



Video Transcript

RSJI Retrospective: Race and Social Justice Activism During the Pandemic

[**Image Description:** A recording of a virtual meeting. The speaker at any given time is automatically shown on screen.]

[The first person on screen is Kelly O'Brien, a dark-skinned, masculine-presenting person with a bald head and goatee with chinstrap. Kelly is wearing a dark polo shirt and glasses. He has a virtual background that says, "Interrupt white dominant culture".]

Kelly O'Brien: Hey, everyone. Welcome to the second event agenda for today in the 2022 RSJI Summit & MLK Jr. Unity Day celebrations. My name is Kelly O'Brien and today we're gonna bring you a panel that looks at the retrospective of, race and social justice activism during the pandemic.

So there's a couple of things I wanna do as we're all joining in the room. First is I'm gonna start with doing a land acknowledgement and getting us grounded in this work, first by saying really that the theme for today is decolonization. And as an RSJI team, we had spoken a little last year and many of you know if you taking part in key leaders, that decolonization was an issue that we spoke to, and that we brought into the fundamental truths, the fundamental RSJI truths, that we shared during that key leaders training work. And so it's a very important part of how we can expand our understanding of what race and social justice is.

And so we're going to embark upon decolonizing the space around this work, so that we go to those folks that are on the frontline, that are in departments that are just like us, members of the RSJI network, where they're doing work and trying to bring an RSJI lens to their work every day. And so that's why we bring you this panel. And that's why we invite the panelists that are here. Jenifer Chao, Natalie Hunter, Ani Krishnan, and Jackie Mena to speak about their retrospective about work in RSJI during the last year.

So I'm gonna start with the land acknowledgement. As we reflect on Seattle's legacy of displacement, we encourage you to think about how that legacy shows up in our present day. The Indigenous community that has been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. And if you're able to think about lending your support to one of the many organizations that have stepped up for community over the past two years, you can look at seattleurbannatives.org, and we're gonna put the link in the chat. And this is gonna be part of our land acknowledgement for today.





I always go to the website to get the words on how we do a land acknowledgement, learning the importance of honoring and acknowledging the land on which you live, work, and play. And something that folks know that we do land acknowledgements all the time. It's almost like fashionable, but this is actually traditional Indigenous practice, right? For folks that are from here. And so, let's decolonize that and like know it for what it is.

So I'm gonna read through, I would like to acknowledge that we are on the traditional land of the first people of Seattle, the Duwamish people past and present, and honor with gratitude the land itself, and the Duwamish tribe. By extension, we honor the Coast Salish peoples and the original people of the Pacific Northwest.

Here's our dilemma, when we're doing race and social justice work. Equity, as opposed to equality is about distributing resources in a way that gets to the folks that need it and as much support and resources as they need. But all these resources that we're speaking about are actually stolen resources, that's the dilemma. The dilemma is, we're on Native land, we have resources that aren't our resources and we have spaces that aren't our spaces that we're using.

And as we're doing justice work, we have to try to understand like, how do we reconcile the fact that, this all starts with that colonizing moment. Our government is the descendant of a colonizing settler government, all right? And so I tell people, when I used to train, we wouldn't be in this building, we wouldn't be in the Tower, we wouldn't be in the Central Building, we wouldn't be anywhere here if this land hadn't been taken from somebody. We wouldn't be anywhere here if this land hadn't been taken from somebody. If families hadn't been disrupted if communities hadn't been disrupted, if blood hadn't been shed, we wouldn't be here doing this work.

And on top of that we have in Seattle this history of displacement of communities of color. And like, I don't know if folks know the history, but Chinatown moved twice before it is where it is today, because of displacement. And we know that gentrification has really displaced a lot of people in the Central District, which is historically a Black community. And so I want us to think through when we do a land acknowledgment what it means is we're doing an acknowledgement of the people that are here, that were here, and that aren't being valued for how they took care of this space and this land. When I do land acknowledgment I try to think really deeply through this and also to encourage folks to do something that is action oriented.

So we have the website that's in there, I also sent folks to realrentduwamish.org, okay? All right, so I'll give a few moments for that to just set in. And then I'll ask the panelists to introduce themselves. So, hey, I'm gonna introduce myself, I'm the sort first, and then we have folks and I'll just start with, the first person on my list and then you guys choose each other, okay?



So hi everybody, my name is Kelly O'Brien. I'm with the Race and Social Justice Division, the Office for Civil Rights. I am Black, Pan-African. I use he, him, his pronouns. It's really good to be here, I'm the moderator for today's panel.

And what we have today is just folks that are part of our network, in different departments throughout the city doing work at their desks, just like the rest of you, but really working to incorporate an RSJI lens into that work. And so I'll ask you all to introduce yourselves, starting with Jenifer Chao.

[Jenifer Chao appears. Jenifer is feminine presenting, with tan skin and long brown hair. She is wearing a black shirt, vest, and glasses. Her background is the corner of a house with wall-to-wall windows looking out at a backyard. To her right is a large net.]

Jenifer Chao: Thanks Kelly, can you all hear me? All right, Jenifer Chao, I identify as Mien ethnically from Southeast Asia, and I go by she, her, and hers and my working title in FAS is the Deputy Director of Strategy and Administration. And my current out of class is in the RSJI team as the Interim RSJI Manager. So glad to be here and thank you again for the invite. Good afternoon, everyone.

Kelly: Thank you. Natalie Hunter.

[Natalie Hunter appears. Natalie is feminine presenting, with dark skin and gray hair. She is wearing a black beanie with shiny decoration. Her background is blurred.]

Natalie Hunter: Hi, I'm Black African-American and I go by she, her, hers. And I'm been a member of doing this RSJI work since the beginning, the building it from the ground floor up.

I'm currently at SPU in our environmental justice and service equity division that does a lot of the RSJ work, and helps lead it in our department. My biggest focus that I'm trying to leave a legacy for is the educational materials that we use and the history and stuff. I'm kind of the keeper of that and trying to make it available to also the employees.

And I just kinda wanna expand a little bit on what you were saying Kelly, about the land acknowledgement. I'm born and raised here in Seattle, spent a mass amount of time on the Waterfront, and really not knowing the history of the Duwamish people that had their places and land down there where they lived and not really visualize that until I found out about the work to try to make it a national landmark that honors them and not where people came ashore and the ships came in and stuff.



And then also thinking about the, Chimamanda Adichie, story of "The Danger of a Single Story" and looking at the place marks that they have on there and how they tell the native story versus how they tell the colonizer story. And what would that story look like if they told their own story and what can we do to help the effort to get them acknowledged and have the right land mark that tells the right story down in that place. So I will pass it on to Vivian.

Kelly: (indistinct) Vivian. Vivian are you popping in? I don't think Vivian is able to pop in. Maybe we can pass it to Jackie. Hey Jackie, they are.

[Jackie Mena appears. Jackie is feminine presenting, with tan skin and long dark hair. She is wearing a red sweater and headphones. Her background is a room with a window and door on opposite sides.]

Jackie Mena: Hi everyone. My name is Jackie Mena, and I identify as Latina mixed race, born here in Seattle, the first generation of my family to be born in the U.S. and both of my parents come from Central America, Nicaragua to be specific. I work for the Department of Neighborhoods and I've been there for just about four years now.

So this is my first mayoral transition, where I'm more of an established staff member. And when I started at DON, there wasn't a change team in place at the time. And so I worked with my former colleague, Jenifer and others at my department to create a new organizing structure for us at DON. And I'll pass it over to... Oh, and I use she, her pronouns. And I'll pass it over to Ani.

