

Town of Arlington

COMMUNITY EQUITY AUDIT

Report Summary



Project Summary

In June of 2022, the Town of Arlington contracted with Opportunity Consulting to conduct a review of the barriers to the Town's ability to connect, engage with, and respond to the needs of residents from underrepresented communities, particularly Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. The project focused on three main areas- Civic Engagement, The Town Workforce, and Housing. The Town of Arlington has acknowledged that Town services and programs can sometimes have an unequal impact and contribute to widening or shrinking gaps between residents' opportunities and outcomes. Jillian Harvey, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Director commissioned a community equity audit to examine the impact of those gaps and determine how the Town can develop better and more equitable policies and practices to increase engagement, participation, and information sharing with populations that have been historically underserved.

Opportunity Consulting partnered with Arlington for the scope of this project. The audit focused on identifying the lived experiences and perspectives of targeted groups and drawing connections between existing policies and practices utilized by the Town. We examined how identified practices contribute to Arlington's existing inequality and devised recommendations to support the Town in developing more equitable practices, in order to increase engagement and establish more meaningful connections between the Town and its residents.

Throughout American history, racist and discriminatory policies have been woven into the fabric of society, and that racism created all marginalized groups. Those groups have been denied opportunities in jobs, education, housing, and the ability to thrive. When we address the legacy of racism and discrimination we can ensure equal access and opportunity for all. Racial equity aims to improve all groups' lives, and the strategies are targeted to specific groups based on their collective needs.

Key Points

- Research shows that most people are motivated to participate when they can connect with their cultural identity.
- When residents feel they don't belong to a place or region, they are less likely to spend time and energy in Town- based activities.
- Residents need to feel that their efforts and opinions matter - which is partly dependent on feelings of belonging and trust.
- When a Town wants to engage those who are most impacted by inequality, they need to develop solutions that have a positive impact on daily life.



- Our team traveled to Arlington on multiple occasions and immersed ourselves in the community to establish connections, and gain a sense of the local context.
- We developed a community survey to collect additional data from Town residents and individuals who work in Arlington but do not live there.
- We held 30 individual interviews with residents, individuals working for community-based organizations, Town leaders, and stakeholders in the private sector.
- We hosted 4 separate focus groups with a mix of community members from underrepresented groups.



How we discovered our findings

- We examined residents' experience in the Town workforce, housing, & community outreach, and looked at publicly available data like the census, past community survey data, existing reports & more!
- We looked at how communication is distributed among various groups.
- We also collected our own data through resident input that provided a critical, local lens.
- This gave our team insights into understanding life in Arlington, and in what ways life is unequal. That allowed us to focus on what the Town can do, resulting in recommendations for real change.

An inclusive and welcoming community is one where residents and members feel respected, safe, and comfortable in expressing their identities. The sense of belonging that each member feels is shared equally with all other members of the group.

At OC, we believe diversity includes Disability.

We lead with Stakeholder input

Trust

We take steps early- on to establish community connections from the very beginning. We recognize the populations in which we are engaging have suffered from societal trauma and oppression and may be hesitant to speak their truth and honor their efforts.

Accessibility

We host community-based discussions and recognize that we are asking for the time and energy of people who have limited abilities, resources, and capacity. We engage with interest and sincerity the same way we would approach someone on the street or in a cafe.

Partnership

At OC, we view stakeholders as partners. Participants are providing a service to us and we ensure that we provide a service to them as well. Without their input, our projects would not change outcomes.

Relevance

We embody respect, acknowledge what matters most for others, and center that in our work. Our content focuses on connecting the dots for participants, demonstrating how the project outcomes could impact their daily lives and target what is important.



Data Collection

Demographic and Administrative Data

We collected data from the Town of Arlington as well as other government agencies, including the census, regional comparisons from the Arlington Fair Housing Action Plan, and publicly available data from other sources such as local and regional non-profits. The data included information on race and other social demographics, salary information of the Town workforce and elected officials, housing data patterns across the region, and characteristics such as age, tenancy, value and affordability, zoning requirements, and voter information such as active and inactive voters, and the precincts in which they live.

Community Visits and Survey

Our team traveled to Arlington on multiple occasions and immersed ourselves in the community to establish connections, and gain a sense of the local context. We also developed a community survey to collect additional data from Town residents and individuals who work in Arlington but do not live there. The survey included five sections and thirty-five questions on demographics, where individuals live and work, and their perspectives on life in Arlington. We distributed the survey digitally, and it was open for responses for four weeks, resulting in 126 responses from a wide range of community members.

