



Waco Foundation

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Waco Foundation takes a “capacity building” approach to equity work, offering a racial equity training to leaders and organizations in the Waco community. Hundreds of community leaders representing city government, universities, businesses, and nonprofits have participated in the training and gone on to apply principles of equity in their own organizations’ work. Simultaneously, Waco Foundation has been on an internal journey to diversify its staff and board, and to ensure principles of equity are embedded in organizational culture.

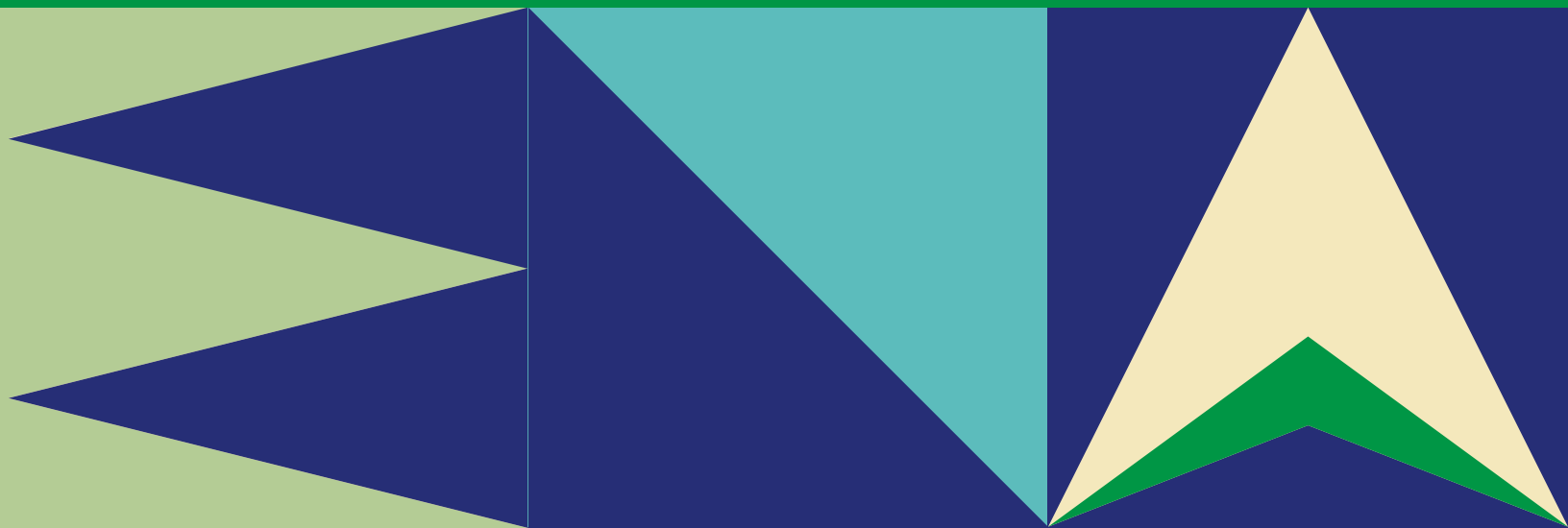


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Introduction

Waco Foundation is a community foundation based out of Waco, Texas (TX). Established in 1958, the Foundation invested \$5.7M in the form of grants, scholarships, and community programs in 2021, and manages over \$130M in assets.

In 2009, Waco Foundation commissioned a study on the state of early childhood education and care in McLennan County, TX. This was based on the premise that the most valuable and cost-effective education investments the Foundation could make were at the early childhood stage. The report, titled “2009 Childhood Quality of Life Index,” revealed significant geographic, demographic, and socioeconomic disparities in access to services and outcomes for young children (ages 0-3).¹

These findings served as a call to action for Waco Foundation leadership. According to Nicole Wynter, the Foundation’s Senior Director of Community Investment: “Children’s experiences

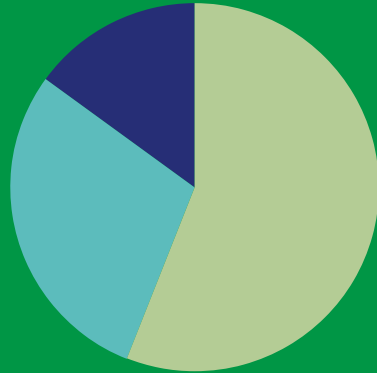
were different by zip code and due to the history of redlining in our area, we know that some neighborhoods had and continue to have higher concentrations of people of color than others.” Ashley Allison, the Executive Director of the Foundation echoed: “By going through that [early childhood] work, we determined that race was an important factor to address.”