[Ani Krishnan does not appear on camera. He is represented by a white center with his initials, AK. At the bottom of the screen is his name and pronouns.]

Ani Krishnan: Thank you, Jackie. And hello everyone my name is Ani Krishnan. I use he, him pronouns. I identify as Indian and a son of immigrants and myself an immigrant here in the United States. And I work as a Climate Data and Policy Manager for the Office of Sustainability and Environment where we collectively recognize that climate change is a racial equity issue, and we approach all of our work with that framing.

And I've been with the city for about four years, a little over four years. And along with Ximena Fonseca-Morales co-restarted our departmental change team about two or three years ago. And we remained co-leads of that change team and are really honored and grateful to be tied into the city networks. So great to be here. And Kelly I'll rely on you to pass it onto whoever else is left.

Kelly: Okay, now we're good. Thank you, thank you so much Ani, and thank you everybody for joining and for introducing yourselves. A lot of folks really believe that RSJI exists because of

some power on a high, right? A lot of people think that that's why it exists. Now it helps RSJI work and it helps our existence that leadership and the powers that the support doing race and social justice work.

But the thing about what keeps us going is actually the people in the departments that are doing the work. People on the change teams, the people who are pushing this stuff, people who been on core teams, that are pushing their leadership, pushing their departments, pushing their divisions, to make sure to keep our race and social justice lens on things.

And over the years RSJI is almost full grown-up almost 18 years old, right? And that's a lot of work internally in departments. And I think centering our community in that way is decolonizing the space. And so that's what I wanted to really bring to note here, as we started this discussion and we are gonna have a discussion. So I'm gonna ask folks questions, some basic questions, and I hope you know that they'll be able to sort of get answers, but then we'll have question and answer at the end as well, all right?

So without any further ado, I'm gonna start, and I wanna start with Jenifer just because Jenifer is our RSJI interim manager, and I have a habit of putting my bosses on the spot all the time whenever I get a chance. So, (chuckles) I wanna talk to you Jenifer, because I know and when we spoke a lot like, who would be in here speaking? I know you've done a lot of work at in your transition from DON to FAS over the last few years, and now where you are here today supporting our team, and the question we're gonna start with are the challenges. And this is we're gonna start with challenges for everybody. We're gonna end with how the work's changed so that we know how we can work moving forward.

Jenifer: Yeah thanks, Kelly. I would say that when I transferred from DON in 2020 in January, and came to FAS and joined the FAS family in January of 2020, the biggest challenge definitely was that when we turned virtual due to COVID, because then in March, I think it was like March 16th, we were directed to work from home. And that was a big shift 'cause I had never built relationships virtually before it's always been in person and that's more organic and natural, right? For how we relate to folks and just anyways, and how I build relationships.

So, that was probably the biggest challenge was 100% virtual and getting to know a new team in a new division and learning new areas of work, right? It was all regulation, regulatory industries, so making sure that we would be able to stay connected. And I'll show a little bit later about how we were able to overcome that and lessons learned. But in the moment that was probably the biggest challenge was switching to 100% virtual and how do we stay in relationship.

Kelly: So, I was gonna say this echoes what other folks have said in discussions earlier as we prepare for the panel, right? That there's been challenges in making connections. So I'm wondering if any of you could just jump in, so sort of like from your space, how was it, how is this echoing for you what Jenifer shared? Anybody jump in, I can pick somebody. Jackie, there we go.

Jackie: Well, for me I think virtual was definitely one big change, but these past two years, right? There's been so many big changes, big hits that I think people have been like trying to absorb the shocks of. And for me, facilitating a lot of different meeting spaces, really trying to hold sort of space for everyone and you know, what's going on in their lives was a real challenge because everyone was experiencing something different.

There were days where I would come to meetings and someone would be answering the check-in question with 80% of their team is experiencing loss or illness. You'd have other folks who would answer the question of like, hey, today was a sunny day and I was able to go on a walk with my family and that felt really good. And it just sort of, as a facilitator of that space, trying to hold the meeting, keep us moving forward, but also show up for people and show up for folks experiencing the pandemic differently, experiencing the protests differently, experiencing sort of work and loss of motivation or engagement in what we're doing, disillusionment with government.

Like there were just so many different, I think shocks that people were going through. And again, as a facilitator, I'm constantly thinking of the room and how I can show up for others. And I think sometimes I got lost in that and I forgot that I also was a person who was experiencing these shocks, trying to figure out how to show up for myself, for my family, for my larger community. And so I would say that was probably like one of the biggest challenges I've been working through over the past couple of years, and it's a continuous work, like we're not out of it yet.

Kelly: Yeah, that's been ongoing and that's where, because that whole sort of like mental space where you have a responsibility towards folks that you're leveraging your power to help them have space, but then we're in the space too, right? We're also going through the pandemic and there's just untold changes that people's lives have gone through, the people, sort of relationships, over time with this pandemic that has just been really disruptive.

So like, I really appreciate you, like sort of showed us that the whole perspective, Ani, we can't see you, but like I want you to join in and share how it is you felt, how this echo for you.

Ani: Thanks, Kelly. Yeah, definitely I think everything that's been said so far echoes, right? Just this transition to being in a work from home environment, there's a lot of variation in how each

of us are set up in our work from home spaces, which can affect how well we can do our jobs from that environment. So that was definitely an inequity that showed up and something that we were actively trying to manage.

There's also this challenge of forming meaningful relationships, especially if the type of work that we have had to do has been transformational. And we definitely faced that challenge of figuring out how to use this virtual environment to actually have relationship building in a meaningful way and in a way that helps us bring our authentic selves to those spaces, right?

So that was definitely one of the bigger challenges that we were dealing with and we continue to deal with, as you noticed, I'm not (chuckles), can't see my face because I'm still having tech challenges, even almost two years into the pandemic. And then finally, the other challenge that I wanted to mention is just, not being able to fully disconnect from this work, right? Because like Jackie mentioned, we were dealing with a whole lot more than the pandemic, we were dealing with violence and racial inequities, and the Black Lives Matter movement. And so seeing all of that happening around you, combined with working on related issues in our day jobs, combined with being at home where all of those things just collide was a lot to manage and it still is a lot to hold. And we've just had to adapt in ways to be able to still move that work forward in a way that's meaningful.

Kelly: Yeah, that meaningful piece, that piece where like, it was already difficult to create meaningful relationships. It was already something that we were trying to do better. And then having the pandemic create for so many folks, a virtual space. And then the disparity of the frontline folks, the folks who still have to keep coming out, the folks who still have to keep doing stuff, all the time during this really, disastrous time people are dying, it's not a joke. And so I think that those meaningful relationships for them to be meaningful, we had to have some additional thinking, some additional dimension.

I'm gonna jump in, 'cause I feel like I can be part of the convo too. I know for us, we had worked with DON to revamp Inclusive Outreach and Public Engagement, IOPE and working with Jenifer and other folks at DON at the time and over time to create humanity centered engagement for racial, restorative justice, right? A new model of our way of engaging. And that really all had to like, not stop, but that added dimension of how do you center community and engage with them properly during a pandemic. Like you can't throw that under the rug. That's gotta be a very important part of what our engagement looks like.

How do we care for each other and for our communities in a very health centered way? So just at that very basic level, like for me I think one of the things was like MLK Jr. Day was always like a day with parades and stuff and the city was really involved and we haven't really been connected to community in that way, and I hope that we can be more so. I don't know, I think

Natalie, just because you have a lot of history, you have all the history, Natalie, I think you might be able to help contextualize some of this too.

