

COUNTY OF MILWAUKEE
Inter-Office Communication

Date: 4/17/2025

To: Marcelia Nicholson-Bovell, Chairwoman, Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors

From: Sumaiyah Clark, Office of Equity, Executive Director

Subject: Milwaukee County Office of Equity 2025 Annual Report

File Type: Informational Report

This informational report provides a report on how Milwaukee County Office of Equity set and achieved its 2025 goals.

POLICY

This report aligns to Chapter 108: Achieving Racial Equity & Health.

Milwaukee County Code of General Ordinances:	Chapter 108: Achieving Racial Equity & Health
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ALIGNMENT TO STRATEGIC PLAN

- 1A: Reflect the full diversity of the County at every level of County government
- 1B: Create and nurture an inclusive culture across County government
- 1C: Increase the number of County contracts awarded to minority and women-owned businesses
- 2A: Determine what, where, and how we deliver services to advance health equity
- 2B: Break down silos across County government to maximize access to and quality of services offered
- 2C: Apply a racial equity lens to all decisions
- 3A: Invest “upstream” to address root causes of health disparities
- 3B: Enhance the County’s fiscal health and sustainability
- 3C: Dismantle barriers to diverse and inclusive communities

The Office on African American Affairs (OAAA), established in 2015, evolved into the Office of Equity (OOE) in 2022 to advance equity across Milwaukee County government. While OAAA initially focused on Milwaukee’s African American communities, its evolution into OOE reflects a broader mission: to ensure every resident—regardless of race, age, gender, geography, ability, or identity—has access to a full, vibrant, and healthy life.

OOE is a strategic support hub for departments and a bridge to residents, community organizations, and external partners. Our work is rooted in upstream solutions to health inequities and driven by our departmental goals:

- Promoting equity
- Building civic trust
- Increasing resident-based power

OOE carries out this mission through five core strategic service areas:

- **Strategic Partnerships:** Build cross-sector partnerships that address barriers to economic well-being and foster equity-centered economic development.
- **Community Engagement and Connections:** Create space for meaningful resident participation and deliver resources through trusted, accessible channels.
- **Policy Advocacy and Systems Change:** Shape policies and structures that embed equity in governance and ensure responsive, modern systems.
- **Technical Assistance & Capacity Building:** Equip departments, system partners and community leaders with the tools, skills, and frameworks to embed equity in projects, services, and planning.
- **Research:** Use data and community-driven research to shape inclusive policies and close equity gaps.

While OOE upholds all nine of the County's goals, our work most closely aligns with goals 2B, 2C, 3A and 3C. As stewards, we lead strategy across the county to advance these specific goals. Our department's initiatives are intentionally designed to facilitate Milwaukee County's vision, mission and ability to create healthier, more equitable communities for all residents.

Alignment to the above strategic goals is articulated in responses to the questions below.

BODY

Please tell us about your progress on your Department/Office's top goals in 2025.

If any of your goals have changed, briefly explain why, how they are "SMARTIE" goals (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, timely, inclusive, and equitable), and how they align to the county's racial equity strategy.

Goal 1: Integrate best practice frameworks that address racism and promote equity across Milwaukee County

This goal is SMART because it specifically focuses on integrating evidence-based frameworks that address racism and other forms of oppression to advance equity across Milwaukee County. OOE supports this work by providing technical assistance and making self-service tools, training opportunities, and capacity-building resources readily accessible to community leaders, system partners, County departments, and other stakeholders. Progress can be measured by tracking the number and type of

technical assistance request, adoption of equity-focused frameworks, the use of available resources, and improvements in organizational practices that promote equitable outcomes.

Racism (not race) is a leading indicator of health because it structures access to opportunity like housing, education, employment, food, safety, and care. When access to opportunity is structured unequally, health outcomes follow that pattern. Other forms of oppression (i.e., ableism, sexism, etc.) operate through similar pathways, and when they intersect with racism, the impact on health compounds.

