.**
 3. Build the capacity of informal and formal leaders to apply a social justice lens to their analysis, engagement, service delivery, and decision-making.
 4. Promote the emergence of leadership that reflects the diversity of the population
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5. Contribute to the ongoing development of a vibrant, inclusive, welcoming community that attracts people to the region.

Methodology & Demographics of Equity Assessment

Our team conducted focus groups, affinity spaces, and individual interviews with City staff, department heads, BIPOC residents, LGBTQ+ residents, people who serve those who identify as financially insecure or precariously housed, and other community leaders. We spoke with over 80 people in total. We also administered a survey completed by nearly 350 people. Here are some of the demographic breakdowns of survey respondents:

- 88 percent live in Montpelier, with others identifying as working or spending considerable time in Montpelier.
- 11 percent identified as multiracial, Black, Asian-American, Indigenous, or Latinx.
- 19 percent identified as part of the LGBTQ+ community.
- 52 percent identified as having an advanced degree such as a Masters or JD, which is about double the number of advanced degree holders in the population of Montpelier, which itself is about double the presence of advanced degree holders in the general Vermont population.

This assessment is available to inform opportunities for immediate action. In addition, the assessment provides a springboard for ongoing conversations and relationship-building and will serve as a starting place for development of an equity plan with specific action steps for the City of Montpelier.

Summary

Overall, community members experience Montpelier differently, particularly related to their ethnic and racial background. A majority of white people who responded to the survey report feeling a deep sense of belonging in the community (68%) while far fewer respondents who identify as BIPOC report feeling a sense of belonging (39%). A majority of people who responded to the survey reported experiencing or observing racism in the City. This was true for white respondents, as well as respondents who identified as BIPOC. In the BIPOC affinity space, it was also clear that there is general fatigue with equity initiatives and “being consulted,” as this kind of processing has taken a significant emotional toll and not led to meaningful change for BIPOC residents in the past.

Gaps in a sense of belonging also exist for LGBTQ+ members of the community (45% report a sense of belonging vs. 69% of people who identify as heterosexual). Community members who hold less education also feel less of a sense of belonging than those who completed more formal education - 46% of those without a college degree report a sense



of belonging in comparison to 64% of those with a college degree or higher. This seems to also underscore a theme from the focus groups around an “in group” versus an “out group” where residents leading in committees and initiatives often have more available time and personal financial capacity to volunteer.

People reported a range of experiences participating in the public life of the community. Survey respondents reported feeling most engaged and valued voting, visiting the clerk’s office, and frequenting local businesses. Respondents reported feeling the least valued when attending public meetings and serving on municipal committees. The City Council was noted by some as intimidating and unapproachable. The strong mutual aid network was often cited as a strength of the Montpelier community and made residents less likely to turn to the City and instead request informal collaboration to meet people’s basic needs. A scarcity of affordable housing and the cost of living were consistently identified as barriers to living in Montpelier, particularly for City employees. Some cited the lack of diversity in the community and schools as a concern for raising children in Montpelier.

When survey respondents were asked what would make them more likely to attend a public meeting, the most popular answers were if they...

- Felt confident their participation would make an impact (63.7%).
- Could attend virtually (56.9%).
- Heard from people with a diverse range of lived experiences (55.9%).
- Felt space would be safe for people with marginalized identities and communities (40.2%).

In the focus groups with City employees, there was an eagerness to build an equity lens into their work, but most articulated feeling unprepared, siloed, and unclear where to begin to understand and address equity-related concerns. They relayed an urgency around creating more inviting, accessible facilities and spaces in City government. There was also a general awareness of LEP (limited English proficiency) populations, but no standard practice or protocol for accessing language services and communicating about municipal services and responsibilities through written translation and oral interpretation.

In the course of our work, we had separate focus groups and individual sessions with emergency services employees and law enforcement officers (LEOs). Non-LEO emergency services employees reported having difficulty in de-escalating situations without emphasizing that they were not LEOs and police would not be responding to the call. Dispatch staff expressed a desire to help callers with other resources beyond a police response, but how much time they could spend with someone in crisis was dependent on the frequency of incoming calls at a given time or day.

