

Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness Program Action Grant Case Study

Municipality: City of Medford

Project Title: Equity-centered process for climate action and adaptation planning

Award Year (FY): 2019

Grant Award: \$ 36,135.56

Match: \$ 12,045.19

Match Source: City of Medford (cash and in-kind)

One or Two Year Project: One year project, extended to two years due to the pandemic

Municipal Department Leading Project: Office of Planning, Development, and Sustainability

Project Website URL: N/A

Community Overview:

The City of Medford is one of seventeen municipalities located in the Mystic River Watershed and is part of the metropolitan region that makes up Greater Boston. The proximity to Boston, MBTA transit connectivity to neighboring cities, access to robust natural resources like the Middlesex Fells and the Mystic River, as well as Tufts University and good public schools are some of the many assets that draw people to living and working in Medford. Today Medford is home to just under 58,000 residents, and the city has been seeing notable growth and new development in recent years.

Medford has also become an increasingly diverse city. As of 2018, Medford's population consisted of the following racial-ethnic demographics: 75.0% White, 10.6% Asian, 9.4% Black, and 5.3% Hispanic/Latino. Medford has been a long-time home for immigrant communities—including Italian and Irish communities in the mid-1900s, with growing Caribbean, Asian, Arab, and Latinx populations, and specifically large Haitian and Brazilian communities, today. Approximately 21% of Medford residents are foreign-born and 29% speak a first language other than English. Medford's median household income is \$92,363 and the poverty rate has persisted around 9-10%. Based on Massachusetts criteria for income, English isolation, and racial-ethnic designations, many neighborhoods in Medford are Environmental Justice communities, including portions of South Medford, Wellington, Glenwood, Medford Square, and West Medford.

With climate change, Medford faces growing risks from higher temperatures, heavier precipitation, larger storms, and flooding. The combined effects of storms and sea level rise could also create substantial flooding in the city as early as 2050 unless large-scale, regional

infrastructure projects—currently being pursued—can help mitigate this risk. Medford’s Environmental Justice communities will likely experience disproportionate burden from climate change as a result of systemic inequities; these neighborhoods in Medford are also at high risk for flooding and extreme heat. Additionally, Medford’s rising cost of living and limited “front doors” to social services are some of the challenges that will likely continue to hinder community resilience and disproportionately impact Environmental Justice communities. Medford’s low-income communities and Black, Indigenous, and communities of color have been consistently underrepresented in the City’s planning processes. Developing new ways for community collaboration that center the experiences of Medford’s low-income communities and communities of color are critical for the City’s short and long-term climate planning.

Project Description and Goals:

In 2019, Medford received an MVP Action Grant to host a series of community dinners and an equity workshop that would enable more inclusive community engagement in the development of Medford’s Climate Action and Adaptation Plan. Increased communication between municipal staff and Medford residents was identified as a priority action during initial MVP community resilience building workshops. Approximately 28% of Medford residents speak a first language that is not English and lack equitable access to city services and information. Similar to other Massachusetts communities, Medford’s city council, boards, and committees are predominantly made up of white, upper-middle class residents and thus planning processes have consistently highlighted the objectives of residents that are white and upper-middle class, while often overlooking the perspectives of Medford’s low-income communities and communities of color.

Through this MVP grant, the City of Medford aimed to develop and pilot more inclusive and equitable planning processes to inform the strategies of the Climate Action and Adaptation Plan and to build upon its commitment to making Medford a more equitable city for all residents. The main goals of this grant were to 1) increase accessibility of planning processes, 2) connect with residents from more communities, 3) ensure residents from environmental justice communities are given ample spaces and opportunities to shape the CAAP, 4) increase community dialogue, understanding, and shared language around equity in policy-making, and 5) pilot new forms of engagement centered on relationship building and lived experience. To expand the City’s outreach process, reach new communities, and consider equity in a more robust way, the City proposed to host a series of community dinners and an equity workshop in the spring of 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the City had to transition many of these events to alternative formats and timelines.