Natalie: Yeah, I had mentioned in my thing is like we have this multiple pandemics going on, with the health thing, with the COVID, with the political unrest and then also as a person of color or Black person, all the stuff that I carry on my shoulder, when I walk into the workplace with the expectation that doesn't exist for me, I just need to come in and do the work. And even speaking to that, hey, this is like, this is on me and this affects me too, and just happen to keep bringing that up so that people recognize us as what we're dealing with and that's how I started anti-harassment discrimination work and pulled all the affinity groups that were experiencing this stuff.

It was as if the Mayor Murray at the time was only addressing the stuff that was happening in the community, but not the stuff that was happening across the city and city departments and how those interactions, those things were just escalating too for us, 'cause people were just becoming more and more comfortable with saying and speaking and acting the way they feel and having to deal with that.

And then at SPU, Seattle Public Utilities we were beginning of working with operations staff 'cause we have some serious issues that are happening in our department. And to work with operations staff, you really need to be face-to-face with them, right? So we had to still go out and do that, we still had to work with the COVID requirements that were out there but talk to a couple of hundred people at different places all over the city, because our department has different areas where these employees work and still have those conversations, right? And go into spaces where they're not trying to hear that stuff, right (chuckling)? That we're blaming them, but to be able to kinda like break through that kind of stuff.

So we use cracking the codes as our grounding training to get people to understand, have a basis, a similar understanding of what we're talking about. And then we also did racial caucusing and conversations, and Kyana Wheeler from SOCR was like key into helping us do the RSJ foundational training with these folks and they have those conversations. So there are more people that we reached, there are more people that are willing to try to listen and do things different did we get everybody, no, but it only takes a few to influence the rest. So, yeah. And there's still work that we're doing, we got a lot of work to do.

And I think the worst thing for me was really not carving out time for self care, right? Really need to do that because we were on a fast pace, we had to go all over the city, by the time that we can come, just worn out, just exhausted, because it does take a lot out of you when you're doing this kind of work and you're talking and interacting with people that are not trying to hear it.

And I think too for me, I'm kind of like only having to hear about, because of George Floyd this, because of George Floyd that, I mean it is extremely horrible what happened to him and all the others, but never talking about the people here in Seattle, the Charleena Lyles, Che Taylor, John T. Williams, Manuel Ellis, Tommy Lee and many more. It's like we can point the finger over there. That stuff is happening there, but it's not happened in Seattle when it really is. And we really need to put our folks that stuff that's happened to our folks, put them back in the forefront and help the others that are working to try to get those things corrected and stuff. Let's not forget, Seattle is not immune to the violence that the other people are experiencing across the nation.

Kelly: Thanks, Natalie. I mean, that's especially important for us doing this government work in the city, it's about sort of where we are and how it is that we're helping the communities that we serve, right? And how does we're answering the injustice that we're supposed to be undoing as folks doing race and social justice work. 'Cause that's our mission to undo the institutional racism in our city. So thank you Natalie for sharing that.

And I think part of what you were saying around the work that's being done and how much work that needs to be done, like allows us to transition into what sort of successes have folks felt that they've had as we've been adapting over the pandemic, 'cause here's the deal, okay? Anti-racist work I know is always flexible, it always has to be flexible and adaptable to different conditions, to different things that are at play.

And what we learned during the pandemic was not necessarily stuff that was new, this exacerbation of the systems that we already had, all right? That we're already part of and the inherent racism that was at play. So I think for us, if we (clears throat), excuse me, if we think through how it is that we work to create the success that can exist for us, what is it that's worked for you all in the different departments that you think are successes as you've been flexible at transition during this pandemic time?

Who wants to jump in? I like people jumping in, I can select people, but I feel like I'm a professor. Like I used to teach English at University and I feel like a prof and it's just, you know? So who wants the jump in?

Jenifer: Well, I just wanna say like what Natalie shared really prompted me to think, Natalie, about what you said about George Floyd, 'cause that is actually what prompted how our consumer protection division started reacting. And I share that to say, and it's really hard for me to say that it's a success based on someone who died, right? That it had to be on his death that caused the racial reckoning. But that is really the pivot that happened in CPD.

So with that, I would say that we started leading with race after the murder of George Floyd. And I would say that with a platform that I had, and with another deputy director named Mary Mitchell, whom some of you may know, as a Black woman. So two women of color coming together with the platform of the positionality that we have decided to lead with race. Every meeting started talking about race and holding sessions. So meaning learning circle activities. And so when I say activities, it sounds so institutional, right? But learning circle sessions, meaning we broke up into small groups so that people could actually think about and ponder about what is happening in the world around us.

And I know that there, institutionally right away, people sometimes I think, well, how does this relate to our work? And it's like, well, how does our neighbors relate to our work? There was a man who died, there's people dying all the time in Seattle. Those are those who are most impacted that we serve in our regulatory industries, right? In cannabis, who benefited from the cannabis legalization and who did not, right, their black books. In the taxi industry, right? They're mainly immigrant and refugees. So who are we serving? So trying to not compartmentalize what racial justice is, but personalizing our professional work, right?

And I know that that word, sometimes it's a trigger for people and we can't take things personal, but for people of color it's really hard to say that nothing is personal because it is personalized, right? Whether or not you wanna call it that because it is close to home and the impact is always with us, right? The color of our skin, the racism, the oppression. So with that said, as we lead with race and with racial equity, in our meetings we had racial equity issues.

We talked about things that came up and the division decided and got to determine what they would be talking about as Mary and I would lead. So started off with race card illusion, because we also realize in lessons learned that some people still didn't believe that race existed. That race is actually a social construct. And so we had to start from the basics to make sure that we were on the same page, create a community agreements, to make sure that people be honored and sharing their experience, and recognizing that it may not be your experience, but that you have to hear and listen to people and trust their lived experience.

So from those meetings, I think it really then evolved into Mary putting together the modules. So she created modules from our CPD journey and we lifted it up to our executive team in FAS. So Calvin and the directors, and asked, if this is something that we would like to share with our leadership forum it's actually, I don't wanna call it a curriculum, but again this is our journey and this is how we've been leading with race.

And again, this also came out from our director after the murder of George Floyd, that Calvin said, "We will be leading with race." He did not tell us how, he did not dictate how, that would be up to each division to adapt to how they want to do that. And so it really gave us the way

and the permission as we speak to say, we're going to do it how we wanna show up in our division and how it would work.

And so with that, after we presented to the FAS executive team, they blessed us to be able to share with the leadership forum, which is with all the APEX SAM, so many managers and strategic advisors and deputies. So it's about over 150 folks or whatnot virtually. So my director, myself and Mary shared and gave an example of what our journey looked like in CPD starting with community agreements, talking about some of the sessions that we held for the learning circles.

And that was to again, create intimate space for folks, because 40 people, just not everybody's gonna speak out loud and that's not how they process or learn, they needed intimate space, and based on the division's request, we put people in groups. But from that, after we shared at the leadership forum, then we got calls from, and even during then, actually let me backtrack a little bit, Kelly, just real quickly.

So in response to actually putting the modules together, it was because people in the divisions, so division directors and other folks were calling Mary and I separately asking, how do we lead? How do we do this, right? And us not really knowing how and giving them piecemeal, like, 'cause everything we were sharing was from RSJI, everything we were sharing was from OCR. So it was like, here's the white supremacy document. Here's the relational document. Here's RSJI truths, right? And everything that OCR was doing with RSJI team, with the leadership series, all the trainings that we were attending and the core team that we had been trained in.