In this way, the 2009 study on early childhood became the starting point for Waco Foundation’s equity journey, an ongoing effort to learn about racial disparities and disproportionalities, embed principles of equity into the Foundation’s programs and operations, and disseminate these principles throughout the broader Waco community.



267,000

Waco is the county seat and largest city of McLennan County, TX, which is home to 267,000 people.

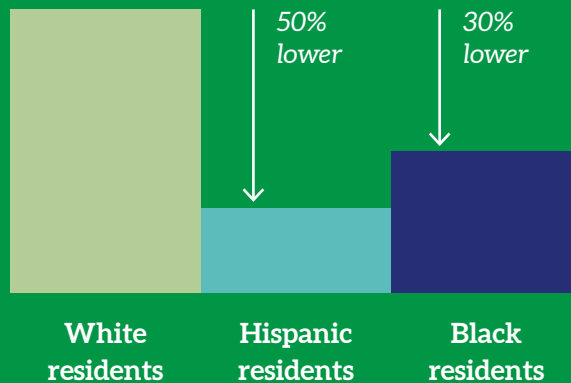


56% White
29% Hispanic or Latino
15% Black²

While median household income in Waco has increased over recent years, it is still distinctly lower than Texas overall, and there are significant disparities by race and ethnicity.



Median Household Income



These gaps are getting larger, as Black and Hispanic residents have seen the smallest increases in household income since 2015. As of 2019...

35% of Waco's Black residents living below the poverty line

21% of Waco's White residents living below the poverty line³

A Capacity Building Approach

Waco Foundation's approach to equity work has been to educate community members about the problem of racial inequity and the importance of centering equity in the work of organizations across sectors. According to the Foundation's Executive Director Ashley Allison: "We felt that understanding the concept of race equity was a capacity skill ... and we sought to provide that skill via a capacity building program." In this way, the Foundation tries to disseminate principles and practices of equity beyond its own walls, recognizing that racial inequity is a systemic problem that can't be solved by the Foundation's own grantmaking alone.

The Foundation engaged the Racial Equity Institute (REI), a Black-owned business that provides training and consulting on structural racism, to offer a series of training sessions to the Waco community. The first training occurred in 2016. Since then, 3-4 sessions per year have been facilitated, reaching more than 350 members of the Waco community. According to Nicole Wynter, the Foundation's Senior Director of Community Investment,

"We invite people from throughout the community to participate, people from various institutions: city council, city manager's office, business leaders ... The trainings are an educational tool to build a common language and understanding [around equity] in the community."

Many prominent leaders have attended the training sessions, including the current and former Mayors of Waco and the Dean of Baylor University's School of Law. As envisioned by Waco Foundation leadership, participation in these sessions has had a ripple effect. For example, after attending the REI sessions, former Mayor Kyle Deaver and his city council members made race equity a strategic priority. Reflecting on his time in office, Deaver told reporters: "I think the race equity training hit a lot of our city leaders and other leaders throughout the community ... [and] helped us understand some of the mistakes that have been made in the past and try to avoid those going forward."⁴



“ We felt that race equity was a capacity skill ... and we sought to provide that skill via a capacity building program”

Ashley Allison

Executive Director of Waco Foundation



Another community leader who attended the training was Dr. Jackson Griggs, who serves as the CEO of the Waco Family Medicine Center. Recalling his experience, Dr. Griggs reflected:

“It was about appealing to the sameness and shared human experience of everyone in the room, our shared sense of fairness and justice ... and leaving folks with the uncomfortable realities of inequity ... It was influential. It opens up the door to have real conversations about race and equity.”

Since Dr. Griggs attended the training, the Waco Family Medicine Center has established an equity committee and is striving to infuse equity into every aspect of its work.

The racial equity training has reached an impressive array of organizations in Waco, including businesses, educational institutions, and faith-based groups of various denominations. According to Sherman Ayres, a former executive at Mars, Incorporated, and the current Waco Foundation Board Chair, the racial equity training has already reached a critical mass in the community: “Leaders at Baylor have been through it, city councilors have been through it ... The way the community has embraced it, I think it’s gotten to the point where if you have a leadership position in Waco, you might feel you have a disadvantage if you did not go to this training.”

