

United Way of
Greater Atlanta



#Listening #Learning #Leveraging #Leading

Recommendations to Advance Equity, & Inclusion in Cobb County, Georgia

January 2023

 CHRYSALIS LAB

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Lean in to understand and respect why equity is a shared value that affects us all, while gaining deeper knowledge and confidence of how inequities stand in the way from improving the well-being of children, families and Greater Atlanta communities.

In order to improve the faces in front of the numbers, we realize we must redesign the path we are on to ensure we are headed to the future we all want for Greater Atlanta, regardless of race or zip code.

-United Way of Greater Atlanta

01. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Inequity is not simply a theoretical construct or an arbitrary series of occurrences. It is the result of countless moments – past and present – that, over time, has drastically tilted the playing field for generations of marginalized people, communities, and identities. These series of moments have led us here – a society whose economic engine functions by advancing systems of inequity and poverty. By that same logic, collectively, we can deconstruct systems of inequity, moment by moment, with consistent effort and authentic intentionality.

Yet as writer-poet Audre Lorde famously heeded, “***The master’s tools will not dismantle the master’s house.***” This means we must develop new tools to unlearn the conscious and unconscious behaviors that got us to this point in time.

Like communities across America, Cobb County, a major suburb of Atlanta, Georgia, is experiencing seismic shifts in demography and leadership,¹ all amidst a polarizing political environment, resistant health challenges due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and a universal call for greater transparency, access, and inclusion for all of its residents.

In 2022, the United Way of Greater Atlanta convened a partnership with Cobb County Commission Chairwoman Lisa Cupid to conduct a community discovery process – one that would gather insight and wisdom from diverse Cobb County residents on their perceptions, experiences, and aspirations relative to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the County. Chrysalis Lab, a social impact consulting firm, was engaged to facilitate this discovery process which included deep and broad stakeholder input in the form of an online survey, one-on-one interviews, focus groups, interactive presentations, and community dialogue events.

¹ Gaines, Alexandra C. “Trouble in the Suburbs.” Center for American Progress. Center for American Progress, December 21, 2022. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/trouble-in-the-suburbs/>.

01. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY Continued

It is important to remember that ensuring equity is a journey and not a destination; there is no universal destination, or “right” starting point. The journey is also holistic and iterative: consisting of successes, failures, and lessons learned. The key is to start - building on the will of a community’s stakeholders to make progress. We trust that this report and recommendations, presented in the categories of **#Listening**, **#Learning**, **#Leveraging**, and **#Leading**, will contribute ideas and tactical guidance to the United Way and other Cobb leaders, innovators, and change makers.

#Listening - Opportunities for Cobb residents and stakeholders to dialogue, exchange perspectives, aspirations, and ideas, resulting in greater understanding and willingness to ensure opportunities for all.

#Learning - Forums for shared understanding and exploration of the principles of equity and inclusion to set the stage for listening, learning, and introspection on pathways to eliminate inequity.

#Leveraging - Engaging all of Cobb’s assets to catalyze systems change, influence public policy, and lead to sustainable improvements for residents to access opportunity.

#Leading - Demonstrating courageous and transparent leadership that centers community voice and shares power and engagement.

Through collective, broad based leadership, Cobb County has an opportunity to make a forceful case for greater equity and inclusion by examining and explaining the challenges, highlighting the areas of opportunity, and taking bold action to embed equity into its county culture. We stand ready to support this work.

We are thankful for the leadership and courage of the United Way of Greater Atlanta to explore these essential and dynamic issues.

COBB COUNTY EQUITY & INCLUSION RECOMMENDATIONS

LISTENING

#1	Create opportunities for shared dialogue.
#2	Develop strategic relationships with “trusted voices” within Cobb’s Latino and other diverse communities.
#3	Commit to focused dialogue about Cobb’s inequities with Cobb elected officials and faith communities.

LEVERAGING

#6	Explore interest in creating a “Collective Impact” initiative or similar model to coordinate DEI efforts and leverage resources.
#7	Leverage the 2021 American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding to drive attention and direct resources to address inequity.
#8	Tap into the will and interest of Cobb residents to achieve greater equity together.

LEARNING

#4	Provide consistent opportunities for training on principles of equity and inclusion.
#5	Compile a “brain trust” of Cobb’s DEI efforts that can be used for engagement and action.

