How did the Community Equity Initiative start?

IN 2020...

The Community Foundation of Herkimer and Oneida Counties launched a $10 million plan, the largest single investment in the organization’s history, as an initial 10-year commitment to address racial equity and social justice challenges in the two counties it serves. This commitment became known as the Community Equity initiative and is part of a continuing commitment to view all Community Foundation efforts through an equity lens—since the CF vision is “a vibrant region with opportunity for all.”

Tying into this was the establishment of a community-wide fund called the Racial Equity and Social Justice Fund. Thanks to many committed donors, the fund is supporting equity-related investments to nonprofit organizations in Herkimer and Oneida counties, now and into the future.

Building on this commitment to equity, the Community Foundation also launched the Mohawk Valley Equity Pledge to get community residents and organizations to demonstrate their support for the advancement of this important community effort. Visit mvequitypledge.org to take the pledge.

IN 2021...

A 12-member equity advisory group representing varying backgrounds and sectors came together to help guide the overall direction of the Community Foundation’s initiative funding. The group conducted discussions, brainstorming sessions, and researched opportunity barriers and obstacles that marginalized groups face. Community engagement included a public forum with neighborhood residents and partners sharing their feedback and ideas and continues online at foundationhoc.org/communityequity. Advisory group members and residents have recommended a broad range of challenges and ways to address them short- and long-term.
Equity Advisory Group

Community change requires community voice and that is where the concept of the advisory group stemmed from. We knew that if we were going to tackle this initiative the right way, we would need to do so with the perspectives of many.

This group convened regularly to assess programs and services that would improve the quality of life for those in need, and solutions that could lift barriers to success for the struggling while advancing opportunity for all who live and work in this community.

GROUP MISSION

• Provide diverse community and neighborhood perspective to the Community Foundation of Herkimer and Oneida Counties primarily regarding the Foundation’s community equity initiative

• Recommend strategies and comprehensive data-driven solutions to the Community Foundation, based on reliable quantitative and qualitative research including community anecdotal input

• Focus will be achieving short- and long-term meaningful impact that improves quality of life for all community residents, especially people of color most affected by racial barriers to success that affect their everyday lives

Community Foundation President/CEO Alicia Fernandez Dicks and Executive Vice President John Swann attended group meetings and took part in discussions.
Our Region

**ONEIDA COUNTY**

**POPULATION**
Total population – 228,671
- White – 86.0%
- Black or African American – 7.1%
- Asian – 4.1%
- Hispanic or Latino – 6.2%

**POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS**
Total number of Veterans – 14,917
Foreign born persons – 7.5%

**INCOME & POVERTY**
Median household income - $56,027
Persons in poverty – 14.6%

**FAMILIES & LIVING ARRANGEMENTS**
Total number of households – 89,729

**HEALTH**
Persons with a disability (under age 65) – 10.3%
Persons without health insurance (under age 65) – 5.3%

**EDUCATION**
High school graduate or higher (age 25+) – 88.5%
Bachelor’s degree or higher (age 25+) – 25.7%

**HERKIMER COUNTY**

**POPULATION**
Total population – 61,319
- White – 96.0%
- Black or African American – 1.5%
- Asian – 0.6%
- Hispanic or Latino – 2.3%

**POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS**
Total number of Veterans – 4,585
Foreign born persons – 2.6%

**INCOME & POVERTY**
Median household income - $54,646
Persons in poverty – 13.7%

**FAMILIES & LIVING ARRANGEMENTS**
Total number of households – 24,524

**HEALTH**
Persons with a disability (under age 65) – 12.4%
Persons without health insurance (under age 65) – 4.7%

**EDUCATION**
High school graduate or higher (age 25+) – 89.8%
Bachelor’s degree or higher (age 25+) – 21.5%

All statistics shown are provided by U.S. Census Bureau (www.census.gov)
Barriers

Based on months of research, community conversation and national comparisons, the equity advisory group identified five barriers to opportunity and suggested ways to address them with the community's input, summarized on the pages to follow.