Equity Workshops: The City planned to host an equity-focused workshop to reconvene members of working groups (convened in Fall 2019 to develop Medford’s climate strategies) to think critically about the equity implications of their proposed strategies. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the intention was to hold this workshop in-person. To lead the workshop, the City partnered with All Aces, Inc., a local minority-owned firm that facilitates conversations around race, resilience, and equity. The first part of the workshop would allow participants to build a shared understanding on the link between inequality and climate change, as well as gain the terminology and context to discuss structural inequity. Following this, participants would reconvene during the second part of the workshop to revise their proposed strategies through an equity lens. With the limitations posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the City worked with All Aces to create a new model of the equity training that could be hosted online. The workshop was broken up into two sessions and held remotely in May 2020. The first session was an interactive learning process where participants were grouped and asked to complete a task in which they discussed instances or events that are essential to the preservation of dignity. Through the activity, the All Aces team created different experiences for different groups, providing participants with the language to articulate what they were experiencing or witnessing through the activity. The goal was to enable participants to actively recognize biases in planning or policy. During the second workshop, participants discussed ways to amend existing strategies and expand on the strategies to better reach equity goals. The discussions were centered around the following questions: *1) Does the policy/program/initiative create any unfair burdens for socially vulnerable populations?, 2) How can we ensure the benefits of this policy/program/initiative will be designed to reach socially vulnerable populations?, and 3) How will socially vulnerable populations be able to contribute to the development, implementation, and evaluation of this policy/program/initiative?* These learnings were documented to later be integrated into the strategies of the CAAP.

Community Dinners: As part of the MVP Action Grant, the City also planned a set of community dinners. These dinners were designed in response to questions such as: *How can we gather community members and city staff to talk about the future of our city in ways other than traditional (white culture) city meetings? Can we create ways for planning processes to be more relational and less transactional?* The community dinners were designed to be bilingual, family-oriented events focused on storytelling, music, building relationships, and sharing a meal. The goal was to host two dinners as a pilot—one tailored for Medford’s Haitian communities hosted in Haitian Creole and English, and one tailored for Medford’s Brazilian communities hosted in Portuguese and English. The dinners were planned and hosted in partnership with Medford Family Network, an organization that supports and builds social networks for families with young children, especially immigrant families. The City intended to bring in True Story Theater, a nonprofit theater company, to use playback theater to facilitate storytelling and sharing

experiences around what contributes to a resilient community in a way that was interactive, reflective, and relational. Due to restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic, the city had to alter the structures and timelines to host these dinners, delaying the dinners multiple months and making the events much smaller to abide by maximum gathering sizes. In October 2020, the City successfully hosted one in-person, socially distanced Haitian community dinner at Tufts Park. The dinner focused on discussion and storytelling about the challenges residents currently face and their priorities with regards to transportation, public health and natural systems, and any other barriers to accessing city services or resources. Examples of key guiding questions are below:

- *How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your ability to get to the places you need to?*
- *What other things are important to you to improve transportation in Medford?*
- *What do you do to stay cool when the weather is very hot?*
- *How do trees and green spaces impact your experience of those places?*
- *Would you want to see more trees and green spaces? Where?*
- *When there is a major storm, what are some impacts on you and your family?*
- *What is most important for the City to be focusing on to make sure residents have the resources they need?*

The Mayor joined toward the end of the dinner to connect with residents and to listen to community members' primary concerns. The Mayor also spoke to a number of the City's ongoing initiatives, reiterating the commitment that the City has made to increasing inclusion and promoting racial equity in community planning. Though brief, the Mayor's visit helped to reiterate that the City seeks, respects, and appreciates the input of Medford's Haitian community.

