

## From Poverty to Possibilities 2022



After serving Pierce County for over 100 years, we know that our community's biggest challenges and opportunities for development cannot be addressed alone. At United Way of Pierce County's 6<sup>th</sup> annual From Poverty to Possibilities summit, we asked:

*How do we move as a community to reframe the conversation around poverty, equity and race? What is keeping us from being a more caring and resilient community? Can we create a community in which we all prosper?*

At From Poverty to Possibilities, we share true lived experiences from our neighbors who are Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE) and insights and expertise from community leaders, artists, and policymakers. We work to reframe our understanding of the complex challenges that families face today by taking a strength-based resiliency approach to solve our bold goal of lifting 15,000 families out of poverty by 2028. More than 250 community members joined us at the Hotel Murano in downtown Tacoma to learn, listen, and act.

Dr. Karen Johnson, inaugural Director of the Washington State Office of Equity, joined us for a keynote presentation on acknowledging and overcoming inequities that exist because of racism's influence on economic injustice and how it hinders opportunities for individuals and communities to thrive.



## Key Themes from This Year's Summit

- 1. Lifting voices from our community is essential.** To create effective and lasting solutions, we must welcome lived experience as expertise, shaping policies and programs based on what works in homes and neighborhoods.
- 2. Everybody and every sector can play a role.** Sharing the opportunities, having common solutions, and communal action is key. When our community is united, we all benefit.
- 3. Poverty is directly related to equity and race.** We must start with empathy. When we truly understand the disparities and inequities caused by policies of exclusion, we can bear witness and ensure that this part of our history is not our future.

*“There is more than enough  
for everyone.”*

**-Dr. Karen Johnson**



## Dr. Karen Johnson (Dr. J)



The Washington State Office of Equity was established to co-create a seamless, integrated, world-class, equitable and just public service delivery system where a team of actively engaged public servants bring their whole self and ‘A-game’ to provide a superior customer experience to Washingtonians seeking assistance. The Office of Equity prioritizes partnerships to decrease inequities in employment and contracting, improve access to state services, and surpass accessibility requirements across state government. At From Poverty to Possibilities, Dr. J shared that an equitable future requires an understanding that many have been excluded from reaping benefits from our nation’s development. The wealth gap and unequal distribution of opportunity has contributed to challenges that ALICE and communities experiencing poverty face every day.

Additionally, Dr. J discussed:

- Today, nearly 50% of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color are unable to afford purchasing a home, education for their children, or entrepreneurial ventures like starting a business.
- How do we prosper together? It begins with recognizing abundance and the fact that there is more than enough for everyone.
- Restoring the middle class stimulates hope and should be a priority.
- My dad provided hope. There was hope for education, hope for homeownership, and hope for entrepreneurship...until it became our turn.
- When it became time for Black and Brown people to prosper... suddenly the rules of the game changed.
- We have to understand that poverty is not who you are. If we believe we are in scarcity, we operate with a scarcity mentality.
- Small seeds bring great rewards.
- Ubuntu means to operate in love and caring and resilience, we must be in this together... we will rise together.

[Hear Dr. J’s full keynote address](#)

## Panel Discussion

Carol Mitchell, Founder of the Institute for Black Justice, hosted a panel to shine a light on cross-sector perspectives on how we reframe the conversation about poverty and racial disparities in work, school, and everyday life.

### Panelists

- Dr. Lori Pfingst, Senior Director of Poverty Reduction for the Washington Department of Social and Health Services
- Adam Stein, Columbia Bank, VP, CRA & HMDA, Compliance Manager, CRCM
- Debbie Wilkerson, Community Member and GRIT guaranteed income recipient
- Carlos A. Ortiz, Writer, Director, Producer, Filmmaker, Zeta-Maya Entertainment, Co-Founder and Chairman of LUNA
- Melannie Cunningham, Director, Multicultural Outreach and Engagement, Pacific Lutheran University
- Dr. Karen Johnson, Director, Washington State Office of Equity