So with that work, we just noticed that it was being piece-mealed. And so that's why the modules got put together. And then with that, after we presented it to the leadership forum, then we said that we would go ahead and support divisions and the way that they would need to facilitate, because in FAS it is not primarily POC, right? So speaking just honestly and truthfully, right? It's primarily white.

And so we are working towards advancing more diversity and whatnot, but that takes time. And so we don't have to wait while we're hiring, because it also takes all of us to make movements, including white folks, right? Including white folks, they are included in this work. And so with that, Mary and I offered, before we offered the racial equity intensive, so that's what we called it or named it to do a train the trainer, we met with OCR, we met with the RSJI change team to make sure that Tamar and the rest of the team and Kelly, you were there you know, to make sure that our stuff was aligned with what RSJI was doing. 'Cause we wanna make sure that we are aligned with what the city is doing, right? That this isn't just our own concept.

So then with that, we put out a call to action with the FAS change team and with the consumer protection division who had experienced this journey, to ask if they would be facilitators. And we would be with OCR support, train them and not just facilitating language, but actually grounding us first in IRS, so internalized racial superiority for the white folks who volunteered to facilitate or to be facilitators and also in internalized racial oppression.

And so OCR, RSJI team supported our team, grounded us in a few sessions, I think about four, to make sure that we were very clear because those are kind of sometimes the issues that come up is really internally, between ourselves that causes more of a disruption, than really the fight that's out there, right? So we wanted to make sure that we would be grounded together in how we show up for each other before we started training on the technical stuff.

So I don't know if you wanna call that a success, I would call it a journey, I would call it an ongoing journey and it's still happening right now. We are still facilitating, still training. And we'll probably end in April our sessions, there's about eight modules, and people are practicing. And then we'll probably then go back to FAS executive team to do a call out, to see which divisions need support and then we'll partner with RSJI to make sure that we are prepared and willing to put ourselves out there to help continue.

Kelly: Yeah, thanks Jenifer. I think it's interesting that the successes that we have met with really actually blend right into how the work has changed. And I think part of what you're saying is that the work is ongoing, the work keeps evolving, the work keeps changing, but like part of it that never changes is that collaboration, right? That us touching base with each other, us trying to make sure that we are aligned, that sort of like checking in knowing that we don't have all the answers, right? That's the sort of anti-racist we're working.

I mean, I like that basically you blend that 'cause I think for other folks and just let's get a time check. We have about 40 minutes left, but I wanna give this as much time as we want, this is our network, right? And I want us to be able to talk, right? The next thing in the session is at 3:30. So I'm just like giving us what our time dimensions are.

But that being said, I think the other panelists can do like Jenifer, kind of like also blend what their successes look like, but how the work has changed over time as we sort of get the conversation going. And I think that part of what Jenifer was really pointing out that I think we should pay attention to is as much as we are tied to how community movements push, when we're in government, we're doing this institutional work, right? We are in a sort of institutional space. We've got to do this, build this bridge between all the stuff in our heart and the way in which the rules and regulations stuff have it so that we can do work.

And so I think that's another part of what we could acknowledge. So I don't know, Ani or Jackie or Natalie, if either each other of you wanna jump in, who wants to?

Natalie: I'll go in. So I think for SPU, we created these things called branch equity teams. So that each one of our business units, line of business, water drainage, wastewater, solid waste and engineering, what have these groups that will work directly with their line of business to do the work. And that way, we're expanding it throughout the department 'cause we need to embed this dwelling place it shouldn't just be just like one group that's responsible for a whole department you have to get everybody involved so kind of piggybacking on what you were talking about, Jenifer.

So by doing that, when we first started we had 80 people. Now there's like over a hundred. We had one of our branch equity teams that expanded from eight people to 80 people. And it's one of the units that we needed to do a lot of work in. And what made it successful is the deputy director of that line of business really opened the doors and moved the barriers to make sure that we can do the things that we needed to do and that we still continue to do that makes a big difference when you have that level of support behind you. And then making sure that division directors were also a part of the branch equity teams.

So we were able to do a lot of work and the employees at all levels were involved and it wasn't a hierarchy, everybody had the same level of contributions to that with the management, say director level, really opening up the doors so that we can actually do the work to hear the issues that employees were having and tackling them one by one. But we got a lot of stuff accomplished, which is amazingly, hiring was a big issue in there.

So we created this equitable hiring practices where we used RSJI best practices. We use the hiring toolkit from the Minnesota that they have to help us inform everything that's a part of that. We have a racial equity review that goes throughout that forum. We worked on creating the knowledge, skills and abilities that we want crew chief to have before they move in there and have them be a part of that process at, looking at what we were coming up with. We made sure that they were informed where they need to look at stuff, 'cause one of the things that came out in the surveys that we did with employees and employee groups across the city is that people were moving into roles of supervision and management and not having the experience or the understanding of what that requires.

So making sure that they got that information of the training that they needed where they needed to get stuff. But it's like when we had the deputy director leadership of Alex Chen, it just really opened up the doors for that line of business to really move forward and have more people being a part of the process. And we have a BIPOC caucus out in that group, one's getting

started and a couple of other ones, the people that are members of these teams are really, really involved. They have direct relationships with the people they work with.

So that makes the work much easier to do because it's not just this one group of employees talking to them, but it's their fellow employees that are talking to them about the work. So it has a more buy-in from employees across the utility and definitely, intentionally going out and making sure operations staff is a part of this work. So I think, that is what's making it a success for us to work in this and to help change the minds and hearts of a lot of employees around here and to make this work more visible.

And it's really great to see how employees are really taking this on. And they're spotting, inequities and racial issues and bringing it, here's a place I can bring it to, we can work on it, let's deal with it. And that's what we wanna do, right? And I wanna use—Sylvia Cavazos' words were like, the designated irritants, we know where the stuff is and we need to bring this stuff up and this is how we need to work with it. So not only do they bring it up, but they know how to work with it, they know who to connect with to make change happen and stuff.

So I think we got a good momentum going and affinity groups are involved in it, the SPU anti-racist white caucus we've had them as some of our facilitators 'cause as you know across the city, it's really hard to find white facilitators to do the racial equity work. And you can't always have SOCR all the time.

Want to thank, Denise Colvin, Brian Mickelson, and Pam Emerson, from there that helped us with these conversations. So I mean, just building that network is really important and real critical to moving this work forward.

Kelly: Thanks, Natalie. I think a lot of what you're talking about that cohesion that sort of like, operational and organizational cohesion between people, it's really reflective of a lot of what we see actually happen out in community too, right? Like a lot of with like a mutual aid stuff that came up after COVID and even like this sort of reminds me of our next panelist coming up, which is around Asian, AAPI and Black solidarity and how that sort of plays out in communities.

Like what you're talking about to me feels very accurate of that sort of thing. I'm wondering if other folks, if Ani, Jackie, I'll call on you, Jackie, if you could all sort of like talk through, 'cause I think DON dealing with neighborhoods and like really touching on communities in different ways around development has this very unique role and I know you do a lot of work.

Jackie: We definitely have a new unique role. And I'm really excited to be talking about successes 'cause this work is really hard as everyone said, there's just been a lot that's

happened. And just focusing on like, even the smallest wins is what keeps me moving forward. And this year, I think, has been a really powerful one at DON.