Outreach and Community Collaboration Working Group: Given a number of constraints based on the pandemic, weather, and project timeline given the delays, the team opted to rethink the format of the second community dinner, while still holding the same goals of centering the voices of Medford's low-income, immigrant, and/or community members of color in the climate planning process, and building relationships for ongoing and more equitable collaboration in climate policy-making. In lieu of the second community dinner, the City organized and convened an Outreach and Community Collaboration Working Group, specifically focused on the inclusion of residents from Medford's Haitian, Arab, Asian, and Latinx communities, as well as residents with lived experience facing houselessness and/or financial insecurity in Medford. The new format included two 2-hour meetings (via Zoom) held in April 2021 where the group collectively reviewed the CAAP strategies and the plan's Equity Framework, discussed ways to increasingly center equity in the strategies, and discussed ways to implement the strategies in ways that draw on the knowledge and leadership of Medford's

diverse communities. The meetings were conducted in collaboration with the Medford Community Liaisons, to align the City's ongoing efforts around equitable community outreach and building social resilience in Medford.

Results and Deliverables:

Results and primary deliverables from the *equity workshop* included:

- **Completion of two two-hour workshop sessions** whereby thirty-two attendees (including Medford residents, city staff, and consultants) participated in building a shared understanding of how racism and other prejudices often play out in local governance and how equity is integral to the city's climate goals.
- **Documented revisions and additions to the CAAP strategies**, which were discussed and developed as part of the workshop and focus on prioritizing equity in climate planning processes and outcomes.
- **All Aces Closure Report**, within which the All Aces Team provided recommendations for continuing to center equity in climate planning. The report included tools for evaluating the outcomes of a given policy/program/initiative based on associated benefits and burdens on socially vulnerable populations, as well as a set of guiding reflection questions for future community engagement based on the Movement Strategy Center's Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership. These tools helped to inform strategy revisions, the Equity Framework, and the focus of the Outreach and Community Collaboration Working Group.

Additional deliverables included the workshop agenda, slides, handouts and discussion materials, and documentation (photos and notes).

Results and primary deliverables from the *community dinner* included:

- **Completion of one three-hour community dinner**, which supported Medford's commitment towards creating new community planning processes that focus on respect, inclusion, and relationship building between city staff and Medford's communities of color, low-income communities, and/or immigrant communities that have been consistently underrepresented in planning processes.
- **Identification and elevation of priorities and concerns** of members of Medford's Haitian community, which were documented in notes and incorporated into the Equity Framework and CAAP strategies.

- **Face-to-face conversations** between members of Medford’s Haitian community, city staff, and the Mayor as a step to building trust, connections, and ongoing relationships. Authentic relationships based on mutual respect are seen as a critical starting point for Medford to create systems and develop the “infrastructure” for more equitable decision-making around the city’s future.
- **Process Recap and Reflection Document**, which documents the approach, thinking, and logistics related to hosting the community dinner as an internal tool for city staff to continue to learn and improve upon community planning events and processes.

Additional deliverables included the community dinner guiding agenda, flyer invitations, supporting materials (discussion images, posters), and documentation (photos and notes).

Results and primary deliverables from the ***outreach and community collaboration working group*** included:

- **Completion of two two-hour working group sessions**, which supported Medford’s commitment towards centering the priorities and lived experiences of Medford’s communities of color, low-income communities, and/or immigrant communities in city planning. Working group members included ten community members from Medford’s Haitian, Arab, Asian, and Latinx communities and/or who brought lived experience facing houselessness and/or financial insecurity in Medford.
- **Discussion summary**, which anonymously documents the concerns and priorities of the working group members brought forward during the discussion, as well as the recommended additions and revisions to the CAAP strategies and Equity Framework. Working group members reviewed the discussion summary, which was then shared with city staff and used to inform additions and revisions to the CAAP.
- **Additions and revisions to the CAAP strategies and Equity Framework**, which included new strategies and new strategy components based on the concerns and priorities of the working group members. Discussions with the working group members also led to reframing and restructuring areas of the plan to better connect with the “immediate needs of here and now” experienced by Medford’s most marginalized community members.