Participation in the REI training is also a requirement for all Foundation board and staff, a reflection of the organization’s core belief in the program’s value.

Racial Equity Goals

This capacity-building approach to equity work is reflected in the Foundation's stated goals on racial equity, made public via a dedicated page on the Foundation's website.⁵ This page includes an overall mission statement: "To make Greater Waco a better place to live for all members of the community, and to help foster an environment in which a person's race or ethnicity has no influence on how one fares in society." There are several goals that ladder up to this mission statement, including: "Improve the community's capacity to have constructive conversations and continuous learning in regard to race"; "build community understanding of racial inequity"; and "facilitate

the development and implementation of strategies to help address racial inequities."

Critically, these goals recognize that the Foundation will need community buy-in and engagement in order to truly advance equity in Waco. According to Nicole Wynter:

"The challenges we have in the community [around equity] cannot be handled by Waco Foundation alone. The community needs to be involved and take the lead, and our role is to provide support and build capacity for those conversations."

Taking a Stand Against Historical Wrongs

Like many communities in America, Waco has a long and devastating history of racial violence. One particularly horrifying incident took place on May 15, 1916, when a 17-year-old Black boy named Jesse Washington was lynched in Waco. The Equal Justice Initiative estimates that between 1877-1950, at least 4,000 Black people were lynched in the US, including over 300 in Texas.⁶

In 2016, Ashley Allison encouraged then-Mayor Malcolm Duncan Jr. to issue a public apology on behalf of the city on the 100th anniversary of Washington's lynching, suggesting that it would contribute to a constructive dialogue about race

in the Waco community. Mayor Duncan did issue an apology, saying, "We profoundly regret and condemn any instances where a citizen of Waco has not received equal protection under the law." Several of Jesse Washington's family members were at the commemorative event, including one who shared with reporters:

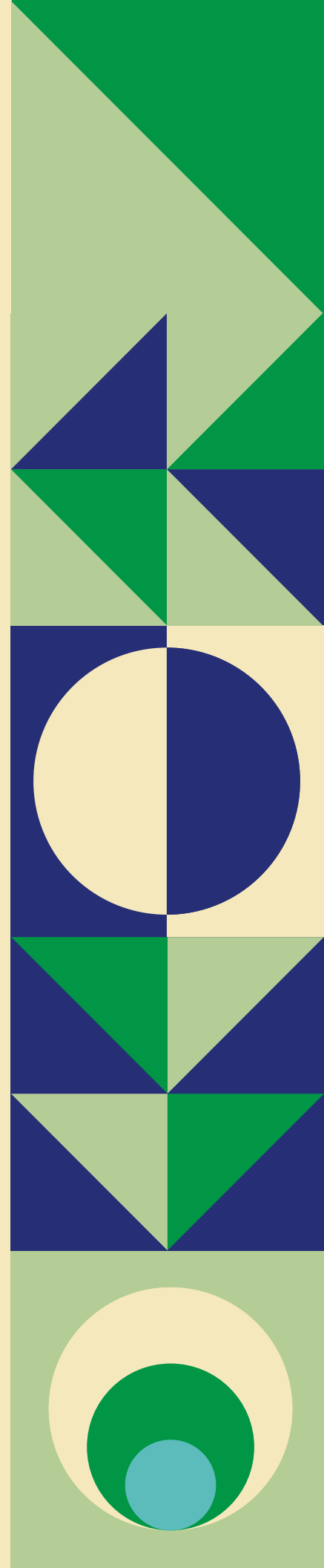
*"We already knew what he went through—I thought it was just something that was buried and gone. By the city coming up and acknowledging that now, it makes me feel a whole lot better about Waco."*⁷

A Diversifying Staff and Board

Ashley Allison has been with Waco Foundation since 2007, and noted the organization's board and staff have become significantly more diverse than when she started. "The board is diverse. It represents our community," she said, "and that is something they've been committed to... right now, we have five people of color on our board [of 10]." Sherman Ayres, the current Chair of the Foundation's board and a board member for eight years, reflected: "Since I've been on the board, there's been an intentional effort to make sure we have a diverse board." According to Ayres, a Black man, having diverse representation on the board is key to building connection with the community: "There's an impact on the Black community; when they see me in that role, it will give them a sense of belonging that they did not have before."

