

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This report is being delivered to CCRPC during a time of disruption. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic created a public health emergency for Black people and other people of the global majority. There has been a reckoning with racial violence and discrimination against Black people following the murder of George Floyd in June 2020. In addition, the wealth gap among Black and white Americans persists, and income inequality overall is at an all time high. The devastating impacts of climate change, disproportionately borne by people of the global majority, are becoming more common, and in the midst of these many challenges, the country is experiencing an intense period of political unrest and polarization.

In order to find a way forward, it is imperative to address the long standing disparities that have been laid bare by the pandemic. As Heather McGhee, author of *The Sum of Us* writes,

“...when a nation founded on the belief in racial hierarchy truly rejects that belief then and only then will we have discovered a new world. That is our destiny. To make it manifest, we must challenge ourselves to live our lives in solidarity across color, origin, and class. We must demand changes to the rules in order to disrupt the very notion that those who have more money are worth more in our democracy and our economy. Since this country’s founding, we have not allowed our diversity to be our superpower and the result is that the United States is not more than the sum of its disparate parts. But it could be. And if it were, all of us would prosper. In short, we must emerge from this crisis in our republic with a new birth of freedom. Rooted in the knowledge that we are so much more, when the we in we the people is not some of us, but all of us. We are greater than and greater for the sum of us.”

The belief in racial hierarchy is woven into the fabric of our country. Redlining and other government sanctioned policies have led to centuries of institutional and structural oppression towards Black and Indigenous people. These systems of economic disadvantage, established and maintained by those with political and economic power, directly caused the persistent wealth gaps that exist today between Black and white people as well as a plethora of other structural inequities. In Vermont, BIPOC people are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, climate challenges, access to housing, and higher rates of incarceration and engagement with the justice system. The cumulative impact of denying BIPOC people equitable access to not only health care but other social determinants of health such as education, housing, employment, and justice is a vast range of health risks and outcomes (Centers for Disease Control, 2020).

Regional planning commissions like CCRPC, have [contributed to](#) unequal resource distribution to people of the global majority. Recently, CCRPC has put forth for consideration a vision of a *healthy, inclusive, equitable, and prosperous future for all Chittenden county residents, especially BIPOC and other people who have been underrepresented or marginalized.*

Verbal commitments are important, but these alone are insufficient in combating and rectifying the harm caused by systemic oppression and racism. In order to effectively address racial inequities, organizations must understand how the organization's past and present practices are adversely impacting marginalized populations and identify actions that can be taken to remedy these problems.

The Creative Discourse Group (TCDG) is supporting the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission (CCRPC) board and staff as they build their capacity to address systemic racism and inequities in their internal and external work. During this initial phase of support, the TCDG worked with CCRPC leaders to establish an Internal CCRPC Equity Leadership Team. In addition, TCDG assessed CCRPC's current work, led several

racial equity workshops for the CCRPC board and staff, gathered information about equity initiatives across the municipalities, and planned and facilitated the November 6, 2021 *Planning for Equity Summit*.

The organizational equity assessment reveals that CCRPC is generally held in high regard by its staff, board, and partners. CCRPC staff are willing and motivated to embark on racial equity work, but lack skill and confidence. As a whole, the board is less far along, in both knowledge and willingness. At the same time, it is evident that CCRPC has valuable resources. The organization has a broad footprint in Chittenden County and holds unique expertise related to planning as well as deep knowledge and experience navigating across municipalities and organizations. While the organization holds this positionality, it also has blind spots. The people within the organization are mostly white and do not hold marginalized identities. They lack the lived experiences and understanding of what many people in the region are actually facing.

Generally, the CCRPC team is willing to step forward, engage in self reflection, and make changes to ensure that resources are effectively leveraged to improve the lives of the broader community, especially BIPOC and others who hold marginalized identities. This willingness sets CCRPC apart from many other organizations. Even so there is much work to do to move from this important first step to fulfilling CCRPC's responsibility to disrupt and dismantle the decades of systemic measures that are still present today and perpetuating significant inequities and harm to people of the global majority.

Upon conclusion of this equity assessment, The Creative Discourse Group offers three (3) broad recommendations.