Additional deliverables included the invitation, guiding agenda, supporting materials (group agreements and CAAP overview document), and documentation (photos).

Lessons Learned:

One of the most important lessons learned from the project was the way in which racist attitudes and other forms of prejudice within the Medford community at large reinforce inequities in Medford's city planning and decision-making. As mentioned previously, Medford's city council, boards, and committees are predominantly made up of white, upper-middle class residents, and thus these perspectives direct much of the policy decision-making in the city. An initial significant focus of the project was on how to shift that imbalance by making city planning (and specifically climate planning) more inclusive and accessible—through means such as translation and interpretation, childcare, stipends, food, and transportation. Each of these aspects support efforts to execute more inclusive and accessible outreach, but it became increasingly clear that they only scratch the surface in undoing many of the pervasive patterns that have led to communities of color, immigrant communities, and low-income residents feeling disrespected and unwelcome in city meetings and in Medford.

Community members pointed to a large number of recent and egregious racist incidents, as well as more covert patterns that continue to make communities of color, immigrant communities, and low-income residents feel othered, disrespected, or that they don't belong. Due to this trauma, "city spaces are not safe spaces," as one participant explained. It is hard to voice your opinion publicly when you don't feel heard or respected by your community, and when you fear retribution for "being problematic" by speaking out about the things you care about. Without addressing these attributes of systemic racism and prejudice head-on, city planning spaces will continue to be filled with only white upper-middle class residents, and decisions will continue to be made without the voices of the people who will be most affected. In other words, addressing systemic inequity is fundamental—and in many ways a precursor—for short-term or long-term climate planning to be successful.

Beyond this primary point, the project contributed to a more advanced understanding of the priorities and needs of Medford's low-income residents, immigrant communities, and communities of color in order to be a more resilient and equitable city. It also contributed to a better understanding of how to move forward with, and continue to invest in, equitable engagement in Medford—which in many ways were inseparable from community needs and priorities. Some of the most transferable lessons relevant for other communities include these insights related to building more equitable forms of engagement. The City of Medford urges all communities to consider how dominant cultural norms and overt or covert racist attitudes within the community may be creating a substantial barrier to safe spaces that outweigh other efforts for more equitable outreach. Below is a subset of some of the related lessons drawn from this project:

- **Combating racism and prejudice** – The City of Medford must focus dedicated staff and resources to addressing racist and prejudiced cultural attitudes in Medford before it will be able to make progress towards procedural equity in city planning processes. These efforts will require building cultural awareness, tools and trainings, investments in inclusive outreach, as well as a commitment across city leadership, city staff, and the community to holding each other accountable with the message that racism is not acceptable and has no place in the city.
- **Building relationships, trust, and accountability** – Collaborating with trusted community partners in the design of the project’s events was critical for reaching residents and for developing safe and welcoming spaces. Over the longer term, however, there is a significant need for much stronger relationships between the City and residents, built on transparency, accountability, and respect. Building authentic relationships will require creating spaces where power dynamics can be effectively acknowledged and broken down. It will take dedicated time and funding to mend trust and build relationships.
- **Rethinking dominant cultural (white culture) norms** – City meetings in Medford, like most of Massachusetts, tend to follow a set of dominant cultural norms. The community dinners provided an opportunity to question and think critically about those assumptions, including the format, timing, language, and focus. The dinner for Haitian community members was held on a Friday evening to best accommodate participants’ work schedules and avoid conflicting with church. It was held over a three-hour time block with a period in the beginning for arriving, socializing, and introductions to align better with Haitian customs rather than the assumption that events start promptly at the specified time. Rather than English being the default language, much of the conversation took place in Haitian Creole, with interpretation for the English speakers. Whereas City meetings can often feel “transactional,” focused on exchanging information to reach a goal, the dinners focused on being “relational” whereby residents could bring their whole selves (and families) to build human-to-human relationships in support of a common goal. The focus on storytelling and lived expertise (as opposed to purely technical expertise) further supported this shift.
- **Providing translation and interpretation** - Translation (of written materials) and interpretation (spoken in-person) is critical for procedural justice, particularly in ensuring that the people most affected by climate change “have a seat at the table.” It’s also important for conveying that “your specific insight and perspective are important to this conversation.” As Medford continues to evolve its frameworks for community planning and expand its participatory reach, investments in additional capacity for multilingual outreach and events will be crucial to cultivate trust and advance equity in both processes and outcomes.