Interviews and Focus Groups

We conducted 30 interviews with Arlingtonians, including residents, individuals working for community-based organizations, Town leaders, and stakeholders in the private sector. In addition, we facilitated four separate, targeted focus groups with a mix of community members from what our data revealed as the following underrepresented groups:

1. Residents who identify as Black, Indigenous, People of Color, or multicultural
2. Renters and Low Income
3. Chinese-speaking residents
4. Youth and Young Adults
5. Precincts 1 and 17
6. Parents of Black, Indigenous, People of Color, and Multicultural children

Lead Stakeholder Team

We utilized community connections formed from our initial community visits to invite a diverse group of stakeholders to guide our practice throughout the second half of the project. The role of the group was to provide insights into the data collected, provide expertise and help to plan engagements with the community. The team consisted of 8 members from diverse backgrounds who were either members of marginalized groups or involved in community organizations whose mission is to support the needs of those groups. The team convened weekly from September to December 2022, and Bi-weekly in January 2023.

Introduction

The Town of Arlington is a desirable community just outside of the City of Boston. Arlington is steeped in charming character and history and provides a popular small-town New England feel. It has many amenities and opportunities for residents, including quick access to the city, lovely neighborhoods, schools, park and green spaces, and many restaurants, shops, and cafes.

Residents value the Town's history and what it has to offer and are committed to preserving those features. Residents also want to ensure the Town is a thriving and inclusive community for everyone, including a growing and changing population.

Inclusion and belonging shapes access to many opportunities, including employment, education, transportation, safety, and green spaces, and influences outcomes like physical health, mental health, how long a person lives, education, contact with the criminal justice system, and more. Our society, our economy, and our democracy are better off when everyone has a chance to live, work, and learn together.

Addressing Racial and Ethnic Equity- Inclusion from the start

Equity is reached when social factors like race, ethnicity, and status no longer predict a person's income, wealth, zip code, or how long they live. Most people are motivated to participate in their Town when they have a sense of collective and cultural identity. People who feel they don't belong to a place or region are less likely to invest time and energy into improving their surroundings.

Research shows that people like and want the ability to influence their community if they are going to participate in public activities and if they do not feel that their efforts and opinions matter - it is unlikely that they will be motivated to engage in community transformation plans. The reason why we engage people who are the most impacted by inequality is to develop and advance solutions that have a positive impact on their lives. Designing strategies that support the most marginalized among us results in outcomes that benefit all of us.

Throughout our American history, racism, and discrimination have been woven into the fabric of society- harming Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color, and are the reasons why all marginalized communities exist and have been denied opportunities and the ability to thrive.

The purpose of addressing our legacy of racism and discrimination is to create equal access and opportunity for all. Racial equity aims to improve all groups' lives, and we work to create strategies for specific groups based on their collective needs.

Summary of Findings

FINDING 1

Opportunities for public participation are not designed to be accessible to diverse residents, yet it is critical to achieving equity.

FINDING 2

Town events aren't really available for residents to form connections & relationships.

FINDING 3

Town officials and leaders don't make time to get to know diverse residents.

FINDING 4

Diverse residents, including those differently abled, don't trust that the Town is meeting their needs.

FINDING 5

BIPOC residents do not see themselves as potential employees in the Town workforce.

FINDING 6

BIPOC residents have a negative view of the Town as a workplace.

FINDING 7

White employees of the Town make more than non-white employees.

FINDING 8

Civil service membership prevents the hiring of diverse Public Safety Staff and Officers.

FINDING 9

The Town of Arlington is racially segregated, which restricts housing options for BIPOC residents.

FINDING 10

Renters feel unsupported by the Town.

“Public infrastructure and services are not wholly designed to support children with disabilities. . . other towns have programs at the public library, sensory-friendly sports programs, and the like. That might be different if someone with neurodivergence was a decision maker”.

“I vote but I don't know who the candidates are or what they support. I just go in, check the boxes and leave because I want to exercise my right.”

Stories from the community

One participant who resides in East Arlington told a story about an entire neighborhood feeling excitement about a Town Meeting candidate who identified as Black, canvassing and making “good connections” on their block and others. When election day arrived, they and some of their friends went specifically to vote for that candidate only to find that the candidate’s name was not on the ballot. They later discovered the candidate had not known they were canvassing in a neighborhood outside their jurisdiction. That candidate subsequently lost the election. The East Arlington resident voter expressed frustration and signaled a mass confusion that took place among their neighbors over where to vote and who their local representatives were. That situation was left unresolved.

