



Lessons Learned from Community Engagement

The Washington Voting Justice Coalition's (WVJC) mission is to build and sustain a movement that will increase civic participation by changing power structures that deny certain people meaningful access to having their votes counted and their voices heard.

For the past three years, the coalition has been housed at the Win|Win Network and it is comprised of nearly 30 organizations and individuals representing disenfranchised communities, good government, service providers, advocacy, and civic engagement organizations, all dedicated to the coalition's mission.

Aside from our shared policy goals, we strive to work with intention, transparency, equity, and accountability to transform how we organize coalition campaigns. Over the past three years, we've been working together to pass a suite of policy reforms to reduce barriers to voting. Our strategy was to pass these reforms through the Legislature and prepare for a statewide ballot measure if a legislative route was not successful.

The following principles serve as a foundation our work:

- **Racial equity:** Creating a vibrant movement that leads with racial equity by prioritizing and being accountable to communities most impacted by voting barriers.
- **Redefining wins:** Redefining a win that's creative, transformative, and radical that isn't only defined by what policies we win, but how we are able to do it.
- **Transparency & equity in decision making:** Creating a transparent and equitable decision-making process and resource allocation model that focuses on those most impacted by voting access issues.
- **Learning & mentorship:** Creating a learning community that focuses on mentoring and supporting one another to strengthen our collective and individual work.

We are very proud of our work and greatly appreciate the opportunity to share lessons learned with the Group Health Foundation. To give you a flavor of how we use resources, the funds received from the Group Health Foundation will be used to meet a collective need of the coalition, whether that be a training, communications resources, or support for a new group to join our efforts. The following narrative of our lessons learned is informed by Win|Win Network staff as well as three coalition members who provided feedback on the questions.

Community Relationships

The WVJC has engaged, convened and maintained relationships with organizations representing numerous communities including the Asian Pacific Islander community, students,

formerly incarcerated individuals, Latinx communities, and those experiencing homelessness or housing instability.

Like most high-functioning teams, we are bound together by relationships built on trust. Our principles and group norms (appended) outline our shared values and the behaviors that guide our work, which helped create that foundation of trust. They also set accountability, clarity of expectations, roles, decision making, transparency in resource allocation, and are used as a tool to create space for different people and groups to shape our campaign.

We also spend time getting to know one another. As shared by Sue Mason of What's Next Washington, "We have created time to share victories and losses, and to gather for holidays or simply to hang out so that we can get to know each other outside of this work. This is incredibly helpful to my population especially in that often we can feel ostracized by those who have not had our lived experience. We don't just come to the table as the formerly incarcerated. We come to the table as coalition members and bond over our work not just our identities."

Co-Created Solutions and Designs

The coalition has sought to bring in community voices during our policy campaign. We recognize that even though our coalition membership is broad, organizations are still gatekeepers to different communities and hold a place of privilege. We set intentions to gain direct input from communities during two critical moments during our campaign.

First, during our legislative campaign, concerns arose about the level of protection offered to non-citizens in our Automatic Voter Registration bill. Joseph Shoji Lachman from Asian Counseling and Referral Service says, "When discussing bills to improve voting access, organizations working with and representing people of color expressed the need to ensure that any voting access bill that required collection of personal information would also include protections for immigrants and refugees to make sure they wouldn't be punished if somehow they were accidentally registered to vote by a government agency. Coalition leadership listened to these concerns and collectively we adjusted our legislative approach as necessary."

Next, we wanted the communities we work with to help shape our potential ballot measure language and know if our policy solutions really matched the barriers that people face to voting. To do this, we conducted a first-of-its-kind qualitative research project, where the coalition granted funds to community groups to conduct their own focus groups. Leaders were able to leverage their trusted relationships, understanding of cultural norms, and ability to provide translation support to gain direct input from their communities. Topos Partnership, an ethnographic research firm, were then given the transcripts to analyze and compile a report of the findings. This process helped us better understand how our communities talk about and understand problems with voting access.

Addressing Systematic Inequities

As we worked towards defining and operationalizing our guiding principles, we spent a lot of intentional time defining what racial equity meant to us. There was a lot of tension among coalition partners at this time as we struggled to work through power differentials within the group and leadership of the coalition. We went through a race-based caucusing process so that people of color could identify and get support on what they needed from the full group, and white partners could respond to those needs, identify ways in which their internalized white supremacy showed up in coalition space and hold each other accountable for different behavior. This resulted in Win|Win staff having some hard conversations with individual members of the coalition whose organizations or individual actions were not living up to our racial equity principles and they were asked to leave the coalition. This process was one of the greatest learning opportunities for us and ultimately brought us closer together as a coalition.

Here are two viewpoints from coalition members:

“The coalition did a good job at identifying and addressing both power differentials and racism. Sometimes our meetings would stall due to the need to address issues that arose. After the first two or three meetings with the full coalition, there was a need to address problematic language and assumptions that were made by white members of the coalition. There were two spaces created to talk openly and honestly about the issues coming up in the coalition space. One space for people of color and other for white members of the coalition. I can only speak on behalf of the POC space: overall, it was a great and needed "pause" for POC members of the coalition to look at their role within the coalition space and talk about ways to be more honest about our feelings when issues arose. We reported back to the coalition about our own feelings of the coalition space and used that solidarity to navigate our space in the coalition better than before”, Guillermo Rogel, Washington Student Association.

“Last year there were coalition members from communities of color that had serious concerns about the direction some of our organizing efforts were taking. The coalition immediately addressed these concerns by putting together a series of conversations for the white people to address their biases, privilege and learn how to effectively engage with marginalized identities without using the tactics of privilege. It was an incredibly powerful experience; one I haven't seen practiced before. Instead of putting the onus on the marginalized to educate, the coalition put the onus on white people to address their behaviors and their biases accordingly. It was incredibly powerful to be part of a coalition that centered the lived experience of communities of color rather than prioritizing the comfort of its white members”, Sue Mason, What's Next Washington.