- **Centering the priorities of Medford’s most marginalized residents** – Centering the experiences of those who are most marginalized is critical for creating a sustainable and resilient future for *all* Medford residents. This was not necessarily a new learning, but it was heavily re-emphasized throughout the project. For example, it will be critical for the CAAP to consider what does a “resilient building” strategy look like for someone who is experiencing homelessness? If the City of Medford is committed to centering equity and the lived experiences of those who are most marginalized, it may lead to a shift in expected climate planning priorities. It is important to recognize and identify broader factors that affect community resilience, which in Medford include aspects such as access to language and legal services, “front doors” to social services within Medford, and access to programming and recreational facilities for youth.
- **Accounting for cultural norms and perceptions** - Cultural norms and perceptions matter a great deal when it comes to designing infrastructure and strategies that serve all communities in Medford. For instance, participants at the community dinner explained that in Haitian culture, cycling on the same roads as cars is perceived as extremely unsafe, and cycling is therefore considered to be primarily a recreational activity, not a commuting option. Therefore, mode shift planning and outreach needs to account for these perspectives when working to make bicycling a viable option for more residents.
- **Increasing the resilience of systems for outreach** – The COVID-19 pandemic led to a large number of challenges in reaching community members, highlighting a lack of “resilience” in systems for equitable and participatory planning. Hosting events online had equally—if not more—barriers to access due to limited access to computers and/or internet and/or limited computer literacy, and due to social distancing requirements and citywide closures, it was increasingly difficult to “meet residents where they are.” These challenges had a tendency to exacerbate inequity—hurting the people who had the most limited access to computers and internet or the fewest resources available to contend with the isolation. Along this same line, participants spoke to perceived mismatches between how the City disseminates information, and how information is most likely to reach residents in their community. Information sharing via direct neighborhood outreach (e.g. door-to-door canvassing, flyering, and localized signage) was seen as a preferred way of staying informed. Building the city’s capacity to provide events and information in a wider range of formats and through a variety of channels will ultimately support greater equity in Medford.

Partners and Other Support:

The following partners played a role in supporting this project:

Linnean Solutions — Linnean Solutions is a multi-disciplinary firm based in Cambridge, MA that works with local governments on climate mitigation and adaptation planning, as well as developing and facilitating community processes. Linnean has been working with the City of Medford on the development of the Climate Action and Adaptation Plan. As part of this grant, Linnean helped to organize and facilitate the community events, as well as integrate the outcomes of the community processes into the content of the CAAP.

Medford Family Network — The Medford Family Network (MFN) is a community organization affiliated with Medford Public Schools that supports families with young children in Medford. The MFN’s director and outreach coordinators are connected with many of Medford’s immigrant families, including the Haitian and Brazilian communities. The City of Medford partnered with MFN to organize outreach efforts and to co-host the Haitian community dinner.

All Aces, Inc. — All Aces, Inc., a local minority-owned firm that supports learning at the intersection of resilience and equity, developed and led the Equity Workshop. Both sessions were facilitated by Dr. S. Atyia Martin, CEM (CEO & Founder) and D’Janapha Fortune (Director of Project Management). All Aces also developed the close-out report.

Project Photos:

Please see photos of the community dinner enclosed separately in the submission package. Please note that no photos of the Equity Workshop or Outreach and Community Collaboration Working Group session were enclosed—due to the events being held online, all images of those events include identifiable individuals and/or intellectual property of All Aces.