To guide its year of research and discussion, the advisory group utilized a number of resources:

- GREATER BUFFALO RACIAL EQUITY ROUNDTABLE CASE STUDY
- ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION RACE EQUITY AND INCLUSION ACTION GUIDE
- UTICA CENSUS DATA
- UFA IMPACT CENTER COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT REPORT
- CITY OF UTICA COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT
**TOP BARRIERS**

- Lack of transparency regarding past conduct of police officers
- Lack of diverse personnel in legal areas such as courts, jails and police
- Non-local police force which lacks community connection and loss of local revenue
- Lack of DEI training, understanding and application
- Disparate treatment and judicial outcomes in diverse communities
- Over-use of police for civil disputes and inconveniences
- Lack of alternative intervention programs
- Over-criminalization and failure of adequate support for returning citizens
- Treating all people of similar crimes the same
- Heavy police presence in schools
- Inadequate prison reform
- Unfounded write-ups/negative reports of inmates preventing access to programs
- Acknowledgment and handling of bias from police and citizens

**SUGGESTIONS**

- Start a cultural shift in police department and community through education and improved relationships including officer accountability and diverse hiring practices
- Implement and/or expand preventative and alternative programs
- Institute a law enforcement accountability board with civilian representation to address unprofessional behavior and to share best practices
- Implement educational and community outreach programs regarding police interactions, laws, legislation and therapeutic services for victims of trauma at all age levels and related to all circumstances
- Increase support for re-entry and restoration of voting rights
- Enact alternative safety practices for schools prior to police intervention
- Provide training to teachers, counselors, administrators and staff to ensure students are treated as youth instead of as an adult
- Create safe places for all students to congregate
- Provide consistent mental health services for incarcerated individuals
- Allow federal prison inmates an opportunity to continue their education
- Revise re-entry to include supports such as housing and employment
**TOP BARRIERS**

- Lack of transparency and public accountability within local school districts
- Need for more parent/community engagement and interest in the K-16 curriculum
- Lack of mentorship and college/workforce development
- Lack of cultural competency/structural inflexibility in K-16

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**SUGGESTIONS**

- Invest dollars in education partners, mentorship organizations, internship opportunities and other nonprofit agencies
- Implement diversity and inclusion mandates in school board and leadership
- Diversify teacher, administration, and school board racial and ethnic makeup
- Encourage students of color to consider the education field as a profession
- Launch an open forum to publicize school/student hearings, board meetings as well as outcomes and to file complaints
- Develop a K-16 curriculum with levels of cultural/structural flexibility
- Strengthen and support the role of guidance counselors
- Fortify the Arts and Humanities curriculum
- Provide families options for educating students such as Charter Schools
- Improve mentorship and modeling around college and workforce development
- Educate, inform and provide resources to parents to become more involved in child's learning and development
TOP BARRIERS

• Lack of jobs that provide a livable wage and benefits
• Lack of generational wealth being passed down and an elevated level of debt
• Lack of knowledge surrounding entrepreneurial opportunities and commercial financial institutions
• Lack of knowledge about spending habits and creating a budget
• Insufficient social security benefits
• Unfair lending practices
• Disproportionate homeownership for People of Color (POC)
• Unfair arrests and fines on homeless
• Unjust re-entry policies for felons resulting in joblessness and homelessness

