

# Getting to Our Why: Durham County Racial Equity Visioning Sessions



*Shifting our Culture | Embracing our Commitment | Serving our Community*

November 9, 2020



## DCo Racial Equity Vision Statement

***Our vision is for Durham to be a resilient community where all residents can live, grow, thrive, and achieve optimal outcomes on their own terms during their life course.***

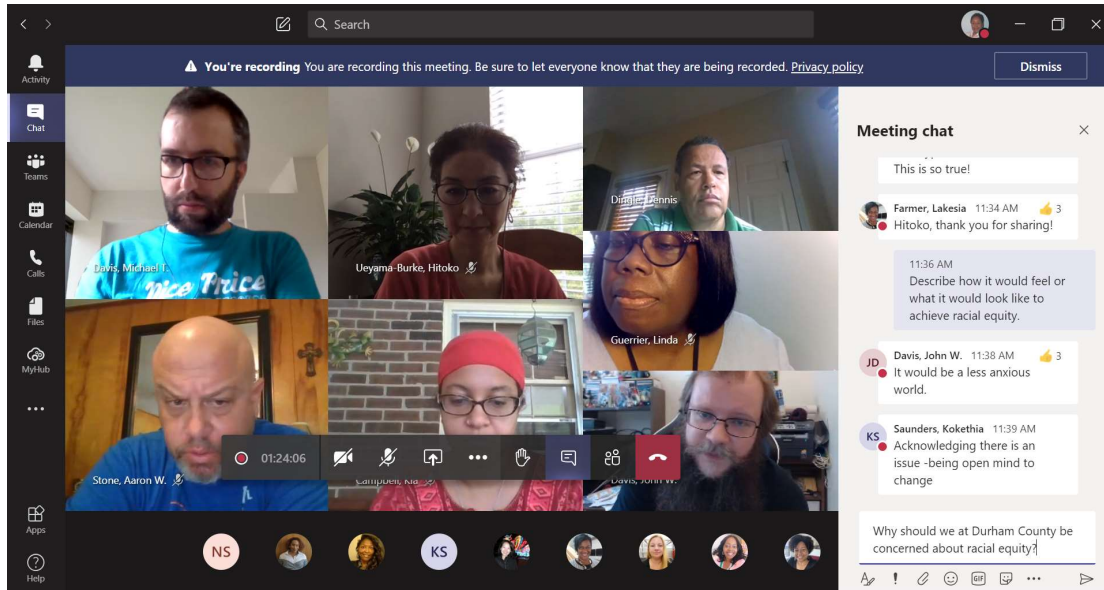


Photo: Screenshot of Racial Equity Visioning Session, September 2020

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*All Durham County Staff who Participated in the Racial Equity Visioning Sessions*

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*Racial Equity Vision Session Organizers and Facilitators:*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Durham County, North Carolina is a vibrant place that strives to offer all residents, employees and visitors the same opportunities to live, grow and thrive. Durham has a longstanding tradition of promoting positive community change through civic engagement. Durham County Government (DCo) is a dynamic organization that spans 24 different departments and almost 100 program service areas that impact and support the lives of residents. From economic development to human services to enrichment and education to public safety and law enforcement, there is little in local public life that DCo does not touch.

DCo is committed to advancing racial equity. Racial equity, or justice and fairness based on race, is a commonly held value in Durham County that conveys a true sense of community belonging. Despite this ideal, all communities do not experience the same opportunities to succeed in life. People who identify as Black or African American, Hispanic/Latinx, Native American, Asian or Pacific Islander and Multi-racial living in Durham generally have worse outcomes than whites across different measures of well-being. There are many structural reasons for these disparities, including structural racism. Disparities based on race are harmful to our families and communities. Racial equity occurs when race can no longer predict life outcomes.

Over the last few years DCo has taken several actions to build capacity for shared understanding that deeply racialized systems are costly and depress outcomes and life chances for all groups. In May 2020, DCo hired its first racial equity officer to lead and coordinate efforts to integrate equity principles into operations, projects and services of county government. In the summer of 2020, Durham County launched its first racial equity employee survey and began hosting several racial equity visioning sessions with staff.