I think I'm pretty blessed to be working for a department where I would say the majority of people came to do this work because they care about community. I think centering community, isn't really a question for my colleagues. It's more like, how do we really embed equity and push the work? That's the question. And as I already mentioned, when I first started at DON, we didn't have a change team and I've slowly sort of started learning a little bit about the history and Jenifer, when you mentioned like this work is highly personal for folks of color like that couldn't be any truer for our staff at DON, right?

All people who care about relationships, who care about community, who show up wanting to make a positive impact for our communities of color, like just our city in general, right? But who also are people who have lived experiences of racism, both in and out of our workplace. And so I think one of the biggest tensions that I've felt is not so much that people aren't invested in doing racial equity work, it's that they've been harmed a lot by a system of power in our department where people share platitudes around equity and caring about community, centering community

And so many individuals sit sort of in their own experiences asking, "Oh, so you are saying you care about this, "you're saying this is our goal as a department "and yet every day I feel so harmed "by being in this environment," right? And so one of the successes I feel this year was I was really given the opportunity to partner with my supervisor, Melia Brooks, and to take the work internal. So much of the past few years have been about our external impact on the communities outside of the city.

And this year with the reimagination work that OCR led, our director really gave us permission, the space, the capacity to reflect on some of our internal work and culture shifts that we need to make as staff and accountability structures to really start to heal as a community of employees, right? And of people working together to do this work, and so Melia and I had the opportunity to sit down with a lot of our managers and program leads and our staff, and just ask questions about their experiences here.

And I'm not gonna lie, a lot of people were kind of hesitant to participate. They were like, what's the point of this? Like, how is this information gonna be used? And I mentioned at the start, like, this is my first transition, like of, I guess, executive leadership and I'm realizing everybody's questions are truly founded, right? Things can change so fast, so much progress that you make can change direction very quickly in an elected environment.

And so I fully understand people's hesitations paired with the histories that I've already acknowledged of just harm within our department and beyond. And so, I still was just sitting, listening, trying to capture this and what came of that work, I just wrote it down, right? And tried to summarize it. And I remember the first meeting where I called sort of the whole group together, right? I had previously been kind of doing individual interviews with Melia and one or two staff members.

And so, the first time I sat everyone in a room to sort of look at my summary and like the themes that I had picked up from these conversations, I was so nervous because I was like, this group was already very hesitant to participate. If I got this summary wrong, like this is gonna be like, just terrible, right? And what I found was actually a group of people who looked at this and from my perspective felt very sort of, in support of it. They were like, "Can we make this language sharper? "Can we really stand by these themes? "Are these suggestions or are these like recommendations? "Are these demands?" People really wanted to put more weight behind these themes.

And from that document, Melia and I have still been working relatively behind the scenes, but we've presented those results to our department leadership. And from that process of trying to think, how can we be accountable to what we're hearing from our collective staff, we've got retreats funded to think about how our budget process and our racial equity work can be embedded with one another, and support and having those conversations this year. There was funding identified last year to do a study around pay discrepancies and wage discrepancies, hiring, just looking at our HR system, our hiring practices, our promotional practices, and even more, right?

I don't know, I feel a lot of success in being able to see sort of this opportunity to really sort of capture the stories, the collective stories of our staff, and to turn the lens inward, to start thinking through how can we support the people within our own office, to feel like they can show up as full humans, like they can be supported by the structures, and start to heal that harm that has been done.

And so I feel like that's one of my successes, again, everything is always changing in this environment and I hope that like we can keep building on it and that it continues to go somewhere, but it definitely felt like a huge win for me and hopefully for our department this year.

Kelly: Yeah, I don't think, we can't get away from the things that affect our own internal community. It's really that simple, particularly Black and brown folks that are in our internal community, we can't act like the same things don't affect them. So I really appreciate you, not just that you all identify that, but that you all identify teamwork.

Like that's the thing it's like, we used to do a training, a power analysis training, but like that's collective power, right? That collective grassroots power, that can get support from leadership, but it's not dependent on leadership, but it's actually dependent upon people coming together and wanting to create shift and change.

So I wanna like, let's shift to Ani and like, I know Ani has work around environmental issues in RSJI work that I don't think ever gets as much, I don't know, I don't think it gets as much prominence as it should at all. So I want Ani to share some of this and then we could sort of open it up for questions from the audience, as we round up the discussion. But Jackie, thank you so much for sharing this.

Ani: Thanks, Kelly. Yeah, and I wanna pick up on that theme of what our collective strength is, right? And what our impressions of that were before and after the pandemic? And then talk a little bit about some of our successes in sort of the environmental justice realm. So, we all knew we were working towards building more meaningful relationships with each other as well as with our communities before the pandemic hit.

But we had kind of our structure, right? Like this is such and such department you're on such such and such team in this department. And these are your responsibilities and that's kind of what you do. And to some degree, we were all kind of accepting of that and in a sense it was a privilege, right? It was a privilege to be in that position where you only have to think about these things to do your job well.

And when the pandemic hit, we kind of, just we got the rug pulled out from under us. And in a sense, we were made to live in the shoes of our constituents who we were meant to be representing and reacting and trying to figure out, okay, we have a real problem here, how do we solve it collectively given our individual strengths and given our collective capacities, right?

So one example of this is that right when the pandemic hit, we were just about trying to kick start a new policy from OSE around building performance standards, which we recognized ahead of time would require building owners to do upgrades to their buildings, to bring down the carbon emissions of those buildings. And we would need to ensure that we were providing enough support both financially and technically to especially those building owners of color or building owners and tenants within our priority neighborhoods.

So we were thinking about that and we were like, great, we were gonna find a way to engage with them and get this work moving but then of course the pandemic hit and all of our partners understandably were like, we need to figure out one, the health of our constituents. We need to make sure that we're worried about whether our constituents can pay rent tomorrow, have

a roof over their heads, have food on the table. We're not ready to engage on environmental policy just yet. And so that sort of enabled us to look inward and think about, okay, how can we respond to this?

And we have an amazing food team at OSE, which is in charge of our Fresh Bucks program. And we were able to in a very short amount of time reconfigure that program to start issuing emergency grocery vouchers. And all of us kind of pooled in, not just within the department, but from outside the department as well, pooled into volunteer, to go and purchase those groceries and deliver those groceries to those who were unable to do so themselves. So this was definitely one of the bigger successes that came out of the pandemic.

We were also in the process of setting up our change team, right around that time, we had just completed our charter and we're like, great, 2020 is gonna to be an amazing year and we're gonna get all this amazing work done, but then the pandemic hit and we again, had to look inward and look at the resources that we all had and ask those hard questions, right? How do we really rethink what government means and how we respond to the pandemic in a way that's real, right? Like I can't think of a better word like if we are here to serve our constituents, how can we be doing that most effectively, given the constraints that the institution that we have?

And so we set up multiple retreats I think, like Jackie mentioned, just to kind of think through those issues. We set up a BIPOC caucus and a white caucus within our department to essentially really help understand and set the direction for what each of us should be doing within the department to promote more equity.

As change team, we participated in the hiring process from very early on to ensure that we were making, whatever open positions that we had, wanted to make sure that those were getting in front of more people of color, in front of a more diverse set of applicants with more lived experiences and ensuring that we are representing the constituents that we're serving within our department.

We also took a much bigger role in the budgeting process and applying that racial equity lens to all of our programmatic spending to ensure that we were spending on the things that were benefiting our BIPOC constituents, first and foremost. So those are just a handful of the successes.

And I think if these past couple of years have just taught us that, we cannot really extricate climate work from race and social justice work, right? Race is the number one indicator in Seattle of whether somebody is in proximity of an environmental hazard. The number one indicator, if you look at somebody's race, that's your best indicator about whether they're close to environmental hazard and that's damning, and that's not changing, it's getting worse.