SUGGESTIONS

• Expand or improve career exploration, training, and attainment
• Create entrepreneurship and mentorship opportunities
• Provide accessible financial literacy and education to youth and adults
• Create an agency to oversee funds and distribution into the community
• Build more accessible and affordable housing options for all including homeless
• Educate community on importance of voting, elections, and running for office
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<tr>
<th>TOP BARRIERS</th>
<th>SUGGESTIONS</th>
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<td>• Income and tax inequality</td>
<td>• Complete a current housing needs assessment to include available and healthy housing</td>
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<td>• Stagnating low wages</td>
<td>• Rehab and refurbish residential and abandoned properties</td>
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<td>• Inadequate public benefits</td>
<td>• Improve infrastructure such as transportation, street cleaning and sidewalk repair</td>
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<td>• Lack of access to quality education</td>
<td>• Increase pathways to equitable housing options and homeownership including an educational component</td>
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<td>• Lack of access to affordable health care and housing</td>
<td>• Connect residents and assets/resources through impact centers</td>
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<td>• Institutional racism and discrimination</td>
<td>• Implement Homeless First programs</td>
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<td>• Restrictive immigration policies</td>
<td>• Explore and expand wellness and recreational assets</td>
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<td>• Language barriers</td>
<td>• Create educational opportunities for parents</td>
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<td>• Unjust re-entry policies for felons resulting in joblessness and homelessness</td>
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<td>• Criminalization of poor and victims</td>
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<td>• Exclusionary and restrictive government and local fees and fines</td>
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<td>• Truancy and zero tolerance policies resulting in school dropouts</td>
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<td>• Lack of response to homelessness, mental illness, drug addiction and gun violence</td>
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<td>• Lack of resources for youth, such as neighborhood centers, healthy affordable food options and preventative services</td>
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**TOP BARRIERS**

- Lack of a diverse workforce or understanding of the value of doing so
- Lack of career development and appropriate training for employees, including mentorship and coaching
- Lack of self-marketing skills for new and seasoned employees
- Pay transparency from employers
- Restrictive and exclusionary ways of acquiring new employees
- Failed hiring system that show favoritism based upon race, ethnic background
- Nepotism
- Unjust biases in requested application information, job requirements and protocols
- Lack of access to reliable transportation, childcare and housing
- Lack of entrepreneurship opportunities, encouragement and coaching
- Lack of and access to new business capital
- Lack of dignity and respect in the employee/employer relationship
- Unfair or non-existent promotion potential for employees, especially those of color

**SUGGESTIONS**

- Develop employee/employer mentorship programs
- Establish and advance a coordinated workforce investment strategy with nonprofits and other partners
- Focus on entrepreneurship, new business capital, growth and sustainability
- Implement flexible job requirements relative to education and prior experience
- Utilize both traditional and non-traditional methods of advertising to inform of hiring and to welcome diverse applicants
- Reevaluate hiring practices including implementing a fair and non-discriminatory re-entry policy
- Embrace a blind application process
- Invest in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) for Board of Trustees and Employees
- Prioritize diversity in Board of Trustees and Staff
- Ensure proper training, mentorship and promotion programs are in place, particularly for POC
- Build an authentic pipeline of potential applicants by providing job and internship opportunities for youth
- Create grade and high school entrepreneur training programs that provide grants, investors or start-up capital upon completing the program
What’s Next?

With our advisory group’s work concluded we’re excited for the next phase of the community equity initiative!

Taking the advisory group’s research and the community’s input to date, we will work with partners to create and empower a new or existing nonprofit entity, led by diverse residents, to help direct funding committed by the Community Foundation toward racial equity and social justice for years to come.

The solutions we achieve together will reflect neighborhood needs and resident ideas.

Your voice will continue to guide this effort. Please take part in our ongoing online forum and watch for continuing progress reports at foundationhoc.org/communityequity.

HELP CREATE A VIBRANT REGION WITH OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL

Building on our commitment to equity, the Community Foundation launched the Mohawk Valley Equity Pledge to get community residents and organizations to demonstrate their support for the advancement of racial equity and social justice. Together, we will encourage diversity, challenge injustice and help build opportunity for all. Taking the MV Equity Pledge is a great first step to becoming part of this important community effort. Join us today by visiting mvequitypledge.org.
...to realize opportunity for everyone, we need everyone to be involved.

For a detailed summary of all data collected during the October 20, 2021 Community Equity Forum, visit foundationhoc.org/communityequity.