Episode 20:
Equity North Star adopted to guide Department efforts to become an agency free of racism, discrimination and bias.
- October 16, 2020

Description:
Dion Jordon joins Oregon Department of Human Services Director Fariborz Pakseresht for a 14-minute podcast on the Department’s adoption of an Equity North Star. Dion is the director of the Department’s Office of Equity and Multicultural Services (OEMS). Their discussion covers why advancing equity and inclusion is a Department priority, why it’s important to have an Equity North Star, how it came together and how we will put it to use.

Podcast Script:

[You are listening to Our Oregon DHS, a podcast for employees from the director of the Oregon Department of Human Services.]

Fariborz Pakseresht: Hi everyone and thank you for joining us today. I have invited Dion Jordan, our director of Office of Equity and Multicultural Services or OEMS as we know it in Oregon Department of Human Services to be our guest today on this podcast and to share with us the Department's new Equity North Star.

Over 3 years ago, I started with Oregon Department of Human Services – I should say I came back to it because some of you know that I worked here from 2001 almost through 2008 and equity and service equity has been on the top of the agenda for me. You may remember that we did, um, an assessment of the organization around equity and the creative plan based on that.
We are extremely fortunate to have Dion join us. He's been with us, if I'm not mistaken, about 5 or 6 months and he's brought a new set of ideas, vision and action plans with him which I know will move this organization forward to where we need to be and where we want to go. So, with that, I want to hand it off to Dion to provide us with a high-level overview, first of all, of the purpose of the organization that he leads, OEMS, and then we'll get into the Equity North Star. So, Dion, welcome.

Dion Jordan: Thank you. I, I appreciate that.

So, yeah, let me share a little bit about our office. You know, our mission is to ensure that we provide equitable services to all Oregonians and to make sure that all folks are served with respect, dignity, you know, regardless of the language they speak, regardless of their race, gender, national origin, disability, sexual orientation or, or veteran status, and so internally, it's our mission to embed equity in everything that we do. I often joke in our office that we're trying to work ourselves out of a job, where we won't need an Office of Equity and Multicultural Services because everything we do is embedded in the work that we do.

But with this, you know, comes a strong desire to create a culture that's inclusive and equitable and that's anti-racist and brings a sense of belonging and opportunity for everyone. However, we know this is, you know, often easier said than done because government agencies like ours and, you know, so many others have a culture that's comprised of these interlocking set of systems and unspoken expectations and values, and even assumptions, that are sometimes rooted in equities and impressions, and these elements all work together, you know to mutually enforce the system and keep everything, you know, the way it is. So it's another goal of our office to help dismantle some of these interlocking, you know, elements, uh, where systems of oppression and discrimination exist.

So lastly, I'll say that our mission is really to help equip and education our workforce. We realize that many times the burdens of implementing equity and diversity and inclusion often falls on the shoulders of employees who belong to historically marginalized communities, so we want to be able to make sure that advancing equity becomes the responsibility of everyone.

Fariborz Pakseresht: Thank you Dion for that overview. Ever since you've started, you've been very intentional about developing an Equity
North Star statement. Can you share with us what is the Oregon Department of Human Services Equity North Star and why is it important to have a North Star as it relates to equity for ODHS?

Dion Jordan: Definitely. In its simplest form, you know, an Equity North Star are statements that explain the organizational goals, the commitment as it relates to equity inclusion and racial justice. The reason behind the North Star is to help us align our equity efforts and to give us direction and clarity in what we're doing.

You know, I realized when I came here that, you know, we had so many great efforts taking place but we weren't sure if they were all aligned and that we were all, you know, going in the same direction with the same vision. You know, if I had to use an illustration, it would be like we were all on a raft, you know, a, a huge raft and, and we're all, you know, got our oars in the water and we're all working hard, we're all passionate, but are we going anywhere, you know. Are we aligning our work, are we looking in the same direction and, and trying to go in that same direction? So, I'm hoping this North Star helps us have that direction. Uh, a similar example I often use is the example of, like, the Titanic. Like, sometimes I feel like we could really be good at rearranging the seats on the Titanic, right? We're good at busy work, you know. We're good at putting things on paper. But are we really moving the ship? Are we really, you know, avoiding the iceberg and heading towards the North Star?

So, we're hoping that this Equity North Star helps us give that direction so we don't crash into the iceberg and then we can work together, align our work and move forward.

Fariborz Pakseresht: Dion, could you please walk us through the four elements of the Oregon Department of Human Services Equity North Star?

Dion Jordan: Sure. The Equity North Star is that the Oregon Department of Human Services inclusively leads with race intersectionality in order to address the roots of systemic oppression that impacts all protected classes. We are dedicated to make services, support and wellbeing accessible to all. We are committed to partnering with communities to develop and deliver policies and programs that are equitable and improve community conditions. Staff and communities will
know services and supports are working when all who live in Oregon regardless of identity or place can achieve wellbeing.

**Fariborz Pakseresht:** Thank you Dion. I know that the state as a whole has been intentional about creating an equity plan and vision for many years, but unfortunately, I think we've had a few crashes, and avoiding the iceberg I think is a good analogy, to make sure that we are intentional about keeping our eye on the North Star, but at the same time be very cognizant of the barriers that are in front of us so that we can continue the movement. And I know that you have been very intentional about being inclusive in developing this Equity North Star statement. Can you share with us the work that went into that process?