So all of our work, I think if anything this pandemic has really shown us that our work is really linked together and we really cannot solve for climate without also solving for racial inequities. And so, that thinking that I think always existed within our department, but it's been brought into sharp focus and we're building up the capacity through, for example, our Green New Deal Oversight Board, which is comprised of members from the community, advising us on how we're gonna reach the goals of the Green New Deal for Seattle. We've got Green New Deal city team finally, have lots of IDTs or interdepartmental teams, but this one is one I'm really excited about because we're again, applying a climate lens to all of our work collectively and figuring out how we can achieve the goals of the Green New Deal.

And so, I think those are really key successes and I also wanna touch upon, I think it was Jenifer who mentioned that, this is still a journey, right? Like we've put these pieces in place, but this is still a journey and we're all on this journey together. We're gonna be in different places of this journey, but just recognizing that is a success in itself. And yeah, we keep on keeping on.

Kelly: Thank you so much, Ani. I'm not necessarily in the practice of self promotion with respect to like our team, the RSJI strategy team per se, 'cause we're always just working, like that's kind of how it's been for us.

But I don't know if you all know. a lot of changes have happened to the team over the last year. It's a different team from what it was a year ago, but some of the stuff that you talk about, Ani, that working through caucusing, some of the stuff around key leadership, the budgeting work and stuff, I remember we had a whole day last summit that was on caucusing, right? How we do caucusing, what does it look like, how we do it in departments.

And it just really, it dawns upon me, especially in light of a lot of criticism that RSJI receives that it's not producing anything, but this is what RSJI work is, around building relationships and shifting these processes in our departments and these institutional ways. So we get programs and policy in place that actually put RSJI at the center, and it keeps growing as we journey along and it builds on itself. So I don't know, that's a little piece of self promotion for our work from where we are in trying to align things across the city.

But thank you for sharing what you all see as your successes, because the bottom line of that is like, our community y'all like, that's like that's the bottom line of all of it, that's what it is. And so that might make me a little emotional, but that's what I've learned in this work. And I think we do have maybe a question from the audience. Lemme see.

Okay, and is the discussion around, I don't know if Anita, if you'd like to ask your question, Anita Adams. If you would wanna jump on the mic, introduce yourself and then ask your question.

I think in the meantime, what I can do is I can ask the question as it was listed in the chat. And it was like, what is next for a city race and social justice after King County designated racism as a public health crisis? What does equitable recovery from COVID and racism as a public health crisis look like?

And so like, that's really like, okay, y'all know how we do work, all right? We try to do anti-racist work that was flexible, and that centers those most harm, but we're in the institution. And so what this is, is a call to like, how do we use this institutional power here that designates racism as a public health crisis, in King County to help our work moving forward?

And I think the spirit of that is like, how do we actually tell, or maybe that's how we could round up the conversation is, how do we continue to use the institutional power in the way in which King County has actually like designated racism as a public health crisis? How do we in our different departments continue to use the institutions power to keep our work moving forward?

And maybe we could end the discussion around that. I don't know who wants to jump in first? I'll give five beats, and then I'll call on my boss (chuckling). What do think, Jenifer?

Jenifer: I feel like it's a really a loaded question. So can you people speak it to me again?

Kelly: Yeah, no, I mean, it doesn't have to be loaded. How are we gonna use the institution's power? The leadership that institution has, the resources that any institution will give, our positionalities within the institution, how do we continue to think that we're gonna use that to keep pushing forward what is actually our grassroots goals our community like goals around this work that we are all expressing is happening in different ways and we're having cohesion in different ways, how are we gonna use institution's power in much the same way that like King County has designated racism as a public health crisis? That gets you miles, right? That gets you miles to work.

So it's like for instance, we had a panel on the ordinance earlier today and we were talking about what the need is for the ordinance what power will be behind the ordinance? But one of the things that happens is we get an executive order from the mayor and usually that's what allows us to go into departments and say, "Hey, we're supposed to make this a priority.

"It's a mayor's executive order," right? So how are we gonna keep using what we have here? Just to know the mayor did say that he's gonna send out an executive order in support of RSJI, again, this year, right? How are we gonna use the institutional part that we have access to keep- - That helps Kelly. - Talking about for?

Jenifer: The reason why I say it's loaded was because the other question around public health, and it just seemed really broad.

Kelly: Yeah that's really big.

Jenifer: Like people speaking, when I say people speaking you kind of brought it to how I process. And so it wasn't really just, and just being real with just our process with you're just saying, yeah, plain speak with how are we going to do that in relationship to what King County has done.

So again, from my perspective, and from my experience 13 years in the city, and in 15 years in nonprofit, I would say, that whatever positionality, whatever platform we hold, it doesn't matter, whether it's frontline staff all the way up to directorship or middle management, but that we all have a responsibility for this movement, right? A responsibility to move racial justice forward.

And in my learnings, right, during like my time of journey and still ongoing learnings, I've learned that it is not the title or the position that gives us the power to move, but it is our agency. And that language agency is actually, Jackie shared that with me, right? I didn't understand at first when people would say, "You have agency." And I remember in DON, when Jackie would point to me and I would ask her, "What is agency?" And she shared with me that that is our own power, right?

And so it really spoke to me in working in the Chinatown-International District work that they also have agency, but we ourselves limit ourselves sometimes by our own, we create our own limitations with, well, I don't have that positionality. Well, I did the most work in DON, and I would say powerfully in community, without a position. Yes, as a strategic advisor, but that isn't what moved us, right Kelly? And I say us because you were a part of that work.

And so was Diana and I mean, OPCD, like we were all a part of it, but we had the right players and when I say players, we had people who believed in racial justice so we would embed it wherever we did the work. So I say, wherever you are, so in regards to, for an example, just a like legit example or like a tangible one in FAS, in the consumer protection division when I came on, I was like, regulatory, what are we gonna do?

There's so many things that we could, but we had to also get to know each other as people, we have to get to know each other and who we are in our humanity so that we could believe in the work 'cause otherwise then it's just technical, it's just, we are gonna change business process improvements for cannabis industry, for the adult entertainment, for short term rentals.

But first we have to look at who are we impacting? Who are the policies impacting, right? We center our community where they are, and we center those from most impacted by the policies we're creating and the ordinances and the legislation that we're changing. So wherever we are, and I'm sure now they could speak to at SPU. It is not DON's work to create community. It is each of our jobs as a collective, to create community where we are, right?

And so it's great that we do have people who have positions, who are equity leaders. And I see, like in the chat like, I think SDCl, they're beginning to hire, like that's great to have those folks, but that is not on their labor alone, right? It is on our collective labor to be able to do that. So I would say that wherever we are, whatever positionality, whatever platform we have, we have agency as a collective to really move this along within the institution.

Jackie: Building off... Oh, sorry, go ahead. Natalie No go ahead, go ahead.

Jackie: Well, I'll just say this quickly building off of that, Jenifer, I feel so much gratitude to, the Black Lives Matter movement, which has been around for almost a decade now, right? Like to the police accountability movement that we saw sort of regained momentum these past couple years, like so much of establishing racism as a public health crisis is about saying, "Hey, non-Black folks," myself included, "You can't sit in the comfort of letting racism "just be something that's always present and always exists "like there is an urgency to addressing this, "there is an absolute requirement that we address this "because it is a crisis."