A resident who is physically disabled was unable to access their polling place on election day because it was not ADA-accessible. This resulted in that resident being unable to cast their vote due to their physical limitations, not having known that their polling place was inaccessible.

“We heard about this focus group and just wanted to come to meet people, and get connected. We don’t know anybody here yet”.

What do these findings mean?

- These findings amplify the voices and tell the story of the lived experiences of marginalized residents in Arlington.
- They help us to understand what ways people's experiences are different, and who benefits the most from Arlington's current system.
- We found that people's experiences are unequal and that some people benefit more than others in the Town, which contributes to inequality.
- This means that the Town needs to find ways to create more equal opportunities for all residents so that everyone can benefit and get what they need from Town services.

Residents who wish for change need to become more actively involved in the efforts for it

however...

The Town of Arlington should work to **create the conditions** for residents to be **supported & successful** should they choose to get involved.



A cautionary tale...

Many participants throughout this audit expressed feeling like many in the Town believe that “all Black and Brown people are the same”, and that the notion is harmful.

Residents from the Black and Brown the community expressed a growing concern, that local volunteer groups are “placing pressure” on Black and Brown residents who have no local government or political experience to run for office

in order to “increase diversity” in Town Government. Collective regard among the many people we spoke with, is that this group and the Town have not taken steps to reassure that any successful candidate would be free from harm in the Town Government setting.

Rumors and mixed feelings swirled in our conversations, with many questioning the group's motives. Even though the group has been successful in getting candidates from marginalized backgrounds to run for office, many participants described the group as performative, because many of their members - who are not members of marginalized communities hold powerful positions on Town Meeting, commissions, and boards.

Our participants described beliefs that the group tokenizes the Black and Brown community for the group's own political gain, which is what a few participants said prevented them from considering participation on commissions or select boards.

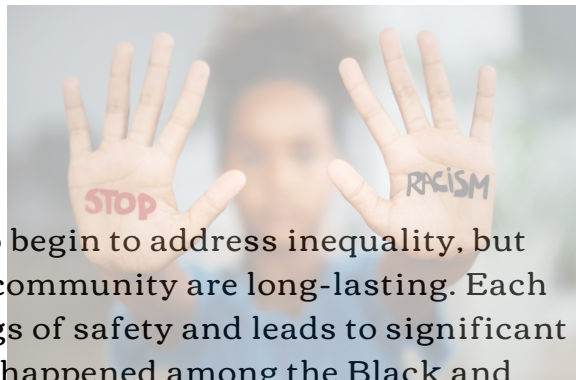
Virtue signaling- an act that implicitly claims that the speaker has made a decision about an important moral question and wants to signal others to align with their specific values- can actually be harmful and create barriers for communities of color.

“When liberal whites fail to understand how they can and/or do embody white supremacist values and beliefs even though they may not embrace racism as prejudice or domination (especially domination that involves coercive control), they cannot recognize the ways their actions support and affirm the very structure of racist domination and oppression that they wish to see eradicated.”

~ bell hooks.

“They think that just because we’re Black, our views should be the same as theirs. But Black Republicans have the right to exist and have their voices heard just as much as Black Democrats. We all experience the same racism.”

Community Healing



We applaud the steps the Town has taken to begin to address inequality, but sometimes the effects of harm on an entire community are long-lasting. Each event that occurs further diminishes feelings of safety and leads to significant distrust. Our process revealed that this has happened among the Black and Brown community in Arlington, and the Town has much work to do to regain trust and build positive relationships that promote health, safety, and well-being.

There is a fear and discomfort in speaking publicly about mistrust in the Town Government, partially because past and more recent racially-motivated events evens have not been addressed by the Town in a way that promotes safety and well-being for the communities that were harmed. This is a significant barrier to Arlington reaching its goals. Many residents expressed that they wanted more direct communication from the Town about racially motivated crimes and incidents, as well as for the Town to include community healing when they are addressing things that happen. This is key to building a sense of inclusion and belonging within any city or town.

There has been more than enough evidence in recent years in the United States, to show that when hate crimes, bigotry & discrimination happen publicly, entire communities feel the effects. It takes more than just addressing these incidents internally to rectify the injustice that is felt.