LEADING

#9	Join voices with other Cobb leaders to ensure issues of equity and inclusion are centered in discussion.
#10	Support the county’s hiring of a Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and promote the inclusion of equity principles and practices across all departments and operations.
#11	Build coalitions between Cobb County and Cobb cities to drive greater equity.

COBB COUNTY EQUITY & INCLUSION RECOMMENDATIONS



LISTENING



LEARNING



LEVERAGING



LEADING

DESCRIPTION	<p>Opportunities for Cobb residents and stakeholders to exchange perspectives, share aspirations, and generate new ideas, resulting in greater understanding and willingness to ensure opportunities for all.</p>	<p>Forums to inculcate shared understanding and exploration of the principles of equity and inclusion to set the stage for listening, learning, and introspection on pathways to eliminate inequity.</p>	<p>Engaging all of Cobb's assets to catalyze systems change, influence public policy, and lead to sustainable improvements for residents to access opportunity.</p>	<p>Demonstrating courageous and transparent leadership that centers community voice and shares power and engagement.</p>
OBJECTIVE	<p>To increase appreciation and affirmation of Cobb's diverse and absent voices</p>	<p>To gain greater understanding and appreciation, and develop a shared definition of diversity, equity, and inclusion concepts</p>	<p>To increase the impact of existing Cobb County equity work</p>	<p>To motivate Cobb leaders to leverage their social capital and be bold equity advocates</p>
POTENTIAL MEASURES OF SUCCESS	<p>Diversity of organizations and individuals who participate (geography, audience, sector, etc.)</p>	<p>Participant engagement and self-assessment of learning outcomes</p>	<p>Equity-centered partnerships and investments</p>	<p>Development of countywide equity plan; implementation of countywide equity audit; full participation of county elected officials</p>

02. ABOUT THE PROJECT

“Our ability to reach unity in diversity will be the beauty and the test of our civilization.” -Mahatma Gandhi

In early 2022, the United Way of Greater Atlanta (United Way) sought to identify opportunities to advance ideals of diversity, equity and inclusion in Cobb County. Grounded in historic and current understanding of Cobb’s social, political, and economic context, United Way engaged a broad swath of County residents and key stakeholders to solicit their experiences, perceptions, and aspirations for greater shared prosperity for the County.

United Way partnered with Atlanta-based social impact consulting firm Chrysalis Lab to conduct a discovery process that would gather critical data and insights, reveal opportunities and challenges to advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion in Cobb County, and chart potential paths forward through well-informed recommendations. Cobb County Commission Chairwoman Lisa Cupid was a primary stakeholder in the planning and implementation of the discovery process.



This project was supported by United Way’s Racial Equity and Healing Fund. Work was completed from March through November 2022.

02. ABOUT THE PROJECT Continued

United Way of
Greater Atlanta



The United Way of Greater Atlanta engages and brings together people and resources to drive sustainable and equitable improvements in the well-being of children, families, and individuals in the community. It invests in over 200 programs in 13 metro Atlanta counties.

Chrysalis Lab



Chrysalis Lab is an Atlanta-based social impact consulting firm that helps courageous leaders co-create solutions that drive social change.

Definitions

For consistency and shared understanding, we used the following definitions for this work:

- **Diversity** - the representation of a range of groups in a given setting, including but not limited to age, disability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, marital status, national origin, race, religion, sexual orientation, or veteran status (Source: PolicyLink).
- **Equity** - the just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential (Source: PolicyLink).
- **Inclusion** - the act of creating environments in which any individual or group can be and feel welcomed, respected, supported, and valued to fully participate (Source: Independent Sector).
- **Stakeholder** - a person with an interest or concern in something

03. COBB COUNTY OVERVIEW

The area known as Cobb County was, for thousands of years, the ancestral homeland of the Indigenous Peoples of the Cherokee and Muscogee Nations. In 1830, they were forcibly removed from their ancestral lands, a result of the heinous Indian Removal Act enforced by the federal and state governments. In 1832, Cobb County was established, along with eight other counties that were carved out of these lands in northwest Georgia.

According to historian Thomas A. Scott, after the Civil War (1861-1865), “for the next three-quarters of a century, [Cobb County] suffered the same afflictions that plagued most of Georgia: a depressed farm economy, low-wage industries, and one-party politics built on white supremacy.”² The county’s economic tide began to turn in 1942 when Bell Aircraft announced the opening of a Marietta branch to produce B-29 bombers, which



provided employment for over 28,000 laborers. This facility was later ceded to the Lockheed Corporation, which became the nation’s leading producer of transport planes.