The Foundation's staff has diversified as well. "As a community foundation," said Ashley Allison, "your staff should represent the community. That was not the case when I got here." But diversity is just the beginning. Recently, Waco Foundation has been focused on auditing internal policies from an equity lens and assessing organizational culture.

In advancing these internal aspects of the organization's equity journey, Waco Foundation leaders credited participation in the CFLeads Equity Network as playing a major role. From 2019-2020, Waco Foundation joined the CFLeads Equity Network, which brings together community foundations from around the country for peer learning on how to advance equity in their work. Speaking on the impact of this experience, Ashley Allison reflected, "We went through the CFLeads Equity Network to decide what we wanted to do internally; and as a result of that, we engaged a consultant to assess our organizational culture ... We learned about the consultant through another member of the Equity Network. It's peer learning; you advance your own learning by talking to others, by hearing where they are on their journeys, and by getting lists of resources like consultants."



Equity Work in a Red State

Both Ashley Allison and Nicole Wynter noted that it can be challenging to work on issues of equity in a red state. In recent years, the Texas state legislature has advanced several bills that threaten principles of equity, including a bill designed to keep “critical race theory out of Texas public schools,”⁸ and another bill that would prohibit public universities in Texas from having DEI offices.⁹ Responding to bills like these, Ashley Allison reflected, “It can be difficult because some of what the legislature is doing seems counterproductive to the great work taking place in Waco. You have to harden to that and remember we aren’t subscribing to national or statewide political narratives. We are taking charge of our own conversation about racial equity because we care about each and every one of our neighbors.”

Nicole Wynter reflected that some Texans have a reflexively negative attitude towards equity as a

concept, but that it’s important to avoid the typical political dynamics that accompany this issue:

“We are in a red state ... A lot of the time, people think that we are challenging their faith or their beliefs. But we don’t want to feed into that national conversation of us vs. them or Democrat vs. Republican. Because we have been able to bring people from different sides together on this issue, we have to be sure we keep this about Waco’s story so we don’t lose people in that space.”

Being located in a red state also informs the Foundation’s capacity-building approach. Leaders of Waco Foundation recognize that embedding principles of equity into community institutions will be a long journey, and that progress will be more durable if more community members are engaged.

Sustaining Progress

Looking forward, Waco Foundation plans to continue its race equity training initiative, with the goal of exposing more and more local leaders and institutions to the realities of racial inequity and the importance of applying a racial equity lens to work across sectors. For the Foundation, this is a long game. Nicole Wynter reflected, “You may not see a massive change in my lifetime, but we’re playing a long game ... Right now, we can talk about how many people we’ve trained, but how does that translate into change for people? For example, how does it change the affordable housing situation in Waco? That is still down the line. But, I’ve noticed that everyone talking about the housing issue now is talking about it with an equity lens, which is encouraging.”

As Chair of the Board, Sherman Ayres is focused on how to make the Foundation’s progress sustainable in a way that transcends any individual leader: “We’re trying to embed equity into the culture, so that it doesn’t revert back when Ashley retires, or when I leave the board ... I want to do everything I can to deepen the roots of this kind of thinking into the Foundation, so that it never goes away, so it continues to grow and blossom.”

Endnotes

- 1 Waco Foundation, Texas Early Childhood Education Coalition, “2009 Childhood Quality of Life Index: McLennan County, Texas”
- 2 US Census Bureau, [“Quick Facts: McLennan County, Texas”](#)
- 3 Prosper Waco, [“2021: The Waco Snapshot Report”](#)
- 4 KXXV/ABCNews25, [“Deaver leaves Waco City Hall with long list of accomplishments”](#)
- 5 Waco Foundation, [“Race Equity”](#)
- 6 Will Bostwick, [“Inside the Decades-long Effort to Commemorate a Notorious Waco Lynching.”](#) Texas Monthly, February 23, 2023.
- 7 Kandace Thomas, [“City apologizes for Lynching of Jesse Washington.”](#) KXXV/ABCNews25, May 15, 2016.
- 8 Brian Lopez, [“Republican bill that limits how race, slavery and history are taught in Texas schools becomes law.”](#) Texas Tribune, December 2, 2021.
- 9 Megan Menchaca, [“Texas Senate bill would ban DEI offices, statements at public colleges, universities.”](#) Austin American-Statesman, March 11, 2023.

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