Racial equity visioning sessions were designed to help set DCo's vision and ensure accountability towards advancing racial equity by gathering input directly from a cross-section of employees at all levels across the enterprise. Employee input is necessary to establish a vision and values that are representative of the workforce. Engaging employees in this process also upholds the racial equity principle of inviting those most impacted by racial inequities to be part of the solution. This racial equity visioning sessions report expands on 'Our Why' (or sense of purpose) and helps to express what racial equity means to DCo employees.

All Durham County staff were invited to participate. A total of 112 individuals participated in virtual racial equity visioning sessions. Participation was voluntary, and separate sessions were held for county leadership. A series of questions were prepared that asked about personal and professional perspectives on racial equity. The agenda included an ice breaker, the purpose of the session, definitions of racial equity and racism, racial inequity data highlights, and facilitated discussion.

Overall, employees appreciated the opportunity to connect with one another in a small group setting to discuss racial equity. Generally, individuals felt comfortable and there were several commonalities across all groups. DCo is establishing the infrastructure and developing the capacity to determine how best to address racial inequities for Black, Indigenous, and Latinx people of color. Input from the racial equity visioning sessions will support the development of the DCo racial equity action plan that will reflect the policy and practice changes needed to drive down racial inequities.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Durham County Government (DCo) is actively seeking to advance racial equity through the pursuit of a comprehensive racial equity action plan. Racial equity visioning sessions were hosted to begin gathering input directly from employees at all levels across the enterprise. Employee input is necessary to develop a collective vision for racial equity at DCo and to establish core values that are representative of the workplace. Engaging employees in this process also upholds the racial equity principle of inviting those most impacted by racial inequities to be part of the solution. This racial equity visioning sessions report expands on 'Our Why' (or sense of purpose) and helps to express what racial equity means to DCo. Feedback from the visioning sessions will be used to enhance the development of our Countywide racial equity action plan.

## **METHODS**

Racial equity visioning sessions were held from late August to mid-September 2020. All Durham County staff were invited to participate. Participation was voluntary and registration occurred on a first come, first serve basis. Sessions were hosted virtually on the MS Teams platform and repeated to ensure maximum participation. No more than 15 people were selected to join the discussion at a time, and staff could only participate once. Separate sessions were held for County leadership. All department heads were invited to participate in 1 of 2 meetings. One separate session was held for general managers and chief of staff. The County Manager did not participate.

Sessions were co-facilitated by the DCo racial equity officer and the director of strategic initiatives. Members of the County's racial equity core team and County's Facilitation Network supported the sessions by taking notes and managing the chat function. A series of questions were prepared that asked about personal and professional perspectives on racial equity (see Appendix A). The agenda included an ice breaker, the purpose of the session, definitions of racial equity and racism, racial inequity data highlights, and facilitated discussion. Some variation occurred depending on the pace, cadence and overall level of interaction across participants. Co-facilitators stressed that these sessions were intended to spark discussion and could progress in whatever way the group determined. The session content was piloted with the Durham County Food Security Taskforce on August 19, 2020.

## **RESULTS**

A total of 112 individuals participated in the racial equity visioning sessions. Approximately 30 people attended the pilot session hosted by the Food Security Taskforce and Cooperative Extension. Eighty-two (82) staff joined the subsequent racial equity visioning sessions, of which 30 participants joined department head or general manager sessions. Participants represented the following departments: Library Services, Social Services, Public Health, Emergency Management Services, Human Resources, County Manager's Office, Criminal Justice Resource Center, Budget, IS&T, Legal and Sheriff's Office.

A follow-up survey was administered to 21 registrants who were unable to participate; three responses were returned and included in the analysis. The results of the visioning sessions themes and the follow up survey results were integrated into themes below.

## THEMES

The following themes were organized based on the total input from each of the seven discussion questions. The seven discussion questions related to 1). vision for racial equity, 2). description of racial equity, 3). description of racial inequity, 4). worries and frustrations related to racial inequity, 5). importance of racial equity to DCo, 6). meaning of racial equity to DCo employees, and 7). racial equity accountability at DCo.

