



## Racial Equity Toolkit Summary Sheet

**Department: Seattle Public Utilities**

**Issue Area Analyzed: Side Sewer Program**

**Team that led this RET process: Gary Christensen, Malcolm Wylie, Azaria Espinoza, Ellen Stewart, Tasha Bassett, Steve Hamai, Rachel Garret, Holly Scarlett, Mark Jaeger, Kate Rhodes, Jemini Davis**

**Date of RET process: February 2, 2021 (date of RET summary memo)**

This Summary Sheet should be completed by those who worked on this RET with input from Change Team members and department leadership. Representatives from these different groups should review the final version so that there is consensus on content before it is shared with the Mayor's Office. For questions about using this Summary Sheet, please contact your SOCR RSJI liaison.

***Please respond to the following questions in a separate document (no more than 2.5 pages) and include this page as the cover sheet along with your response.***

- 1. What issues area did you apply the RET on? (project, program, policy, or budgetary decision)  
Program:**

The SPU Side Sewer Program investigates privately owned side sewers to determine whether corrective action is necessary due to surfacing sewage or a void in the public right of way, caused by a broken side sewer. This investigation process includes reporting of possible sewer defects, an in-person investigation, interaction with property owners, and issuing of a Notice of Violation when a code violation is found.

- 2. What was your north star? What racial equity outcomes guided your thinking (Step 1)? How did you design and facilitate a process that was rooted in relational culture? (See the RSJI document, [Building a Relational Culture](#).)**

The program receives notices of leaking or broken side sewers and conducts investigations in all Seattle neighborhoods. Most property owners are unaware of their responsibility to maintain and fix broken side sewers. In a typical year the team conducts over 500 investigations, the vast majority of which involve a residential single-family home. Communication (in person and/or via email or phone) occurs with the property owner a minimum of two times, before and after an investigation is completed. However, many property owners require much more frequent communication, due to a general lack of knowledge and understanding and/or a lack of financial resources. Anecdotally staff report that property owners who question or otherwise contest a finding tend to be white, well-educated, and relatively wealthy.

Reports of possible broken side sewers can come from many sources: SPU Operations and Maintenance crews, other City of Seattle staff (e.g., SDOT), and concerned neighbors or people



## Racial Equity Toolkit Summary Sheet

otherwise working or recreating within Seattle. For property owners the codes and regulations can be difficult to read and understand. Additionally, fixing a side sewer can be very costly depending upon the location, size of issue, and length of side sewer pipe needing repair or replacement. The following racial equity barriers to repairs side sewers were identified:

- A lack of knowledge of side sewer ownership and responsibility, including knowledge of codes and regulations.
- A lack of trust in government, ability to communicate, and lack of in-language resources regarding side sewer responsibilities.
- A lack of financial and other resources to repair the issue (cash on hand, ability to secure loans, legal representation, personal time to manage the issue etc.).
- A lack of connection to trusted contractors to fix their side sewer.
- A lack of legal knowledge and access to legal resources.

The RET team thus focused on developing immediate actions that the team will take, and longer-term upstream management recommendations to address the racial inequities as listed above.

### Immediate Actions

- Research and develop new materials, platforms, methodologies for delivery of key side sewer messaging to BIPOC communities.
- Build pathways for BIPOC Contractors and Businesses through partnerships with community/affinity groups and trade organizations.
- Develop Preferred Side Sewer Contractor criteria and identify and recruit trusted contractors.
- As a result of investigations, develop standards, checks, and balances to ensure official, legal documentation is appropriately translated and communicated to residential property owners in need of side sewer repair.
- Develop messaging to educate property owners and tenants about their rights pertaining to their side sewers and Seattle Municipal Code.
- Research via Law Department the ability to support a non-stakeholder advocacy contact for people who lack access to legal resources.
- Develop metrics to better assess the program impacts on BIPOC communities and effectiveness of work products associated with tasks as identified in the Equity Toolkit Summary Memo.

### Long Term Recommendations

- Research, create, and support a side sewer assistance and incentive program (effort started in 2021).
- Engage other City agency stakeholders in cooperatively applying RET to policies and practices associated with private side sewer repairs (effort started in 2021).
- Provide private side sewer owners windows of opportunities to conduct side sewer repairs during city projects.



## Racial Equity Toolkit Summary Sheet

- Review and modify Seattle Municipal Code Chapter 21.16 to streamline ownership and responsibilities to insure more equitable assessments and code interpretations.

### **3. What data, stories, and communities did you engage with? What relationships did you develop, sustain, or deepen during this process? How did these relationships contextualize your institutional objective? (Step 2)**

Prior to beginning the toolkit process, members of the team conducted multiple focus groups with homeowners who had experienced side sewer issues. The goal was to gain a better understanding of their experiences fixing their side sewers. Because the program does not collect demographic data, and broad call out for participants was initiated resulting in focus group participants who were mostly older, white retired homeowners. As a result of this racial imbalance the program has committed to develop feedback mechanisms from BIPOC homeowners in the roll out of Immediate Actions as listed in Question #2.

During the RET process, the team presented to, and requested input from, the SPU Creek, Drainage and Wastewater Advisory Committee. This committee is comprised of residents and business owners with a wide range of backgrounds and experience.

