

Equity for All Arizonans

EQUITY IN THE SOUL OF THE CITY COMMUNITY TOWN HALL

November 30, 2023 – Phoenix, AZ; and Online via Zoom

DEFINING EQUITY AND ITS IMPACT

We struggle to distinguish between equity and equality. Ultimately equity involves giving individuals what they need. People are different, and affected by different circumstances, and individuals have different needs. The need for equity applies to ageism, sexism, racism, and ableism. We need to embrace equity in our communications demonstrating respect for each person's background and characteristics. Equity means speaking in the language of each listener. Equity is justice and fairness for everyone. It includes providing equal and comfortable access for the able and disabled without having to endure extended processes and time.

In seeking equity, we need to focus on the goal—what are we seeking to achieve? Basic fairness is the overarching goal, but we are all different, so fairness involves something other than equal treatment of everyone. One goal is to raise the base line for everyone. Another is to have a level playing field. All people need economic resources—jobs, housing, and education, and sufficient support for families, including childcare. In many European countries there are ample social services to provide for everyone, and the standard of wellbeing is higher overall. If the goal is to feed everyone, how do we do that effectively if we don't address individual differences and needs? Providing a peanut butter sandwich for every child will not accomplish that goal for children who are allergic to nuts. Providing sandwiches on regular bread does not nourish those who are gluten intolerant.

There is privilege granted to dominant groups, and our understanding of equity is based upon our experiences. We need to expand our world view so we can do the things necessary to create equity for all. Many still do not understand the difference between equality and equity. Equity requires that we actively address it, and not allow broad policies to be created by small, narrow groups.

To achieve equity, we should focus on removing barriers, and creating pathways of opportunity. Equity creates fairness by providing tools. Just providing equal resources to every community is not sufficient. We need to address historic inequities by providing what is needed to help people catch up after a history of inequity. Staying in community but not being a part of the community does not result in equity.

Equity means meeting people where they are and addressing their needs at the time. Different people and groups are affected differently and have different needs and resources. For example, public services such as public education, access to healthy food, cultural facilities, and law enforcement are not equitable across communities. One example of a community practicing equity is Tolleson—it has a good industrial tax base that could greatly enrich a single school, but Tolleson took the tax resources and spread them more widely.

Equity affects everyone. In seeking to achieve equity we can focus on specific systems that have the greatest impact, such as education, health care, and affording individual access to higher education,

We still have a long way to go in Arizona to achieve justice, which is to bring the walls down, even as we don't all agree that there is a wall. We have not yet achieved equality for marginalized groups. Systemic racism, for example, persists, and we must work hard to find and change rules, qualifications, and requirements from long ago that still exist.

OPTIMIZING EVERYONE'S POTENTIAL AND IMPROVING COMMUNITIES THROUGH EQUITABLE APPROACHES

When equity is lacking it is not just the individual who suffers; the entire community misses out on the potential contributions from that individual. An equitable approach is important for optimizing the

potential of people to the greatest extent possible. We all benefit when individuals are able to achieve their fullest potential.

In addressing the issue of equity, we should view the issue as one involving psychographics, i.e., classifying people according to their psychological differences, attitudes, and values, rather than their demographics.

An equitable approach involves meeting peoples' individual needs. When people have an immediate need, such as the need for shelter, that is an important focus that should take precedence over more general needs of the community as a whole.

Our systems are based on an inequitable model. Education, food, housing, health care, and paying bills all intersect. It is expensive to be poor. People living in poverty or disadvantaged circumstances are more vulnerable to a host of other problems, including criminal justice involvement. We should strive to change the situation where life expectancies in one zip code are 14 years more (or less) than in another zip code. Early intervention is important. Take the issue of housing, for example. When a family becomes homeless, it triggers a cascade of other needs and problems. Children who are struggling need extra help at the time they struggle, and providing that help may avoid a host of negative consequences, from the failure to achieve maximum potential to entering the school-to-prison pipeline and causing much larger economic and social consequences over time.

We need to clean house. We should look at what is working and what is not working, and that will help us identify what changes are needed. Although it is tempting to say that we should tear these systems down, that is not a practical approach. If we were to burn the house down, we'd still need a place to live. We need both a top down and bottom-up grassroots approach to identifying solutions that get to the root causes of problems.

The greatest opportunities to use equity are providing educational resources, access to health care, healthy food, public transportation, and other basic needs. In this mix housing is arguably the greatest opportunity for improvement nationwide because it is critical to meeting other basic needs. We also need to extend public transportation and services like light rail.

In approaching this issue, we should be aware of the differences affecting different populations. The problems of historical inequities are particularly challenging, and groups that have been affected by historic inequity may need special consideration and action. For example, because Black experiences tend to be different, addressing inequities that affect the Black community should adopt a Black-centric approach. In addressing the needs of historically disadvantaged groups we need to come up with approaches that are palatable to both the group and to society at large, and that address the specific needs of these populations, whether for education, health care, homeownership, or other needs.

Equity affects individuals and groups in many different ways and places, and we need to consider all of these issues. Equity in education includes even-handed administration of rules, discipline, and advancement. One of the greatest opportunities is education. Arizona has never seen fit to properly fund public education, and we must eliminate the voucher system. This also applies to colleges, universities, and trade schools. Higher education needs to be revisited in terms of availability and cost because many people do not have the funds to pay for college and are burdened with large loan debt afterwards.