As the original conveners of the coalition, Win|Win got feedback that we couldn't be the only drivers of the coalition and needed collaborative ownership. We are a white led organization, and our Associate Director, who was managing the coalition identifies as white. We took the feedback to heart and co-developed a shared leadership structure, with a steering committee to

help lead the full coalition and make decisions. Early on in this process, we were fortunate to raise grant funds to help support coalition partners' time to more fully participate in leadership positions. Win|Win's Associate Director still manages logistics and planning for the coalition, but she is not the only person driving the group forward.

As a coalition it is very important to continue examining how power imbalances impact the way we work together. If we don't intentionally create a space that relies on trust, honesty, and equity internally, it is much harder to create that change externally through our policies and goals.

Successes

We cannot stress enough that our coalition's successes happened, in large part, because we dedicated as much time (if not more) to develop our values, processes, and culture, as we did to running a campaign and winning our goals.

Joseph from ACRS says, "The coalition functions in larger part because we have worked to establish common values and principles that guide our advocacy, and we also use the opening [of meetings] to establish ground rules to keep ourselves reminded of our levels of privilege and the way we occupy space."

We continue to be transparent in how decisions are made and resources are allocated as a means for strengthening the trust we have. We share reports on fundraising and spending at the beginning of each meeting and rely on the full coalition to guide processes on strategic decisions and money allocation. For example, we used a participatory funding model to distribute the funds to support the community qualitative research project. Together, the full coalition created metrics for the steering committee to use when making regranting decisions. Those metrics included prioritizing funding to groups working with communities most impacted by voting barriers and that incorporate long-term leadership development opportunities in their work.

Challenges

Although we put great attention to creating transparent and explicit structures, there will always be some level of gatekeeping that prevents the people most impacted from being more involved. We must continually remind ourselves of our level of power and in these spaces and the communities we are making decisions for. We did make great strides in bringing in voices of community members, but we need to continue to push ourselves to transform our institutions to be more inclusive. This requires a high level of accountability to these communities that we need to define further. Though we made intentional steps to create shared leadership structures, having a white led organization manage the coalition still gives rise to tension and we can go even further in decentralizing where the infrastructure work happens, how money is raised to support the coalition work, who manages the meetings and agendas, and how we execute our planning.

It is also clear that we need to do a better job of orienting new groups who want to be engaged. During our post legislative session debrief this year, we received feedback that new groups were not briefed well enough on our history, values, purpose, and work plan and felt like outsiders. Given how much time our long-term partners spent to co-create the WJVC structure, in so doing, we have created a bit of an “insider” coalition and need to be more mindful of ways to welcome and include new partners.

Sue from What’s Next Washington sums this up, “We need to go as slow as our slowest member. Many folks have been doing this work for decades and can do this in their sleep. While it may be difficult for them (mostly white, mostly affluent, highly educated) to slow down, it is a must.”

More Equitable Future

We know that civic participation equals power, and with power comes greater health equities in communities typically left out of our voting, government, and civic institutions. Access to health care, transportation, healthy food, good schools, and safe neighborhoods all contribute to the health and well-being of communities, according to the [Snohomish County Health and Well Being Report](#). By removing barriers to voting and participation we can create new pathways of civic involvement and ultimately change the make-up of local and state governments to better support the health of our communities.

The WJVC also recognizes the need to change our internal system to create more equity and increased wellness for people doing this work. It has been a transformative experience in how a large group of people and organizations come together to create a culture and strategy to achieve goals.

APPENDIX: Group Norms

The purpose of our group norms are to provide clarity on the individual behavior we will each express and be accountable to one another to create a space of safety, trust, and vulnerability for the whole group.

BOUNDARIES: We respect each other's boundaries and when we aren't clear about what they are, we ask. We honor everyone's decision to say no to a request.

RELIABILITY: We do what we say we are going to do. This means honoring commitments and requests, and letting each other know beforehand if we cannot do what we said we were going to do.

ACCOUNTABILITY: We own our mistakes and make amends. We hold each other accountable to the coalition's principles through honest group and one on one conversations.

VAULT: We do not share each other's experience without permission to do so. If we need to have a group or one on one conversation that is confidential, we say so, and we all honor that request.

INTEGRITY: We choose courage over comfort, while creating a space that is safe to speak freely and show vulnerability. We strive and support each other to embody our coalition principles instead of professing them.

NON JUDGEMENT: We assume best intentions of one another and instead of judging another's experience or point of view, we ask clarifying questions to gain better understanding.

CURIOSITY: We use a culture of inquiry by asking open ended questions to better understand one another, work through tensions, and solve problems.

LEARNING: We use this work as an opportunity to learn from one another and gain skills that are applicable in our individual work. We take the time to answer questions, support, and mentor each other through the collective work we do together.

RESPECT: We do not use words that are disrespectful to other's backgrounds and experiences. If you are unsure if something will be taken as disrespectful, you ask for clarity. If you intentionally or unintentionally show disrespect, you are accountable to make amends.

INCLUSIVITY: We begin meetings with introductions that include our names, organizations, preferred pronouns, and a quick check in on how we are coming into the space. We end meetings with a one word check out on how we are leaving the space. We are mindful of the space we take up with our words and body language. Step Up your listening skills and Step Up your speaking skills when needed.

PRESENCE: We keep technology use limited when meeting together and do our best to start and end on time.

Some of these norms are adapted from Brene Brown's BRAVING framework on building trust.