1. *Center Equity, Inclusion, and Justice in every facet of the CCRPC's work*
2. *Prioritize connections with diverse populations including People of the Global Majority and those who have been marginalized or underrepresented*

3. *Leverage CCRPC's authority, expertise, and resources to become a regional equity leader.*

In order to accomplish these high level goals, CCRPC will need to build internal infrastructure (hiring staff dedicated to equity work, and continuing to build its Equity Leadership Team), create opportunities for CCRPC staff to build ongoing relationships with underrepresented community members, increase investment in inclusive community engagement processes, and serve as a host and convener for both formal and informal Chittenden County leaders who are engaged with racial equity and economic justice work.

**Category 1: Center justice, equity, diversity and inclusion in all facets of CCRPC's work.**

**1 Hire an organizational leader dedicated to justice, equity, diversity and inclusion work.**

*An organizational equity leader will bring a unique set of skills to ensure the organization makes the transformative change needed to shift organizational culture, priorities, and outcomes. A skilled and innovative leader is needed to transform CCRPC's desire for this work to real commitment and action that improves outcomes for all people in Chittenden County, especially BIPOC and other people who have been traditionally marginalized. This recommendation is the responsibility of the Board for budgeting and Executive Director for hiring.*

**2 Expand and diversify the Equity Leadership Team.**

*CCRPC should expand the Equity Leadership Team (ELT) that was formed to help with Phase 1 of CCRPC's equity work. The ELT could include members of partner organizations as well as informal community leaders. Overall, the ELT should be representative; reflecting as much as possible the demographics of Chittenden County's population. The ELT would meet regularly to support the work of the newly hired equity director, serve as a liaison between newly convened work groups, existing committees and the board, and provide a mechanism to both support CCRPC's work and to hold the organization accountable for continuing to move the work forward. This would be the responsibility of the CCRPC Board.*

**3 Provide ongoing education and training to CCRPC Board and staff.**

*In order to equip the CCRPC board and staff to have effective discussions about race, racism, and equity and to be able to connect in a sustainable way with a broader, increasingly diverse community, additional education and training opportunities should be offered. Regular and ongoing trainings provides an opportunity for CCRPC staff, board, and partners to build relationships, communicate across roles, and hear different perspectives and experiences. In particular, small group dialogue was consistently regarded as a meaningful way to engage in learning so future learning should allow significant time for group work and discussion. Additional learning is also important as CCRPC explores new frameworks for their planning and decision-making processes. This work would be the responsibility of the consultant team with direction from the Equity Leadership Team and direction or assistance from the newly hired organizational equity leader.*

**4 Establish a process for conducting a mini equity audit ahead of all key decisions and at the beginning of projects and initiatives.**

*Applying a racial equity lens must start at the beginning of a process and not at the end. CCRPC should update the Public Participation Plan (PPP) equity impact assessment process and the set of equity questions that are consistently asked and answered at the beginning of each project or initiative across the organization. This would ensure that the voices of those with lived experiences and those most impacted by the decisions are centered rather than organizational leaders who do not hold this knowledge and experience. CCRPC should consider a wide range of questions to help the organization lead with a racial equity lens, always keeping in mind who is most impacted, who is part of the decision-making process, who is being left out, and who has been historically negatively impacted by the issue. This could be done by a PPP work group which would be established by, and make recommendations to, the Equity Leadership Team.*

**5 Build in robust investments for engagement and relationship building at the front end of all projects.**

*Organizations tend to hoard power and typically neglect to create opportunities for people most impacted by their initiatives to weigh in and help shape the activities of the organization. The CCRPC should co-create the activities it embarks on with people who have been traditionally marginalized that are most impacted by the organization's activities. To do this, CCRPC should invest additional time and resources to engage with community members of the Global Majority, community members who hold marginalized identities, and people who are most likely to be impacted by particular projects. Staff should be expected and empowered to build ample time and resources for engagement into project proposals (also see the recommendations below). This would be part of the decision making during development of the annual work program by the Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP) Committee with review by the Equity Leadership Team (ELT). This should also be included by staff when applying for grants or considering work for municipalities and partners.*

## Category 2: Prioritize connections with diverse populations.

### 1 Restructure CCRPC meetings to decentralize dominant culture and to encourage the board and staff to go where people are and invest time in relationship building.

