

King County Executive Constantine's prepared remarks for the 2018 King County Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration

Thank you, Councilmember Gossett.

- And thank you all for joining us today as we honor the life, the work, and the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

We all wonder, at key points in our national conversation, what would Dr. King think about the times in which we live?

- What would he think of those who say they want to Make America Great Again?
- Especially, given that the most common response when you ask exactly when America was great is the 1950s – a time of plentiful industrial jobs... but also of segregated schools, segregated public accommodations, a theoretical right to vote that in practice was denied to millions.
- Today, more than ever, we as Americans need to prioritize equity, racial justice and civil rights.

We know the facts: both locally and nationally many communities of color continue to fall behind.

- Even as public high school graduation rates for all students are on the rise for all groups, the graduation rate for African-American students remains below 70 percent in 12 U.S. states, and for Latino students in 10 states.
- And prosperous, progressive Washington state is on both lists.
- Washington is also one of 11 U.S. states in which the public high school graduation rate for low-income students is below 70 percent.

In 2016, the median household income for white Americans was just over \$65,000 a year.

- For Latino families it was about \$48,000.
- And for African American families, it was less than \$40,000.

We also need to look at race and its many intersections

- Especially in a week in which many of the top women in the entertainment industry have announced that Time's Up on tolerating discrimination and harassment in the workplace
- King County has been shown to have one of our country's biggest gender wage gaps.

Most wage gap talking points state that Women, on average, make just over 78 cents for each dollar earned by equivalent male workers, when in fact, Women of color are paid dramatically less: 56 cents on the dollar for African American women and 47 cents for Latinas.

- These are issues we must address as we continue our work to break down barriers and tighten systemic gaps for our employees and those who call this place home.

These deep inequities are present in our own community, and these inequities make it harder for people to get an education, to get a job, even to find a decent place to live.

- As a County that proudly claims Dr. King as our namesake, we have a special responsibility to advance racial justice in both our organization and our community.

Two years ago, King County drafted and enacted its first ever Equity and Social Justice Strategic Plan. The Plan has received national recognition and praise.

- We had a lot of help on putting it together: Almost 700 King County employees participated in plan workshops and more than 100 community groups also made their voices heard.

The six-year Strategic Plan represents a critical opportunity for King County to do ground-breaking work:

- We have started to implement this plan, and are making investments that address the root causes of inequities – investing upstream and where needs are greatest.
- We will encourage innovation and adaptability across King County government to help us be dynamic and culturally responsive.
- Our intent and our focus on racial justice must be clear and unwavering to achieve the results we desire.

One major example of our new focus on addressing problems upstream is Best Starts for Kids.

The very first BSK program was a new initiative launched a year ago to work with people and families on the verge of becoming homeless and to keep a roof over their heads.

- Young people and families of color have been disproportionately impacted by the homelessness crisis.

After one year, we've found that 96 percent of the more than 1,000 participating households still has a place to live.

- That represents more than 3,000 people across King County.
- The majority of people who have been served by this program are people of color, and about half are African American.
- That's one reason why researchers at MIT and Notre Dame are studying this initiative as an effective way to prevent homelessness.
- And I'm proud of how we have an explicit racial equity lens in this work.

Other Best Starts for Kids programs have:

- Expanded already effective home-visiting programs – such as the Parent-Children Home Program
- Opened new school-based health centers where students can meet with medical-, dental- and mental-health providers at no cost, and
- Provided leadership opportunities and mentoring programs that help our young people reach adulthood connected, motivated, and empowered.

Through an Executive Order, King County is adopting a public health approach toward youth detention in an effort to limit the traumatization of youth in detention, and to ensure families have greater access to supports and services in the community.

- And we are using racial equity approaches to effectively lift youth of color, given the disproportionality that exists.
- We need to be explicit in our focus on black and brown youth.

A multi-departmental team under the oversight of Public Health – Seattle & King County is working to draft a proposal reorganizing juvenile detention services.

- And Deputy Executive Rhonda Berry is leading our Zero Youth Detention efforts, using inter-agency and community coordination and strategy to further reduce the number of youth in detention

We are prioritizing racial diversity in our County workforce through our pipelines, hiring, recruitment, and retention processes, especially in manager and supervisor positions where people of color are under-represented.

- We are tracking and being accountable to our goals, demanding change and improvements from all of our departments.
- Our goal is a King County government – at all levels – that more closely mirrors the population we serve – and the creation of good job opportunities for all County residents.

We must rely on our employees as our best innovators and champions for equity.

- Last year again we launched our ESJ Opportunity Fund, created to provide King County employees with the necessary financing to develop and implement projects that advance equity and social justice
- There has been great interest from King County employees in this program, which demonstrates a great level of commitment from our employees as individuals.

- Through a competitive process run by the Office of Equity and Social Justice, 17 employee proposals were selected for funding from a field of 39 applications.

And, although it hasn't yet been formally launched, later in today's program, you will get a preview of a program our King County ESJ team has developed called Conversation Cafes on Race.

- Our goal is to normalize conversations about race and racial justice – not just as part of MLK Day, but as part of our fabric and how we want to work and relate to each other.

Our Conversation Cafes on race will:

- Encourage and promote real and meaningful conversations and interactions within the workplace and among colleagues.
- Build a sense of belonging and community within departments and agencies and across King County, and
- Create a space where employees can engage in these conversations in the workplace without fear of retaliation or isolation.

As an employee of Martin Luther King County, no matter what it says in your job description – we want you to have the tools to participate in this collective effort to create the long-term, systemic changes this nation needs to be what it truly can.

- I believe we have the will and the means in this region to create different outcomes than what we see in the national arena.
- Let us create an environment in which each person – every man, woman, every child growing up here – has the opportunity to fulfill his or her innate potential.
- Let us make King County a place where the human spirit can genuinely flourish.