### 1. Vision for Racial Equity

Participants expressed a desire for a collective racial equity vision that reflects our *humanity*. Equity would result in *less trauma, anxiety, worry and/or judgement based on race*. Most participants agreed that having racial equity would mean *dismantling power structures*, experiencing *desegregation* in places like churches, and more *diversity*. Another element of a racial equity vision that participants expressed was having *more opportunities* for success and well-being, *less inequity* and *righting historic wrongs*. Participants indicated *more conversations* on issues related to racial equity as part of the vision, and an overall *need for a common goal or vision*. One participant noted, “sometimes it is very hard to galvanize and move forward. Everyone has a different definition.” Several participants expressed that they weren’t sure what racial equity could look like, especially since it has not existed.

***“Sometimes it is very hard to galvanize and move forward. Everyone has a different definition.”***

### 2. Racial Equity

Participants described racial equity as a process, feeling and a movement. It was also characterized as differences in race predicting and not predicting outcomes, opportunity, justice and human rights, repairing harm and reparations, and leveling the playing field. The difference between equity and equality was raised by participants; participants themselves introduced and discussed a common equity graphic that is used to explain the difference in terminology (See Appendix B). The following section provides examples of participant descriptions.

***Differences in race predicting and not predicting outcomes.*** Related to being racially impartial but not being treated people the same. The issue of color-blindness was raised by participants. Some participants shared the types of lessons they teach their children about race, in terms of “not seeing color.” Others shared that they teach their children to “see color.”

***Process, feeling and a movement.*** The act of breaking down systemic barriers was captured as well as developing systems and processes that do not favor one group over another. It’s not the actual experience that needs to be embraced but the movement towards what feels more equitable. As one participant described the experience of her mother gaining career opportunities in spite of her systemic barriers, “If it had just been equal, she would not have made it.”

**Opportunity.** Having the same or equal chance to succeed in life. This theme also characterized access to said opportunity. Participants also described opportunity as being the norm and being purposeful towards people of color.

**Justice and human rights.** This theme related to social justice and the idea that all individuals should be guaranteed basic human rights. Participants described the concept of respect and not being treated differently based on race.

**Repairing harm and reparations.** In consideration of the historic harm perpetuated against people of color, there was a notion of actively repairing harm. “Those who have been discriminated against deserve the effort of those of us who have not to make sure equality can happen.” Examples like Black Wall Street were provided where participants make a distinct and explicit connection between the consequence of discrimination and making sure that this type of harm is not repeated. The notion that Black and Brown people need reparations to support their ability to build wealth was mentioned.

**Leveling the playing field.** This sentiment was used to describe the notion that success is defined by merit or the notion that people of color need a “leveling” to occur in order to improve their quality of life.

### 3. Racial Inequity

Racial inequity was described by participants as unequal treatment, unequal outcomes, currently the norm or status quo, rooted in our history and privilege. The following section provides examples of participant descriptions in support of themes.

***“The consequences of racial inequity can cost a life, which is precious.”***

**Unequal outcomes** were a major description of racial inequity. Examples related to the criminal justice system, which is overwhelmingly comprised of African American men and barriers in the workplace related to pay differences and opportunities for promotion differing by race. The impact of people of color being disproportionately affected by life in a negative way. Systematic barriers to these issues were identified that related to unjust public policy based on indicators that hindered racial equality and equity.

**Unequal treatment** was another major described as injustices that denied people their rights and opportunities based on race. It is reflective in the current state of our society where access to opportunities (housing, education, work, pay equality) is not equal or equitable. The sentiment of unequal treatment relates to defining people by their race and not their character. “It stings once experienced; you can never forget it.” “No one should want to be comfortable when others are uncomfortable.”

The idea of **currently the norm or status quo** was expressed by several participants that racial inequities are what we have normalized. Across society, many people generally think that the current norms are OK. Some participants expressed that seeing the inequities, or the differences in outcomes, and denying that race is even an issue is part of upholding the status quo.

