







TRANSFORMING RATEPAYERS  
INTO ALLIES

# Centering on Community

BY MAMI HARA | SEATTLE, WA

Seattle Public Utilities (SPU) strives to be a community centered utility. We aim to put people at the heart of everything we do and aspire to build long-lasting, equitable, and inclusive relationships with the communities we serve so that we might co-create solutions that honor community needs and priorities.

SPU has always been committed to providing exceptional service and value to our ratepayers. But over the last several years, as we've sought to better understand and address the needs of the diverse communities we serve, our thinking expanded. We are learning that to deliver our essential services equitably, affordably, and sustainably – and to meet the challenges of the future – we need to partner with communities in authentic and empowering ways.

Centering on community has taught us the importance of leading with humility and seeking to appreciate the experience and expertise of people who live, work, and play in the communities we serve.

It has also emphasized the importance of applying an equity lens to our work and relationships, particularly with BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) and low-income communities. The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the racial and economic inequities that plague our society and underlined the fact that public agencies must do all they can to ensure that everyone has equitable access to essential services. As a community centered utility, we strive to identify and eliminate service inequities in disinvested communities and vulnerable populations.

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Our goal to be truly community-centered is still very much aspirational, but we are seeing progress, for example, implementing programs with mutual financial, environmental, and public health benefits. Beginning with our water conservation program – an early demonstration of the success of this approach – SPU continues to collaborate with the community on many mutually beneficial programs, including our residential green stormwater infrastructure program; tree and garden stewardship; community clean-ups; food recovery; recycling, waste diversion, and plastics prevention; FOG (fats, oils, and grease) disposal; and other issues that directly relate to the ecological health of our waterways.

Through community collaboration, we’ve also found ways to expand the delivery of our essential services to populations that need them the most. Our Purple Bag Program, for example, provides consistent and dependable trash removal services for people living unhoused. Our wastewater pump-out program for residents living in RVs helps protect community health and local waterways. And during the pandemic, collaboration with local organizations like Uplift NW and Kappa Alpha Psi have provided hot showers and clean, dry clothing to unhoused Seattleites.

Looking to the future, we have huge challenges to face. We will wrestle with the increasingly severe impacts of climate change; water and waste pollution; growth, economic inequality, and affordability; and racial and social injustice. To face these challenges with resilience and resourcefulness, public utilities will need to rely on strong partnerships with the communities we serve.

SPU is working to develop these partnerships through programs like Community Connections, in which we partner with trusted community organizations to build channels of communication with BIPOC, immigrant and refugee, and low-income communities. Through projects like Shape Our Water, we are bringing diverse communities into the long-range planning process for our drainage and wastewater systems. Through innovative pilots like Seeds of Resilience, we aim to invest in the future of the communities we serve by fostering entrepreneurship centered on environmental equity and stewardship. And as part of our work to advance Seattle’s Green New Deal, we’ll help create new green jobs that will benefit traditionally underserved communities and our region as a whole.

These are just some of our efforts to build deep and fruitful connections with community, but they illustrate an important evolution in the way we work. Across our organization, employees at every level understand and take pride not just in how our work benefits people, but in how our relationships with people make our work better. How utilities manage water and waste has the power to drive transformative change for people and the planet. But we can’t do it alone.

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