When we examine and correct the structural barriers created by racism, such as inequitable housing policy, underinvestment in neighborhoods, food apartheid, or unequal access to capital, we are also strengthening the infrastructure that also affects women, people with disabilities, older adults, Veterans, immigrants, and others who face systemic barriers in Milwaukee County.

- Convened a committee to review processes and revise the Racial Equity Budget Tool (REBT); established REBT technical assistance process for departments and County Board
- Launched quarterly Community Engagement Trainings and a Milwaukee County Community Engagement Community of Practice
 - 122 Training Participants
- Conducted four focus groups with community members regarding County services and OOE messaging
- Held the second Health Equity Champions Awards which recognized those who have demonstrated a strong commitment to equity by reducing disparities in one or more social determinants of health within their communities, and whose efforts have had a positive impact in their communities. More organizations and individuals were recognized for their efforts to reduce disparities in one or more social determinants of health within their communities. The awards program "equity in action" focus addresses collective impact on the Milwaukee County vision.
- Established partnerships with a host of media outlets to share pertinent resource information with residents (i.e., Bustos Media, WISN12, Courier Communications, iHeart Media, etc.)
 - Monthly segments, ads that promote resources and opportunities to participate in County decision-making, etc. were offered throughout the year
 - 708,000 residents reached

Goal 2: Implement strategies for internal and external accountability to increase civic trust

This goal is SMART because it specifically focuses on increasing the participation of community leaders in decision-making processes across Milwaukee County. The Office of Equity (OOE) builds trusted relationships with community stakeholders through transparent, respectful, and inclusive engagement practices. Working alongside County departments, community organizations, and local partners, OOE creates opportunities for residents to help shape County policies, programs, and services through focus groups, listening sessions, roundtables, surveys, workshops, and other engagement activities. Progress can be measured by tracking participation, assessing who benefits from these efforts, and evaluating how community input influences County decisions. The goal is achievable, relevant to strengthening resident-based power, and can be monitored over time through regular reporting and evaluation. As a result of direct interaction with residents, County staff and elected officials are also able to gain a deeper understanding of community needs and are better able to provide responsive, resident-centered services.

- The Office transitioned from conducting widescale policy reviews, a project which in 2024, completed the review of 300+ policies and ordinances, which resulted in policy modifications that spanned HR, Ethics, etc. Building on that momentum, the 2025- 2026 strategy includes efforts to modernize select Milwaukee County policies that affect both staff and the communities served, ensuring the system reflects current needs and policy priorities.
- In 2025, OOE also sought to standardize best practice across Milwaukee County departments by developing entries for the enterprise- wide Administrative Manual of Procedures (AMOP). A collection of procedures and policies that guide the operation of Milwaukee County government, in compliance with federal, state and local law.
 - Drafted Language Access AMOP (approved in 2026)
 - Drafted Community Engagement AMOP (approved in 2026)
- In Milwaukee County, over 20 percent of people speak a language other than English at home, and there are more than 90 different languages spoken here. To help make our community the healthiest in Wisconsin, we need to remove any obstacles that make it hard for people to access County services, know their rights, and get involved in community activities.
 - OOE was selected by the Government Alliance for Racial Equity (GARE) to lead a Language Access Equity team. This team includes representatives from different County departments, community organizations that serve residents from diverse populations, and individuals who are skilled in languages and cultures, including Spanish, Hmong, and Arabic.
 - A series of community engagement activities, as well as a survey where 60+ people with Limited English proficiency, were completed.

- OOE also provided translated resources to 200+ organizations and thousands of residents during the August 2025 flood to ensure people who live across Milwaukee County municipalities had access to critical information.

Goal 3: Increase community leaders in decision-making processes in Milwaukee County to grow resident-based power.