The **privilege** of white people to not see racial inequity or understand how they contribute to racial equity was mentioned. “We must be able to show white people how this country has created a system - intentionally- to favor whiteness and oppress or hold back people of color.” It was also mentioned that racial inequity is putting the burden of removing oppression on the shoulders of those oppressed. In the words of Bob Marley, racial inequity is “the philosophy that holds one race superior and another inferior.”

**Rooted in our history** was another strong sentiment expressed. The recognition that some groups have a head start above others has led to generational wealth, access to education and healthcare. It is important to ask, “how did we get here?” which often speaks to the historical underpinnings of racial equities and the root causes of racial inequities.

#### 4. Worries and Frustrations related to Racial Inequity

The following table (Table 1) represents employee input on the question related to worries and frustrations about racial inequity.

Table 1. Employee Concerns (Worries and Frustrations) about Racial Inequity

Theme	Employee Comments
<b>Deep, pervasive, perpetual and subliminal</b>	<p>“The issue is so big and deep...will it ever truly be fixed?”</p> <p>“How deeply embedded it is in the culture.”</p> <p>“Everything is racialized.”</p> <p>“Not noticed; not worked on; structure and the way we have set up our society; really don’t have to have any way to deal with it. Leave it up to people to figure it out on their own.”</p>
<b>Fear/Harm /Consequences are life and death</b>	<p>“People are harmed by it.”</p> <p>“The consequences of racial inequity can cost a life, which is precious. In a country of our means, we should not have health disparities or law enforcement disparities that actually cost lives. The Covid pandemic has really demonstrated this vulnerability.”</p>
<b>Lack of acknowledgement</b>	<p>“That people do not believe racial inequity exists or they ignore the fact that it is prevalent all over the world.”</p> <p>“That a lot people refuse to acknowledge the inequities.”</p>
<b>Unfair</b>	<p>“It’s unfairness and at times exhausting.”</p> <p>“Brilliant minds and ideas of people of color are blocked from shining and having a positive impact on the world. It hurts everyone.”</p>
<b>Beliefs of inferiority</b>	<p>“Feeling that I always have to prove myself amongst whites who think I’m inferior by virtue of my color.”</p> <p>“I think it layers upon each other... if you feel depressed or unaccepted, it is perceived and affects how you are treated.”</p>
<b>Pressure of assimilation/Work twice as hard</b>	<p>“Having to work twice as hard.”</p> <p>“It frustrates me that we have to teach black children lessons to stay alive, that white children will never know because it’s a lesson they won’t have to be taught.”</p>
<b>Blame and shame</b>	<p>“Don’t know how to act.”</p> <p>“Not knowing how to acknowledge racial inequity without assigning and/or feeling blame, so strides can be made to change it for the better.”</p> <p>“Trying to embrace what the County tried to instill in us with racial equity training – second guessing yourself if you believe you are doing the right thing or getting push back for doing what you believe is right.”</p>

## 5. The Importance of Racial Equity to Durham County – Our Why

The four most frequently mentioned themes regarding why Durham County should be concerned about racial equity were labeled as: community representation/duty as public servants, policy, education/governance, leadership, value and importance of government efforts, and shared burden/more work to do.

Within the first theme, **community representation/duty as public servants**, most often employees described their duty to serve all members of the public and acknowledged the diversity of the Durham community. One participant responded “As county employees, we’re here to serve the people of Durham. We aren’t fully serving them if we don’t work toward addressing racial inequity.” Another participant noted and several others emphasized “Because as public servants it is our duty.” A third participant commented “I think we appreciate the cultural differences in Durham County. In my humble opinion, we do very well with all that.”

**“For Durham County to train and educate on racism and how it effects its employees, their relationships, and their environment at work.”**

Regarding the second theme, **policy, education/governance**, participants described the County’s role as setting and upholding policy, providing education and supporting the role of government. One participant noted “Putting more policies in place that prevent abuse of power and further marginalization of people of color regardless of who is in the leadership role.”

Another noted “we have a responsibility to set the example of racial equity in all of our policies and service.” A third participant shared “Some whites need to be educated and made aware of racial equity. There are some whites I work with who can't even broach the subject of race in a healthy conversation. I want to find a way to break through these barriers within my department.”