And so I think that momentum, that reminder, that push, in a lot of ways, like in my role in city government, like pushes me to ask like, how am I being accountable to addressing an urgent crisis, not sort of dealing with racism that will be forever existing, right? And so not being complacent in my own oppression and in supporting the oppression of others, right?

And so I think it's given me sort of the ability to show up in a more frank way when I'm talking to my superiors, my electeds, right? This is not something that I have to sugar coat or ease, let's talk about race, like how do I serve that up nicely so that you can hear me, it's, no, there is a sense of urgency, there is a crisis at hand, we need to do something about it. And I feel a lot more confidence because of these movements, because of the work of others, because of how Black folks have really like established a sense of urgency always already but especially now, for me anyway, in my lifetime.

And so I think when I see that statement, racism is a public health crisis, this is point in fact, it's not something you can ignore, it's not something that we can just be comfortable with, it's something that we have to do something about. And I feel like in my role, I can really state things that plainly, whereas perhaps in the past I felt like I had to sort of serve it up nice. And

because of that, I just feel a lot of gratitude for the folks who have been on the front lines pushing that.

Natalie: Right, and for me so the statement is, what is next for the city after King County designated racism as a public health crisis? So for me, that's just a statement thrown out there. What behind it and what are you gonna do? And I think, we have to be intentional and specific about the places where we're gonna work on community at.

And I think too, like the, so Mayor Durkan and Mayor Murray just came in quick and rolled out this executive order, the RSJ executive order which was like, man, who informed that decision, right? And it really wasn't written well and I think us that are working, actually doing the work in the community, and that are actually doing the RSJ work in the city that we need to be informing what's in that executive order.

And I would like to challenge Mayor Bruce Harrell to come and talk to us and work with us on that before he actually puts an executive order out there, the next one, that gets written while we're waiting for an ordinance. That please come work with the people that are actually doing the work in here where we really need to focus this work on.

I know I'm in the Native American spaces that I've been in like RSJ isn't reaching my community, so don't come talking to me about that. And I've heard that last year and I was just mortified because it's true, right? And why it's politically incorrect, it has all these politics and things behind what you can and can't do with that community.

And I'm tired of that being as an excuse so what can we do to specifically address their communities and get out there and work on what are other places that we need to work with our houseless population, I guess that's the way to say it now. Is getting bigger and bigger and bigger and what happens after the no eviction, clause totally ends, is that gonna get even bigger, right? What can we do there?

I think the good thing about doing this work is that we realize these are people that have serious issues, no matter what they are and the stuff that we need to address. There are so many services that were cut and people just have no place to go and this is where they end up with and what we have is because of cuts and different things but the main thing is we really have to be intentional about those communities that we need to work with, and really get some meat behind it and not just throw out a blanket statement that says, racism is a public health crisis.

Let's put behind it that's gonna change it so we don't have to say that, and we say something different than that. But I would hope that Mayor Bruce Harrell will work with us to really write

an executive order that's really gonna make a big difference in our relationship with the people in our communities.

Kelly: Yeah, it is. I don't know if Ani, if you want it to round that out?

Ani: All right Kelly, yeah all of what's been said is definitely resonating with me. And I think, the way we tackle racism as a crisis and especially public health is sharing our agency, right? Like the concept of agency was brought about, sharing our agency, as well as partnering with communities in decision making, right?

If I think about our role as the city collectively, because that's how our communities see us, they see us as one entity, we're the City of Seattle. Our role is to be in service of our communities and our constituents, especially those who are BIPOC, Black Indigenous people of color, those who are low income and there's no other way to think about it, that's who we exist to help.

And so everything that we do from this point on is utilizing our agency to ensure that we are allowing and sharing decision-making power with our communities on any policies and initiatives that we undertake. So I really liked the point you made Natalie, about not having things come down, talk down, right? And for it to be bottom up, and not just bottom up from city employees, but our community partners as well.

And so one example I'll bring up is the Green New Deal Oversight Board that we have. When we're thinking about making decisions as it relates to climate policy, that's who we need to partner with on decision-making, right? So using our agency and expertise, so we're like the policy works, the data works and whoever else within our office, let's provide all of the information on what policies we're considering, what are the impacts of those social, environmental, and racial impacts and financial impacts of the decisions that we're considering and provide it to a body that is well equipped to consider all of the community's perspectives and help them make that recommendation based on our expertise, right?

So that's kind of, I'm gonna embarrass myself by saying that, (chuckles) okay, call myself a tool here. But I would like the communities to use us as a tool to get the things that they need in their communities. And that's how I wanna be thinking about our work moving forward.

Jenifer: Ani, I just wanna say that, you are on point in calling us a tool. I know that sounds weird when we say call me tool (laughing). But I just wanna just say that really spoke to me because I always tell community, we get behind you, we cannot get in front of you.

So even though we create community where we are within the city of Seattle, and I think someone had, was it Royal that shared this, at the Black Directors Forum today? I don't

remember, but I think she had said that, sometimes she thinks about, are we folks who work in the institution for the sake of the community? Are we community inside working through the institution?

And that really spoke to me. And so, as we are community working through the institution, knowing that we work in government, but for community and in the community, we have to get behind them right, they are in the front, and so they need to be leading and we need to be listening, they need to be directing and we need to be following.

Kelly: Thank you all. So it's 1:59 we're supposed to run out, but we actually have one more question. I'm hoping we could devote time, I wanna respect folks who have to pop out and go do other things. But this question is from Loretta in FAS. Do you wanna jump on the mic, Loretta?

And while we're doing that, while you guys are getting Loretta on the mic, or meeting her, I wanna say, this is like a very operational type question around our work. Like, and I think for us, like something as concrete as this is something that we can like talk to and answer. So do you guys have Loretta on the mic? If you're still hearing? All right, I'm gonna get five more beats.

[Loretta Alake doesn't appear on camera. She is represented by a circle with a photo of hummingbirds over outturned hands. At the bottom of the screen is her name.]

Loretta Alake: Can you hear me?

- Yes.

Loretta: Oh, great, okay good. So my question is, and we've been running into this now for a few months. The RSJ committee members, the support is the first to be sacrificed by leadership when a division gets busy. And I'm just wondering if anybody has any suggestions on what could be done to change that.

Kelly: Thanks, Loretta. This is a very basic question like operations. How do we make sure that our operations aren't stymied when demands on our divisions are increased, right? Like that's a fundamental question.

Jenifer: Well, what comes up for me Kelly, Jackie, Natalie and Ani if you have thoughts, but for me, again, it kind of talks about the other folks in the chat who are also saying that they're hiring equity leads or some folks to do the work, to lead this work. What it reminds me of is that we need "both and."

So what that means to me is that RSJI committees, change teams, the racial equity intensive, whatever you call it, that you're in work groups, right? WEPAC, right, the workforce equity work, all those are very important. And the work that is also in your division is also very important because that is where after the fruitfulness of your labor is gonna result.

So meaning how do you bring it back to your work? And if you cannot attend those meetings, and I can't speak for each division because I don't know when divisions or departments decide to sacrifice those folks, right? Or to say people need to be able to do their real work, and I say that, in detriment or in sacrifice to their RSJ work.

So I always have some tension around that because define RSJ work, right? RSJ work is how we live and breathe. So that at least, again, this is what speaks to me from this question. Other people, I would love to invite their perspective, but again, my experience and my perspective is RSJ work is what we live and breathe. And so wherever I am, whatever work that I'm doing in my division, I wanna make sure that it is creating racial justice for the people that I'm serving, right?