*Too often the lived experiences of marginalized people are undervalued. Committees and councils have not traditionally created an atmosphere that is welcoming to diverse community members. They hold meetings in formats that uphold dominant culture and utilize much jargon, acronyms, and procedures such as “Robert’s Rules of Order” that are confusing and inaccessible to marginalized people. Making changes to these procedures and processes and even disrupting the typical meeting structures and locations is critical to shift away from dominant culture as the norm and instead create new norms where community members, especially people of the global majority, and other marginalized groups are regarded as the experts. Further, CCRPC staff and board should go where the people are that they want to engage with. This might mean attending community gatherings where BIPOC people are present, or being in partnership with BIPOC led organizations to host special engagement opportunities to hear from these communities and even hosting CCRPC meetings in these spaces. In either of these cases, it will be imperative that the CCRPC staff and board commit to dismantling the typical ways of preceding and consider alternative processes and formats that uplift ways of being and knowing by BIPOC people. Specific recommendations should be included in the update to the Public Participation Plan (PPP) led by the PPP workgroup with review by the Equity Leadership Team and adoption by the CCRPC Board.*

### 2 Participate in opportunities led by people of the global majority and people who hold marginalized identities.

*Organizations need to shift from being exclusive to being inclusive. One way to exercise this is to engage in experiences that defers to the expertise of marginalized communities. CCRPC should accept opportunities and requests to participate in events convened and hosted by BIPOC organizations and partners who work with BIPOC and marginalized communities. These kinds of opportunities will help build relationships and understanding and broaden CCRPC perspectives. They also serve to disrupt the centralization of dominant culture and creates a space where marginalized culture is uplifted as the authority. The executive director, equity staff leader, and staff would implement this recommendation and communicate with organizations that CCRPC is interested in participating in their events.*

### 3 Create opportunities for affinity group work and opportunities for this work to intentionally inform CCRPC decisions.

*Affinity groups\* of BIPOC and people who hold marginalized identities can offer powerful experiences for participants, lead to the emergence of new leaders, and generate innovative thinking and solutions to inform decision-making . As CCRPC creates opportunities for affinity group work, they also should consider how the ideas generated in these groups directly and intentionally inform decisions made by CCRPC. These could include funding priorities or accountability metrics. CCRPC might also consider how to implement a minimum required percentage of people who hold marginalized identities as part of decision making units. This could be led by the Public Participation Plan (PPP) workgroup with recommendations coming out of these affinity spaces being implemented by the Equity Manager. Decisions on how to integrate with decision making bodies would be based on recommendations of the Equity Leadership Team (ELT) and a decision by the board.*

### 4 Find opportunities to uplift and celebrate the work of BIPOC led organizations on the website and in communication with municipal leaders and partners.

*As the CCRPC holds much power and a broad footprint in Chittenden county, they should also utilize this power and positionality to uplift and support BIPOC led organizations. This can serve as a way to demonstrate reciprocity in the relationships with particular groups as well as create opportunities for relationship building with these groups. This will be implemented by the equity staff leader and communications manager.*

### **Category 3: Leverage resources to become a regional equity leader.**

**1 Host ongoing learning opportunities for regional leaders.**

*The CCRPC also has a great opportunity to serve as a thought leader in the region by creating opportunities to bring partners and municipal leaders together to learn about the history of inequities, promising strategies - from truth and reconciliation, to different planning and engagement techniques, to reparations.*

**2 Convene regional leaders formally and regularly.**

*The CCRPC can play a role in helping regional leaders stay accountable to the equity commitments they are making by convening regularly occurring check-ins. This could begin with a spring convening of participants who took part in the November 6 Planning for Equity summit to offer an opportunity to continue to make progress on priorities identified during the summit.*

**3 Support local equity efforts that are taking root in municipalities across Chittenden County.**

*CCRPC has an opportunity to create (or co-create with partners) peer learning opportunities that bring people across the county together to share stories, successes and challenges related to their racial equity and economic justice work. CCRPC can also help municipalities identify potential funding sources to support both formal and grassroots equity work.*