This goal is SMART because it focuses on implementing clear, measurable strategies (in partnership with community residents) that strengthen internal and external accountability systems across Milwaukee County government. Rather than emphasizing engagement alone, the goal centers on putting effective programs, policies, and performance measures in place that improve transparency, consistency, and trust in public systems. A key component of these strategies includes addressing the economic determinants of health that shape long-term outcomes for residents. Milwaukee County continues to experience hypersegregation rooted in historic redlining and housing discrimination, which systematically restricted where families could live, limited access to mortgage financing and investment, and contributed to long-term neighborhood disinvestment. These policies reduced property values, weakened infrastructure, and constrained opportunities for residents and small business owners to build intergenerational wealth, resulting in persistent racial and geographic wealth gaps.

- In 2025, OOE facilitated a host of workshops for local business owners. As a result of small business engagement initiatives, business owners have built stronger relationships with County leaders and gained greater knowledge of how to access County contracts and economic opportunities. Small business owners also have increased access to information about County contracting opportunities through platforms like Bonfire.
 - 110 Business Owners participated
- In early 2025, (OOE) announced that it had been selected by the Cities for Financial Empowerment (CFE) to receive a planning grant as part of the CityStart. Through the CityStart initiative, a program that works with local leaders to design and implement strategies that help families and communities achieve greater financial stability, OOE is creating an economic empowerment blueprint for Milwaukee County that will outline strategies to close wealth gaps and ensure all residents have the resources to build healthy, prosperous futures. A series of priority recommendations were developed in partnership with local leaders.
 - 54 Stakeholders engaged across seven sector specific roundtables (Government, Youth Development, Real Estate Developers, Financial Institutions and Funders (philanthropy, venture capital, Community Development Financial Institutions), Small Business Owners, etc.
 - 19 Leaders interviewed

- 9 County Department Partners
- 11 Community Partners
- 250 community residents engaged
- Community Outreach events developed in collaboration with various county departments, community organizations, and local businesses, have provided opportunities for residents to engage in cultural heritage activities. Residents have also been able to access essential resources such as food, housing services, clothing, and household goods, thereby alleviating the burden of everyday living expenses.
 - Public Outreach: 23 Community Events
 - 323 Participating Organizations
 - 7 County Departments
 - 105,667 cross-municipal Milwaukee County resident attendees

1. What key factors *enabled* progress toward accomplishing these goals?

Progress toward these goals was accelerated through strategic partnerships, community engagement, and the successful acquisition of external resources. Through competitive national selection processes, our organization was chosen by two national organizations to receive funding, technical assistance, and other resources that strengthened our capacity to advance this work. These opportunities provided critical support for implementing key initiatives and expanding our impact.

At the same time, we developed new partnerships and strengthened connections with community members and organizations to better understand ongoing and emerging needs. These relationships helped ensure that our efforts remained responsive, aligned with community priorities, and positioned to achieve meaningful and sustainable outcomes.

2. What key factors *hindered* progress toward accomplishing these goals?

Progress toward accomplishing these goals was challenged by a rapidly changing policy and funding environment. Evolving federal policies and priorities required ongoing monitoring and assessment to understand their potential impacts on communities and populations across Milwaukee County. While these changes did not diminish our commitment to advancing this work, they introduced significant uncertainty regarding future funding, program implementation, and our ability to respond to community needs as local government leaders.

At the same time, Milwaukee County continued to face fiscal constraints that limited available resources and increased pressure. These challenges coincided with growing needs among community organizations, many of which sought additional technical assistance, funding, and partnership support from our department. While we worked to respond to these requests and strengthen community capacity, the demand for support

often exceeded available resources and required thoughtful prioritization of efforts.

Despite these challenges, we remained focused on advancing our goals through collaboration, adaptability, and continued investment in partnerships that support the health and well-being of Milwaukee County residents.

3. If any goals are changing, please list those and briefly explain why. (Please put "N/A" if your goals will remain the same.)

N/A

FISCAL EFFECT

The report is informational only and there is no fiscal impact.

VIRTUAL MEETING INVITES

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ATTACHMENTS:

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Janelle M. Jensen, Legislative Services Division Manager, Office of the County Clerk