Understanding Racial Trauma

Traumatic racial events (or racial traumatic stress) are the mental and physical impacts of experiencing racism, ethnic discrimination, and racial bias. The consequences of racial trauma are long-lasting, especially when it is compounded by intersectionality within systems of oppression. It can manifest in harmful ways, and when this happens, psychological safety becomes most important in a community. In these circumstances, residents will often look to Town leadership for support, aid, and resources. The negative experiences that happen among under-represented racial groups are ongoing. When these incidents are repeated over time, marginalized groups can feel the effects for generations.

These factors should be considered when addressing the needs of communities who are facing ongoing trauma due to racism, racial oppression, and discrimination, and speaks to the importance of transparency and community healing practices within the organizational response to racially motivated incidents.

Our Recommendations for the Town

Recommendation 1 Establish a Community Engagement Team to make meaningful connections with residents who have experienced inequality.

- Community-based outreach teams can give much-needed support.
- They can build connections, identify and address local needs & build on the expertise and strengths of community members.
- They can establish and facilitate ongoing opportunities for community healing between Town leaders and residents.

Recommendation 2 Develop & implement a Town-wide system for ongoing information gathering and communication.

- Transparency builds trust within a community & connects information & lived experience.
- Effective communication keeps residents informed.
- Residents gain assurance that their local government is well-prepared to address their needs.

Recommendation 3 Establish a Fair Election and Voting Access Plan.

- The purpose of an election is to allow people to choose and hold accountable their political leaders.
- In order for elections to fulfill this function, they should be fair & free, and allow for different perspectives to hold positions of power.

Recommendation 4 Invest in language and communication access, and create a language and communication access policy.

- A language access program will help to eliminate barriers for people who have limited ability to speak, understand, read, or write English from fully utilizing, participating in, and contributing to programs and services.

Recommendation 5 Establish an Equity Dashboard that is reviewed quarterly by Town leadership.

- Equity dashboards provide valuable insight into the impact of DEI initiatives.
- Analyzing DEI metrics, can measure progress, & communication, & be used for accountability and improvement.

Recommendation 6 Leverage local universities and community groups to establish relationships for recruitment.

- Relationships with these groups are critical to recruitment strategy if the Town wants to diversify.
- This can develop pipelines for employment and information sharing with underrepresented communities.

Our Recommendations for the Town

Recommendation 7 Allow the public safety departments to exit from civil service.

- Public safety is key to inclusion and belonging- public safety officers are sworn to protect the safety and well-being of residents.
- The greatest factor in achieving inclusion and belonging is the residents' judgment of fairness within public safety.

Recommendation 8 Address income inequality that currently exists by holding a pay equity audit.

- Arlington should work to address imbalances in representation where some groups are not in leadership positions with higher salaries.
- Pay equity means that employees are paid the same amount for the same work regardless of their identity.

Recommendation 9 Continue DEI Training and focus on Cultural Responsiveness.

- Cultural responsiveness means constantly learning and adapting to different cultural needs & ensures an inclusive, accepting, and supportive environment for employees, teams, and leaders, which in turn, extends to residents.

Recommendation 10 Establish and hire a housing specialist or housing liaison position.

- Renters in Arlington need easily accessible information about housing rights and resources.
- The Town can create a position that is responsible for developing resources that renters can utilize on an ongoing basis, and provide ongoing housing support.

Recommendation 11 Develop a community fund for rental assistance & rental housing improvement programs, & a centralized system for funding.

- Direct rental assistance is a way to give tenants more freedom of choice in where to live and to reduce segregation.
- Implementing incentives for landlords if they choose to renovate units without displacing current renters & keeping rent increases low.

Recommendation 12 Address restrictive zoning districts to allow for desegregation.

- Wealth & access to loans decided who can purchase homes in neighborhoods zoned for single-family housing, & favors white homebuyers.
- Neighborhoods became racially segregated because of explicit racism in land covenants in Arlington.

What happens now?

Our recommendations represent short-term & long-term goals that will result in more equitable outcomes for all residents. We acknowledge that the commitment to change means that it will take place over time and items that have budgetary implications may require some scaffolding in implementation.

Our audit has provided recommendations that we believe are accessible, and feasible and consider the local budget and political contexts and that are also directly related to inclusion and belonging.

The Town Leaders of Arlington are planning to develop a strategic plan for a long-term commitment to equity and inclusion. The Town workforce developed 5 Goals to work towards:

- We will Create an inclusive Town culture
- We will examine and improve our organizational structures and processes to align and advance DEI in our Town.
- We will explore and test/ reassess ways to increase DEI in all areas of town services.
- We will provide excellent and equitable town services.
- We will learn with each other and from each other in service to the Arlington Community and continuous improvement.