## Key Takeaways

- We prosper together.
- Public programs have often been described as “a game of chutes and ladders” and “dehumanizing.” This is by design. It is time for a new design: look to *Washington’s 10-Year Plan to Dismantle Poverty*, the Just Futures Coalition, and the state’s *Equity Playbook*.
- Everybody can be a storyteller and operate with a mindset of empowerment. It needs to come from within us. Transition from thinking about scarcity to thinking about abundance for everyone in our community.
- Race is not just a checkbox on a census form. When we talk about poverty, we need to stop and see the people and listen. Listening is a basic foundational act that will help us reach our full potential.
- Struggle, adversity, and challenge help to forge us. We can use that strength to make things happen in our community.
- We must love and care deeply for one another.

- ALICE is hard working and needs to be seen. If you are a leader, help to create dialogue or build culturally sensitive policies and programs that do not blame poverty on those experiencing it each day.

### [Listen to the panel discuss opportunities for action](#)

## Pitch to Ditch

Each year, United Way of Pierce County works to identify community members that are creatively addressing community needs via an innovation challenge called Pitch to Ditch. We lift up community-led groups that are helping to mitigate the racial and social inequities evident today.

### [Learn about Eastside Community Garden, our 2022 Pitch to Ditch Challenge Winner](#)

In their own words:

The community garden is managed and led by community members from East Tacoma and surrounding area. The Eastside community garden sits in between Roosevelt Elementary and the Puyallup Tribe Grandview Early Learning Center. All families are invited and welcomed to participate in the community garden. Many of our community gardeners are trusted neighborhood leaders. The proximity of the garden enhances partnerships with the Eastside Family Resource Center managed in partnership with Tacoma Public Schools and Tacoma Pierce County Health Department, which serves as backbone organization to Eastside Community Garden.

The Eastside community garden strengthens protective factors such as social connections and access to concrete support in times of need to mitigate the impact of traumas experienced by community members who identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. The community garden provides spaces and opportunities to help strengthen relationships that help create safe, healthy, and just communities for all. It creates leadership development and training opportunities that help build up local capacity and voice. The community garden also allows all participants to connect to their culture and traditions by choosing and growing culturally appropriate foods.

## Design-Thinking Workshop and Breakout Activities

Dr. Divya McMillin, Professor of Global Media Studies, Interim Dean of the School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences (SIAS), and Associate Vice Chancellor for Innovation and Global Engagement led a fast-paced workshop along with UW Tacoma students and community volunteers. Participants were asked to use sticky notes and write down all the ways in which ALICE families were described during the morning sessions. After collecting notes all morning, each table created a poverty-prosperity grid, organizing the ALICE messaging into themes and clusters. Then, groups worked to change the narrative with the experience of ALICE at the center of each theme in order to fashion a story of prosperity. Groups created stimulating headlines and shared their projects which included *From Newcomer to Overcomer*, *The Butterfly*, *From Potterville to George Bailey*, and *Ubuntu (I am because we are)*.

[Read about design-thinking at From Poverty to Possibilities here](#)



## Community Feedback

“So many take aways! It was such a positive conversation with each person on the panel. Everyone had such powerful messages. The most compelling of it all was to be able to be in a room with so many other people who want to and are actively making a difference. I left the summit feeling like my cup was so full. I wish I could start my morning like that at least once a week! We all make each other better and I definitely feel that more than ever!!”

“Debbie's story did make an impact on me. I've been in her shoes and even as a CSF employment coach as a single mom I struggle paycheck to paycheck. She is 1000% right- ALICE Families ARE NOT LAZY!!!”

“The largest theme our table found was that poverty is not the individual's fault it is the fault of broken systems and institutions that were never built for our thriving in the first place”

“Lived experience is so important to hear from the person living it. They are the expert and the hero.”

“This was a powerhouse of speakers. Having one of the participants share their personal experience was extremely powerful and moving. There is so much value and power from hearing from someone that has directly experience poverty and resources.”

[Experience the day again: click for all Poverty to Possibilities Resources](#)