Regarding law enforcement, residents expressed lingering trauma from past use of force incidents, particularly resulting in death. They discussed the need for repairing community harm from these incidents, with a possible role for community and restorative justice. Black and LGBTQ+ residents reported avoiding certain places or experiences for fear of police interactions. They also felt that neighbors were more likely to weaponize the police against Black residents. Concerns were raised about observations of uneven police presence depending on the type of event (e.g. less police presence at maskless rallies versus Black Lives Matter protests).

Community Ideas for Change

Below is a compilation of ideas for change from focus group and survey respondents. This is followed by our own observations and recommendations as a consultant team.

In our focus groups and survey, we asked Montpelier residents, City employees, and frequent visitors about their ideas for change in municipal services and interactions, policing, and overall cultural responsiveness. We have themed this feedback and broken it out into **operational, relational, and structural change**.

Operational change relates to technical challenges, while relational change relates to adaptive challenges. In the Adaptive Leadership model developed by Ron Heifetz, technical challenges are those that can be solved by the knowledge of experts, whereas adaptive challenges require new learning. When the problem definition, solution, and implementation is clear, Heifetz calls this technical change. For the adaptive, change must come from the collective intelligence of all levels of city staff and community members. Working together, participants learn their way toward solutions. Our team added structural change to identify challenges that are both technical and adaptive in nature, and require long-term budgetary and stakeholder commitment.

Operational

- Publicize and create accommodations for people with disabilities at meetings, and make the format more accessible.
- Improve the website and offer content that is easy to translate online or is in multiple languages.
- Conduct implicit bias and anti-racism training for staff, including police.
- Keep Zoom or remote participation component of meetings even after in-person meetings resume. Add closed captioning and multiple languages.

Relational

- Communicate more about available supports and services, and target the outreach so it gets to underserved populations.
- Receive acknowledgement of communication when reaching out to city councilors.

- Find more ways to ask people what they need - outreach, surveys, community polls, etc.
- Have police get out of vehicles and be more approachable on foot.
- Decrease interactions with people from marginalized communities who may have a fear response triggered by police presence.

Structural

- Address housing issues and discrimination toward people experiencing homelessness.
- Revise ethics policy and review all policies through an equity lens.
- Rethink policing in Montpelier. Suggestions include decreasing armed police presence, disarming, defunding, or abolishing police.
- Create a mental health crisis response team and offer alternative support via dispatch.
- Develop and articulate an ongoing equity plan and vision for Montpelier.

Consultant Recommendations

We offer several additional recommendations here based on the findings and the community's ideas for change listed above.

- Offer stipends to residents for service on boards and commissions to support child care, income replacement, access to transportation, and other barriers to volunteer participation in involved City processes.
- Assign initial outreach to LEP (Limited English Proficiency) households to a City staff person to assess unmet needs, and then develop a Language Access Plan for the most commonly spoken languages.
- Implement plans to make public spaces and services more accessible via website, staff and council interactions, infrastructure, and building design.
- Create a restorative process that can be implemented after a use of force incident that causes community harm.
- Clarify the roles and expectations of LEOs (Law Enforcement Officers) in city engagement processes.
- Acknowledge that the feedback about LEO presence is often contradictory and opposing. Some community members want a greater police presence and some want to see less police presence. Underlying both appears to be a desire to build trusting, personal relationships with the Montpelier Police Department. All efforts to build trust should center the voices and needs of those most impacted by police violence locally and nationally.



Conclusion & Next Steps

Of the five goals of the work of Creative Discourse with the City of Montpelier, the equity assessment focused on the first two - capturing the concerns and needs of underserved and underrepresented communities, and beginning to identify effective strategies for including them in City initiatives, services, and community life. The other three goals - building the capacity of informal and formal leaders to apply an equity lens, promoting leadership that reflects the diversity of the community, and building an inclusive and welcoming community - will require a more comprehensive roadmap, inclusive stakeholder engagement, and a financial and personnel commitment from the City.

We would respectfully submit that everyone deserves to feel a sense of belonging and safety in their community, and currently there is a significant, concerning gap in experience depending on one's identity and educational attainment. Community members have valuable ideas for change to make City programming and initiatives more inclusive and engaging. We hope these factors help drive the next phase of work forward on a timeline that meets the needs of community members who are otherwise feeling isolated, depleted, and left behind. There are tremendous assets within the City of Montpelier, and we look forward to helping you bring them to bear to meet these equity challenges, from operational to relational to structural change.