In addition, during this RET process team members reached out to the Office of Housing staff that administer the home loan program, to identify additional support that could be provided to low-income homeowners. Through this initial contact staff were invited to participate in the RET application to the pilot Side Sewer Assistance Program. The purpose of their involvement is to help us identify potential barriers to possible program design elements (given their experience), and possible ways to partner and expand existing home assistance programs. We also secured the involvement of staff from the Environmental Coalition of South Seattle (ECOSS) in this follow up RET process. ECOSS staff are longstanding community outreach and education partners with SPU.

### **4. How did these relationships help you to identify the burdens and benefits of your proposed work? What are the burdens? What are the benefits? (Step 3)**

#### Burdens

Many homeowners are unaware of their responsibility to maintain and fix their side sewers, most notably including the length of side sewer that extends out to the middle of the road where it connects to SPU's sewer main. Most side sewers have a useful lifespan between 70 and 90 years, and many homes in Seattle were built right after World War II. The cost to repair a side sewer can vary greatly depending upon the length of pipe needing to be replaced, the method used (trenchless vs. trenched), work through obstacles built on top of the side sewer (porches, decks, sheds, retaining walls etc.), and whether the repair includes work within the right of way. If work within the right of way is necessary additional permits are required, along with roadway restoration costs. If the side sewer breaks into cement panels it is not uncommon for the restoration cost to exceed \$40,000 (and can on occasion exceed \$100,000). Even



## Racial Equity Toolkit Summary Sheet

without roadway restoration, a typically property owner can expect to pay between \$8,000 to \$12,000 dollars to fix their side sewer.

### Benefits

Aside from fixing the issue, homeowners who repair their side sewer should expect this to be a one-in-a-lifetime expense as a side sewer pipe typically should last for over 80 years. In addition, a 'healthy' side sewer can increase the re-sale value of the property or foster a faster sale.

### **5. Please identify the way in which the four types of racism (internalized, interpersonal, institutional, and structural) animated your RET process and what you learned. (Step 3)**

This process animated a better understanding of institutional and structural racism through discussions and shared examples of the hardships that low-income homeowners face a broken side sewer. Through a combination of RSJ-related trainings and team discussions during this RET process surfaced how communities of color that are already struggling financially have limited access to loans through banking institutions, other family or friends with wealth. Many also don't an ability to take time off from work to manage a side sewer repair project. Most notably fixed income homeowners such as the elderly may also have limited cash on hand to pay for side sewer repairs. Additionally, homeowners in low income and BIPOC communities are far more apt to simply accept the conditions of the enforcement and achieve compliance even when under duress due to a lack of resources. This is in sharp contrast to well educated, wealthy, and mostly white homeowner (especially lawyers), who are more prone to contest a Notice of Violation or otherwise put-up argument on the investigation. Nearly one third of appeals received result in some benefit in favor of the "responsible party." The lack of participation in this process by BIPOC communities is a clear indicator of an inequity.

### **6. As a result of the above analysis, how will you increase opportunity and/or minimize harm for the impacted community? (Step 4)**

The team is developing a pilot side sewer assistance program, to launch in the back half of 2021. As the team designs this program, they will apply a RET and center the previously identified racial equity issues and recommendations from this RET into designing the pilot.

### **7. What steps will the RET team take to ensure that department leadership will implement the recommendations from the RET?**

SPU has funding committed to develop a pilot side sewer assistance program. The launch of this pilot is expected this fall, and this item is a 2021 performance accountability to the Mayor's Office. This pilot will directly address some of the immediate issues listed in Question #2 above. This will all require department leadership review and design approval, including review of RET outcomes and recommendations in the RET Summary Memo.



## Racial Equity Toolkit Summary Sheet

**8 How will you become/remain accountable to the relationships developed during the RET process? How will you report back to your stakeholders?**

Stakeholder engagement will continue through the development and roll out of the 2021 pilot side sewer assistance program. In addition we will continue to partner with Office of Housing staff who lead the home loan repair program.

**9. What additional racial equity issues did this RET reveal? Consider how these unresolved issues present opportunities for structural transformation, including [building a relational culture](#) (i.e., working across departments, and with other institutions and sectors to achieve racial equity).**

SDOT roadway restoration policies, including full cement panel replacement and sidewalk access ramps can significantly add to the cost of fixing a broken side sewer. Our initial analysis is that many cement-paneled streets are also major arterials, including streets that are being upgraded for Rapid Ride bus routes. Sewer mains are typically located in the middle of the street, thus the distance to connect a side sewer to the sewer main is greater on wider streets. Residences facing a major arterial also tend to be less-desirable due to traffic, exposure to vehicle emissions, and street-level noise. Lower income families and communities of color tend to live along many of these arterials.

Some other jurisdictions own or maintain utility assets underneath the public right of way. While it would be cost-prohibitive for SPU to maintain all side sewers underneath the right of way, we are exploring other ways to reduce the steep financial burden associated with this issue. Our pilot program that is in development will explore options such as property liens, a hard cap on repairs, low-interest loans, and other measures yet to be identified. Most of these options will require ongoing partnership with other departments and possibly NGOs to help with program administration or community outreach.