The third theme, **leadership, value, and importance of government efforts** provided additional context towards the importance of racial equity within Durham County. The notion of “leading by example” and “modeling the way” was referenced. Other ideas expressed by participants included changing the way we think and doing a better job within government.

The fourth theme expressed by several participants was **shared burden/more work to do**. Ideas included in this theme were racial inequity not just being a problem for people of color to solve, and not believing that racial and ethnic diversity within the workplace means that progress is happening. “Our racial inequities are deep in Durham County. We can become confused in a diverse county somehow believing because we work side-by-side that we have made more movement than we actually have.”

## 6. The Meaning of Racial Equity to Durham County Employees

The following table (Table 2) represents employee input on the question related to the meaning of racial equity to Durham County employees.





groups which allowed popular themes to emerge. A few limitations were noted, including hosting sessions virtually instead of in-person and limiting the number of sessions offered. However, co-facilitators encouraged group interaction by setting the expectation up front that each participant should contribute to the conversation and co-facilitators were able to assess how engaged participants were by body language and facial expressions. Most participants appreciated that their input would help frame what DCo could do towards achieving racial equity.

## **CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS**

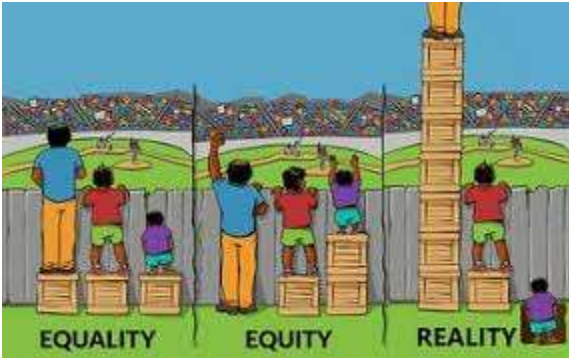
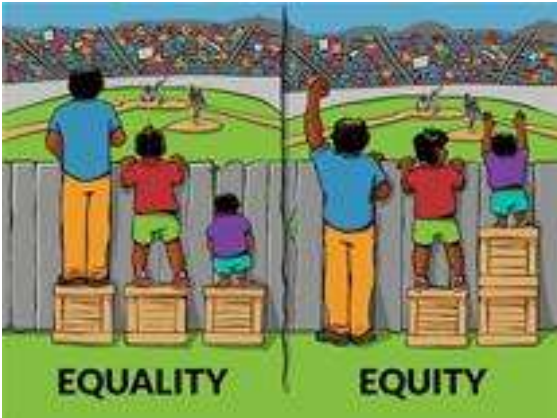
Dco is committed to normalizing, operationalizing and organizing to advance racial equity. County employees are striving to shift the culture to embrace more conversations about race and racism, and to actively become anti-racist in views and actions to improve life outcomes for all groups. DCo has begun to examine the potential for benefit, burden, and unintended negative consequences among racial groups before policy decisions are made to ensure that solutions and public resources are delivered equitably. Equitable communication and engagement practices and principles will also ensure alignment with the shared values and concerns of community members to achieving racial equity goals.

Dco is establishing the infrastructure and developing the capacity to determine how best to prevent further harm among Black, Indigenous, and Latinx people of color and improve life chances for all groups. The County is a member of the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE), a national network of government jurisdictions working to advance racial equity and increase opportunities for all. From 2019-2021, Durham County is engaging GARE to develop a racial equity action plan. Input from the racial equity visioning sessions will support the development of the DCo action plan that will reflect the policy and practice changes needed to drive down racial inequities.

## **Appendix A. Racial Equity Visioning Sessions - Facilitated Discussion Questions**

1. How would you best describe racial equity?
2. How would you best describe racial inequity?
3. What worries or frustrates you about racial inequities?
4. Describe how it would feel or what it would look like to achieve racial equity.
5. Why should we at Durham County be concerned about racial equity?
6. What does racial equity mean to you as an employee of Durham County?
7. In one word, describe why Durham County should be accountable to advancing racial equity.

Appendix B. Racial Equity Visioning Sessions - Equality vs Equity Graphics Shared by Participants



Reference: [Interaction Institute for Social Change](https://www.interactioninstitute.org/)