**Dion Jordan:** Sure. So, it started off with our office coming together to put a draft together. With the draft, our idea was we wanted to be able to embrace our agency's mission, we wanted to make sure that whatever we put together aligned with what's coming out of the governor's office, and we wanted to make sure that it really spoke to, uh, embedding equity in all that we do. And so, our office created, uh, four drafts of a possible Equity North Star. After we had the opportunity to create the four drafts, we then shared it out with our Employee Resource Groups so that we might have opportunity to get their feedback. We realized that our office, you know, although we are the Office of Equity and Multicultural Services, uh, we're not experts, uh, on all things equity, uh, and we definitely need to, you know, get the voice of others. And so we had the opportunity to hear back from many of the ERGs. I think, if I'm not mistaken, we probably received around 140 different comments and feedback for us to implement within the North Star, and so we took those and we went ahead and kinda put 'em in buckets and see where they fit and added many of those recommendations to the North Star.

Once we had a chance to hear from the ERGs, it was now our opportunity to share with our program directors, their deputy directors, so they could share with their programs and get feedback. And so we allowed them to send us the feedback once again back to our office where we had the opportunity to look at their feedback and implement what we could within the Equity North Star.

And then finally, we wanted to make sure that the governor's office had the opportunity to take a look. So, we shared it with the governor's office and we shared with DAS so they had the opportunity for feedback and, uh, once we got that okay from them, we shared it with Fariborz and
shared it with Liesl and that concluded the process of creating our Equity North Star.

**Fariborz Pakseresht:** Thank you Dion and I really appreciate the inclusive process and the amount of feedback that you received and included in the final draft that you brought to us. And when we look at that statement the first pillar of the Equity North Star states a commitment to addressing the root causes of systemic oppression that impacts all protected classes. So, question for you is why is it important for Oregon Department of Human Services to adopt an approach that encompases race with a focus on communities that have experienced historical discrimination?

**Dion Jordan:** So, we acknowledge that all historically disadvantaged groups and protected classes experience systemic inequities and we acknowledge that many people in communities live at the intersectionality of these identities. A good example is a black woman with a disability who experiences multiple, you know, inequities, you know, all at once. So, in our statement in our North Star we say that we inclusively lead with the race and intersectionality. This is because when you look at all the dimensions of identity whether it's income or gender or education or ability or citizenship that races consistently a primary indicator of a person's success and wellness in society. So, knowing this helps us take a more concentrated approach, you know, by naming all the other roles that race plagues.

So a good example of this is by focusing on something that touches all elements of diversity and all the dimensions of diversity we're able to create frameworks to help all and so our hope is that we don't want to create by saying that we lead with the race some type of competition that, you know, one element of diversity is worse than another element of diversity but rather we want to create a common link that is a touching point for all protected classes and all people and by doing so hopefully we can have the opportunity to dismantle a lot of these systems that exist. And sometimes people don't wonder why we focus on systems and the reason why it's so important to focus on systems is systems is where “isms” live and systems is what exists when people leave and so although we can spend a lot of time training people and changing hearts and changing minds. If our policies and our practices and the places that we have hasn't changed then when new people come then we're just operating within the thing and equities that has always exist.
Fariborz Pakseresht: So with that then the question comes up how will this Equity North Star guide our work moving forward? What is the practical use of the Equity North Star on the frontline of this organization, uh, frontline staff? How would a frontline staff in Oregon Department of Human Services utilize this Equity North Star?

Dion Jordan: Yeah, that's the million-dollar question. I believe in human services. Everyone is here because they have a heart to serve, right? I mean after all we are, you know, public service. Their why has already been established in this work but the Equity North Star is the help with the half, you know, how we offer these services and we want to be able to offer these services in a way that's equitable, that's accessible and brings a sense of, uh, belonging to all. So, we're hoping that whether it's frontline or leadership or middle management, wherever they might sit with an organization, that they could find clarity that they could find direction in the work that we do.

Fariborz Pakseresht: I want to thank Dion Jordan for joining us today and helping us better understand the Oregon Department of Human Services Equity North Star statement and I want to thank all of you for joining us today to listen to this program and learn more about our Equity North Star.

We continue to learn about the importance of equity, its impact on our staff as well as on those people that we serve, and I want to be clear that ultimate goal of these conversations and these efforts is to achieve unity. When the sun shines it does not discriminate. It shines on everyone and as you listened to Dion go through our Equity North Star, the last piece of that statement is we would have achieved our goal when all who live in Oregon regardless of identity or place can achieve wellbeing. So, our ultimate goal is to expand this opportunity that exists in this organization and the services that we provide to the community to everyone regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, ethnicity, religion or any other elements of diversity. That is our ultimate goal and everything that we do is focused on unity so there is a path and there is a process to get there and that's what they're putting in place so that sometime from now we can all be proud that our services is similar to the sunshine. It is available to everyone and it does not discriminate.

Thanks again for joining us and we’ll continue our conversations about race, racial equity and service equity because it is central to the work that we do in Oregon Department of Human Services and we'll talk soon.
Thank you.