But I also hear Loretta, I may not be actually answering a question to say that when, 'cause I'm hearing that, how do you balance that, right Kelly? I think that's what I'm hearing is like, how do you balance? And so for me, it's both, and I don't know if we can choose or why it has to be either or well, if you're attending this, then you can't 'cause I can't speak for the division, sometimes there's circumstances and nuances that I'm not aware of.

So I always wanna make sure that I don't speak out of context when I'm sharing my perspective. And I would invite my colleagues and brothers if they have other thoughts.

Jackie: I spoke a little, oh wait, what was someone?

Natalie: No, sorry.

Jackie: Natalie I feel like you go this time, I'll go after you.

Natalie: Okay first, they absolutely in putting in executive order in ordinance that RSJ work is core work, it's not volunteer work. This is what we do to make the city what we say it is, right? And I think they have to empower all the people that are doing this work to do it because there are people that get into these roles, make the recommendations and they can just get dismissed, right?

So a lot of people around the city is we have to empower this work cause we've seen a lot of like recommendations go through past mayors and just totally been written off after all the

work has been done to pull all that stuff together. So it's like we need a commitment from the current mayor to take it seriously and to follow the recommendations that are on there so we have to make this work designated as core work, it's not volunteer work, period.

Departments need to make that happen and not be able to cut it 'cause that's something that we're trying to address too that's really hurting us a lot too in my division, but it has to be designated as core work, it's not volunteer work at all. And I think that statement needs to come directly out from the mayor's office as one place to start.

And then again, the work that we do to try to get an executive order to put that in there so that they can't cut that, and that's something that we wanted to ordinance that in the RSJ ordinance that it's staffed appropriately and funded appropriately, right? Resourced appropriately so, that's the only place I know we can do that, but it needs to come from the mayor as a directive out to his department heads.

Jackie: I was kind of like thinking about that leadership structure and how you embed RSJ into the core work. I described a little bit of some of the internal work that we've been doing at DON. And I'm again, really grateful to Melia and other folks in my department who have longer histories with the city and really see how sort of some of our structures, present opportunities for us to really make this work long lasting and embedded into how our expectations for our staff and how different departments are led.

And so over this last year, even the last couple of years, I talked about not having a change team structure when I first arrived at DON, a collective group of our staff, Jenifer, Melia, just tons of people from DON got together, established the living systems. Over the last couple years, Melia and I have been working to think about how does the living systems and our strategic planning work as a department, not exist in two parallels, but are actually embedded within each other.

And so, so much of the work of our HR work group, right? Has been to start to embed our racial justice principles into how we hire what our expectations are, what our job descriptions are, right? I was talking about the budget, we're starting to build a relationship with CBO, Miguel, love Miguel, is our designated analyst.

And together I think building a relationship around how do we talk about our budget adds, our position adds, as integrated positions, not just, I think so often council, elected, see positions as very discrete to carrying out a particular purpose and kind of forget that we need to be holding both in how we talk about those positions and what we're actually paying for, what the pocket is meant to do.

And so building that relationship with CBO, I think has also given us the opportunity to start expanding how we talk about adds, how we talk about positions and then just all of these elements it's exactly what Natalie and Jenifer and I'm sure others are saying, how do we start to embed this work into how we talk about just our work in general, not as an add, not as an aside, right? But as something that's core to what we need to do.

I'll say when we did establish the living systems a few years ago, and Andres our director was a big part in sort of giving us sort of the space to do that, in partnership with OCR, it was actually made a requirement that everyone in our department had to participate in our living systems in one way or another, whether that was attending different work group meetings, people choose to learn together, people choose to participate in some of these discussions, but some people are co-leads.

But to some degree you're involved in this process of learning and organizing as a department. And I think that is one of those places where we had a director who made sort of a declaration that this work needed to be a part of our workloads. That said, one of the biggest themes that came out of these conversations that I had with a lot of our supervisors, managers, et cetera, was that there is this expectation for us to do this work and yet so much of our capacity.

We're given a lot of other work to do a lot of deliverables to carry out that it doesn't actually give a lot of programs, the space to take a breath and reflect and evaluate and ask, are we actually doing right by communities, right? What shifts do we need to make? That opportunity for reflection isn't always built into the jobs that people are given or the workloads that people are given.

And another theme that came up was, the feeling that people of color in our department have to carry two workloads, both holding this conversation and holding sort of these deliverables in their job description. So I just bring that up because yes, we've got sort of all of this positive movement to try to embed this work into our staff's capacity, our job descriptions, and yet we're still not there, right?

We still haven't fully achieved that and so it's constant work, but that's just one way that we at DON are engaging in the conversation at the very minimum and hopefully, making strides to try to really bring that organic growth within how we see our positions and the work of our staff.

Kelly: Thank you. You know I knew... Okay, yeah Ani, jump in. I was just gonna say, I knew Jackie will tie-in how it is their leadership, like sort of integration around this work before. And I like how the healthy living systems basically is built on itself in the last few years from something like people you did not necessarily know what they would actually end up looking like, right? You know what I'm saying?

So like, that's just a beautiful-- So thanks, Jackie. Ani, go ahead and jump in.

Ani: Oh yeah, Kelly I was just gonna add, I 100% agree with everything that's been said, like it's the way we need to look at, it is that it is core to everything that we do. And that's been something that has been evolving in our department too, right? Like we went from having, just environmental justice teams to now having a change team and a climate justice team, which has increased almost like three fold in size from what it was before. And so we're building that capacity up.

And I think at a point to also consider in this it's not just about from the top up, eliminating that kind of work, but also from within like feeling like you might not have the same capacity to dedicate to that work, year after year. And this is something we're going through as well since our change team co-leads, the leadership is going to be in flux and we're gonna have new leadership this year for our change team.

So I think part of it is just ensuring that everyone is onboard and everyone is being brought up to speed even though we have designated people working on core RSJ work, so that when it comes time for folks to step away or step down that it's seamless to fit somebody back in.

And I like to use the analogy of our vaccination, right? So what is the vaccine? It's essentially instructions being sent to your body's immune system on how to do something. And those instructions stay for a little while until you need another shot in the arm, because the situation is always evolving, the circumstances are always evolving.

So if our current RSJI team and all the multiple teams are those shot in the arms, the city is everyone else, the city is the immune system and we need to constantly be instructed on how to do this work well, and that needs to keep happening so that that never gets taken away from us.

Kelly: Unmute yourself to speak. It's gonna become the theme song of the decade.

Everything you say, Ani, and everything you all are saying here it tells me that something that's fundamental for a lot of this work that we're doing is we're analyzing power, we're actually following one of those anti-racist principles and we're paying attention to sort of like how it works as we do our collective power in relation to where we are in the institution.

So I'm just actually gonna go ahead and put in the chat, the link to the resources page for the RSJI, and the RSJI website for the city and the city website. Just so that folks can see the anti-racist principles, and look and think about how exactly they are incorporated in how we do our



work, as city workers and as people doing RSJI work. Because as every one of the panelists spoke, what I was seeing and what I was hearing, were the anti-racist principles at work, okay?

And so I think that that's the most beautiful way that I could use to round out this panel discussion. We've gone over time, about 15 minutes, but I think it was well worth it.

Thank you for the folks who asked questions and thank you so much to our panelists. Let me just make sure I'm not forgetting anything in particular. No, thanks to our panelists, Jenifer Chao, Natalie Hunter, Ani Krishnan, and Jackie Mena. I really love working with you all in different capacities in the last few years. And I'm just so happy and proud to be part of a community with you all, where this work is taken so seriously and where we continue to push...