Arizona would benefit if individuals reached their full potential.

People and groups need access to capital, to all of the social determinants of health, and they need the ability to make healthy choices for themselves.

Judicial and public officials can abuse their power to prevent equitable treatment. Their decisions and actions have impacts for generations to come. There is tremendous opportunity to increase equity and set precedents. We must strive for systemic change, rather than just act on a case-by-case basis. We must personally move on to the things that we can control or impact in our own sphere of influence. Equity initiatives need to be implemented to reach Indigenous peoples, veterans, and other groups we have consistently marginalized when it comes to resources.

As a community, government, and individuals we must act upon the declaration of human rights. Basic necessities like affordable housing, transportation, healthcare, family, and childcare aren't available to many. System change includes policy changes that result in greater safety and opportunity, especially in areas of poverty.

NEXT STEPS AND ACTIONS

There are seven pillars of influence, all of which should be involved in addressing these opportunities to increase equity. These pillars include religion, media, government, arts and entertainment, business, community, and family.

Things that we fought to get like voting rights, affirmative action, elimination of structural racism are being stripped away. The zip codes people live in determine their lifespan, and people of color and other marginalized populations are not equal under the law or in practice. We must harness our anger into diplomatic action, and action at the state and federal levels. We need to get out there, form coalitions, exercise our voices, and take collective action. Partisanship is not working and in fact has been detrimental. It is up to us to get involved by being informed and engaged and speaking up and avoiding toxicity.

It starts with us as individuals. Each of us is part of a family, a neighborhood, and a community. We can spark change and inspire others through our individual actions and examples. The power of one is illustrated by this story. A woman walked by an accident and saw a motorcycle driver unconscious and trapped under a burning car. She rallied people from the neighborhood and eventually twenty people were able to lift the car and save the injured driver.

We can start by going into communities and having many more conversations like this one about needs and opportunities. To meet people where they are we should understand where they are and what they need. In these conversations we should bring information about potential solutions.

For example, some programs such as emergency rental assistance have ended since the pandemic, and the need is still there. Many people do not have a supportive network to assist them be it family or friends. It is difficult to qualify for government aid if you don't fit in a category like having children, being an elder, etc. People have to fight to get the resources to move from survival to thriving. The federal and state governments should address housing inequity by making homeownership more affordable with equitable interest rates. We should increase individuals' exposure to different opportunities and resources so that they can envision themselves changing their own circumstances, doing something that otherwise might not occur to them. And we should address basic needs, including free daycare, more educational opportunities, and additional sources of funding for education. We need to strengthen the social safety net.

To improve equity, we should build communities where people feel connected. A school community, for example, might engage with banks, grocery stores, small businesses, and other stakeholders, both to forge connections and to think outside the box and make changes. We should make sure that those who need financial aid for post-high school education are made aware of the grant opportunities available. This information can be provided to and through school guidance counselors and other community gatherings.

INDIVIDUAL COMMITMENTS TO ACTION

Recognizing that the power to change the future begins with each individual, participants committed to take personal actions based on their experience and discussions during the Equity in the Soul of the City program. Below are individual actions that were shared.

I WILL...

- Continue to learn about Arizona's needs and resources. I especially like Justine's comment: "Speak the language of the listener."

- Complete my Master's of Public Administration in December of 2024, and continue to work within the state to assist with changes in any way I can.
- Look for additional groups to participate in, like the Chandler Mayors Committee for People with Disabilities, so that my voice can continue to be heard.
- Attending these town halls and making a concerted effort to find and attend town halls, community cleanups, and continuing to attend workshops and personal education to better verbalize and share with/listen to the needs of others around me- especially of those whom I don't share the same experiences.
- Commit to attending town halls next year and to finding local opportunities for listening to my community as well as contributing my own voice.
- Commit to writing down 2024 goals to move the needle on the issue areas of affordable housing, workforce development & mental health.
- Recruit others to participate in the 2024 democracy town halls.
- Teach my children about the importance of equity & the differences between equity & equality.
- Continue to fight for equity in all areas through coalition building, testimony, marching, voting, education, and picketing. It's how we get things done. Loud and proud every day!
- Personally research what the Department of Education can do about making information regarding access to financial aid more readily accessible to all students in Arizona.
- Vote in elections.
- Support proposals for more equity-based communities so that more people can be successful.
- Organize at least two community conversations with my family, friends, and affiliated organizations to have open dialogue about equity and challenge all participants to take one action to help move us forward.
- Become more engaged and educated on the issues.
- Have conversations with others.
- Have a zero-tolerance policy for extreme candidates who build more barrier than bridges.
- Have more candid conversations with those who can create impact and change.
- Have conversations with anyone who is willing to listen and listen to others without judgment.
- Have more conversations with people to break down stereotypes.
- Have more meaningful conversations, empowering people and providing them with the resources to break the cycle of poverty.
- Continue to develop health services and financial opportunities in my neighborhood.
- Stay connected with Arizona Town Hall, Pilgrim Rest Wellness Center, and Arizona Lawyers for Equal Justice and look for opportunities to support equity for all Arizonans.
- Give back to those who need it and pay it forward like others have for me.
- Identify opportunities to connect my organization with my local community—particularly in housing and access to housing.