



You Ask, We Answer: The City's Policy and Practice Project and Advisory Team

What is the City of Red Wing's Policy and Practice Project? It is a multi-year project started by the Red Wing City Council in the fall of 2020. Its purpose is to identify, examine, and improve government policies and practices that may negatively affect some residents, especially residents of color.

Why did this project start? After the death of George Floyd, members of the Red Wing City Council prioritized working toward racial justice in local government. They acknowledged that inequities of all kinds exist across society, and they committed to looking within our own city government to see how we can improve systems so they work well for everyone, not just some.

While this particular project is relatively new, the work follows through on multiple goals set forth in three key City plans: The Red Wing 2040 Community Plan, the City's 10-Year Strategic Plan, and the City's draft 2020 Racial Equity Plan. The project also helps accomplish the City's core mission: to create a sustainable, healthy, accessible, resilient, and equitable community where every person feels at home.

What is the Advisory Team and its purpose?

The Advisory Team consists of 12 residents of varying ages, backgrounds, and life experiences. Their purpose is to help identify ways government can improve to serve all people better. Council members felt it was crucial to encourage input and ideas from people whose voices are often not heard and may be most impacted by inequitable policies. Additionally, efforts were made to reach out to residents who had no prior experience working inside or with government.

The 12 members were selected from a pool of 59 people who either applied or were nominated in the summer of 2020 by people across the community. The process for narrowing down this list to 12 involved Council recommendations and a community-selection process.

Team members make recommendations on policies and practices. They also discuss ways to address the root causes of racial inequities in our community through education, awareness, listening to others, and trust-building.

The team does not make recommendations on individuals—that is not part of their work.

To clarify, a policy is a written guideline, often broad in nature, that helps the City follow through with its mission. A practice is a step-by-step action and includes the ways people work in their day-to-day environment. Practices create a culture within an organization and are updated more often than policies. Both are important to examine.

As a first priority of the project, City Council asked the Advisory Team to explore policies and practices within the Police Department, discuss options for Red Wing, and make recommendations to City Council for positive changes. This first priority area is scheduled to last 18 months from September 2020 to February 2022, though timelines are flexible and could change. The Advisory Team will also make recommendations in other departments, and over time each City department will be examined for policy improvements.

What do Advisory Team members do? The team uses a four-part process to examine policies and practices.

Step 1 – Members learn how systems work within the city department(s) they are studying.

Step 2 – Members learn and share how different residents experience those systems and identify which systems may need changing.

Step 3 – Members learn about options for improvement through research, data, department input, and evidence-based approaches.

Step 4 – Members make recommendations to City Council.

Council then considers and discusses the recommendations, gathers additional input if necessary, and makes the final decisions.

How are City department staff involved? When a department is being studied, the department head and his/her designees assist the team by providing information about their own department, sharing information they know about what other communities do, adding their own ideas for changes, discussing barriers that may impede changes, and speaking up about concerns they may have with potential recommendations. The department representatives work with the Advisory Team as a resource and are not members of the team.

Head facilitator Dominique Johnson from the Center for Policing Equity (CPE) has led most meetings during the first segment of this project. Johnson was chosen for her experience working with police departments to review data, identify policy areas for improvement, and build trust with communities to build more racially equitable systems. (You can learn more about CPE at www.policingequity.org).

The City's Community Engagement Facilitator, Michelle Leise, is staff support for the Advisory Team and is present at all meetings to take notes and assist in some facilitation.

What results has the team had so far?

On February 8, the Advisory Team put forth four recommendations to the City Council, which were approved unanimously. Three of these recommendations focused around the issue of sexual assault. The recommendation's goals are to do the following: a) ensure law enforcement officers are appropriately trained for interacting with and interviewing sexual assault survivors; b) assure that survivors have adequate choices in how and when they report the incident to either an officer or an advocate; and c) promote trust building between law enforcement officers and local advocates.

While some people may not immediately see sexual assault as a policy topic with inherent inequities, studies show those who are Black, Indigenous, or People of Color experience sexual assault more often and report it less often. In addition, a large number of sexual assault cases in all populations go unreported, including to advocates, and many in Red Wing don't know the services available to them locally.

The team's fourth recommendation focuses on hiring practices. The Advisory Team originally recommended the police department review its hiring practices to prioritize hiring a bilingual officer. At the Council meeting on February 8, President Becky Norton broadened that recommendation to include a review of hiring practices and criteria across the City of Red Wing organization and that the City's Human Resources Department bring back recommendations to the Council on ways it will actively seek out bilingual and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) applicants. With this expansion, the Council unanimously approved all four recommendations.

You can see the full recommendations at the Policies and Practices Project website page listed at the end of this article.

What is the difference between systemic racism and individual racism?

This project focuses on systemic racism, not individual racism. Individual racism refers to individual, internal beliefs and behaviors. Systemic racism refers to the larger systems that have been built on unfair and unequal practices for so many years they are often viewed as "baked into" our way of doing things. Organizations, including local government, often don't understand that we sometimes still foster those unjust practices today, which can lead to vast differences in people's health, economics, education, and well-being.

Local, state, and national governments have always played a role in creating and maintaining racial inequities (redlining in the housing sector is one of thousands of examples). Minnesota, unfortunately, still has one of the country's largest quality-of-life disparities between white residents and residents of color—and those unfair advantages and disadvantages occur in Red Wing, too.

How do I get information on when the Advisory Team meets and what they talk about?

- The Advisory Team meets the second Wednesday of every month from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m.
- You can find past and present agendas, summary notes, presentations, materials, and recordings of meeting segments on the City's website at this link: www.red-wing.org/1031/Policy-and-Practice-Project.
- You can find information about the team and the selection process here: www.red-wing.org/advisory-team.
- If you have further questions, contact Community Engagement Facilitator Michelle Leise at michelle.leise@ci.red-wing.mn.us or 651-385-3618.
- For periodic updates, you can also sign up for City Beat, the City of Red Wing's free online newsletter that provides information and ways to give feedback and ideas on government happenings. Visit www.red-wing.org/citybeat and you'll get City Beat delivered to your inbox twice a month.