2 Scott, Thomas. "Cobb County." New Georgia Encyclopedia, last modified Jun 20, 2022. <https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/counties-cities-neighborhoods/cobb-county/>

03. COBB COUNTY OVERVIEW Continued

Today, Cobb County is a vital economic power within the state. It is home to several prominent corporations and businesses, including The Home Depot, Lockheed Martin, Wellstar Health System, and Gas South. In 2017, the Atlanta Braves franchise relocated from downtown Atlanta to Cobb County, after more than half a century. Additional indicators of Cobb County's robust economy include:

- A population exceeding 750,000, with a median household income of \$81,517.³
- The most highly educated workforce in Georgia, with 48.4% of residents holding a bachelor's degree and 15% with a graduate degree.⁴
- Three higher education institutions: Kennesaw University, Life University, and Chattahoochee Technical College

In addition to being an attractive place to conduct business, Cobb County has also become a diverse place to live. Known as a suburban haven for white families

who relocated from Atlanta's urban core in the 1960s,⁵ Cobb County now ranks as the second most racially and ethnically diverse county in Georgia. And with the rise of a more diverse population has come the rise of more diverse leadership: the county government welcomed its first Jewish county commission chair in 2002 and its first Black and first female county commission chair in 2020.

Yet, despite Cobb's significant assets, prosperity, and rich diversity, deep underlying inequities are revealed by examining disparities in quality-of-life outcomes for

3 "Cobb County," ARC (Atlanta Regional Commission, December 8, 2022), <https://atlantaregional.org/atlanta-region/county-profiles/cobb-county/>.

4 "Top Reasons to Choose Cobb," Top Reasons to Choose Cobb | Cobb County Georgia (Cobb County Government), accessed December 21, 2022, <https://www.cobbcounty.org/economic-development/why-cobb/top-reasons-choose-cobb>.

5 Emily Badger, "How Atlanta's Politics Overtook the Suburbs, Too," The New York Times (The New York Times, December 9, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/09/upshot/atlanta-suburbs-democratic-shift.html>.

03. COBB COUNTY OVERVIEW Continued

children and families. Key indicators in health, educational achievement, housing, and employment reveal that Cobb's success and diversity has not always translated to opportunity and inclusion for all of its communities. Furthermore, Cobb County, like suburban communities across the nation, remains stubbornly segregated and inequitable along racial lines. Consider:

- The four-year graduation rate is 97.4% at Lassiter High School (Marietta), compared to 76.2% at South Cobb High School (Austell).⁶ For context, Lassiter is located in a predominantly white, upper-middle class area of the county while South Cobb is located in one of the county's most diverse and economically challenged areas.
- Life expectancy swings more than 14 years between two Census tracts six miles apart: 87.6 years in the Vinings/Atlanta Road area to 73.2 years in the North Marietta Parkway/Gresham Road area.⁷ As with the Lassiter and South Cobb

example, Vinings/Atlanta Road is an upper-middle class area of the county while North Marietta Parkway/Gresham Road possesses a deep diversity of ethnicity and socio-economic status.

- 28% of the Latino population in Cobb is considered among the working poor earning less than 200% of the federal poverty level. This is compared to 12% of Black, 6% of Asian/Pacific Islander and 5% of White residents.⁸

6 "Cobb County (2020-21)," Georgia School Grades (Governor's Office of Student Achievement), accessed December 21, 2022, <https://public.gosa.ga.gov/noauth/extensions/SchoolGrades-Georgia/SchoolGrades-Georgia.html?SchoolName=cobb-county>.

7 "Life Expectancy in Cobb County - ARC" (Atlanta Regional Commission, July 2021), <https://cdn.atlantaregional.org/wp-content/uploads/lbe-snapshot-cobb.pdf>.

8 "Housing Burden: All Residents Should Have Access to Quality, Affordable Homes," Housing burden | National Equity Atlas (PolicyLink), accessed December 21, 2022, https://nationalequityatlas.org/indicators/Housing_burden#/?geo=04000000000013067.

03. COBB COUNTY OVERVIEW *Continued*

Armed with this data, we set out to answer key questions:



How does the Cobb community think and feel about inequity and related issues?



What are the most promising and sustainable approaches to achieving greater equity on a countywide level?

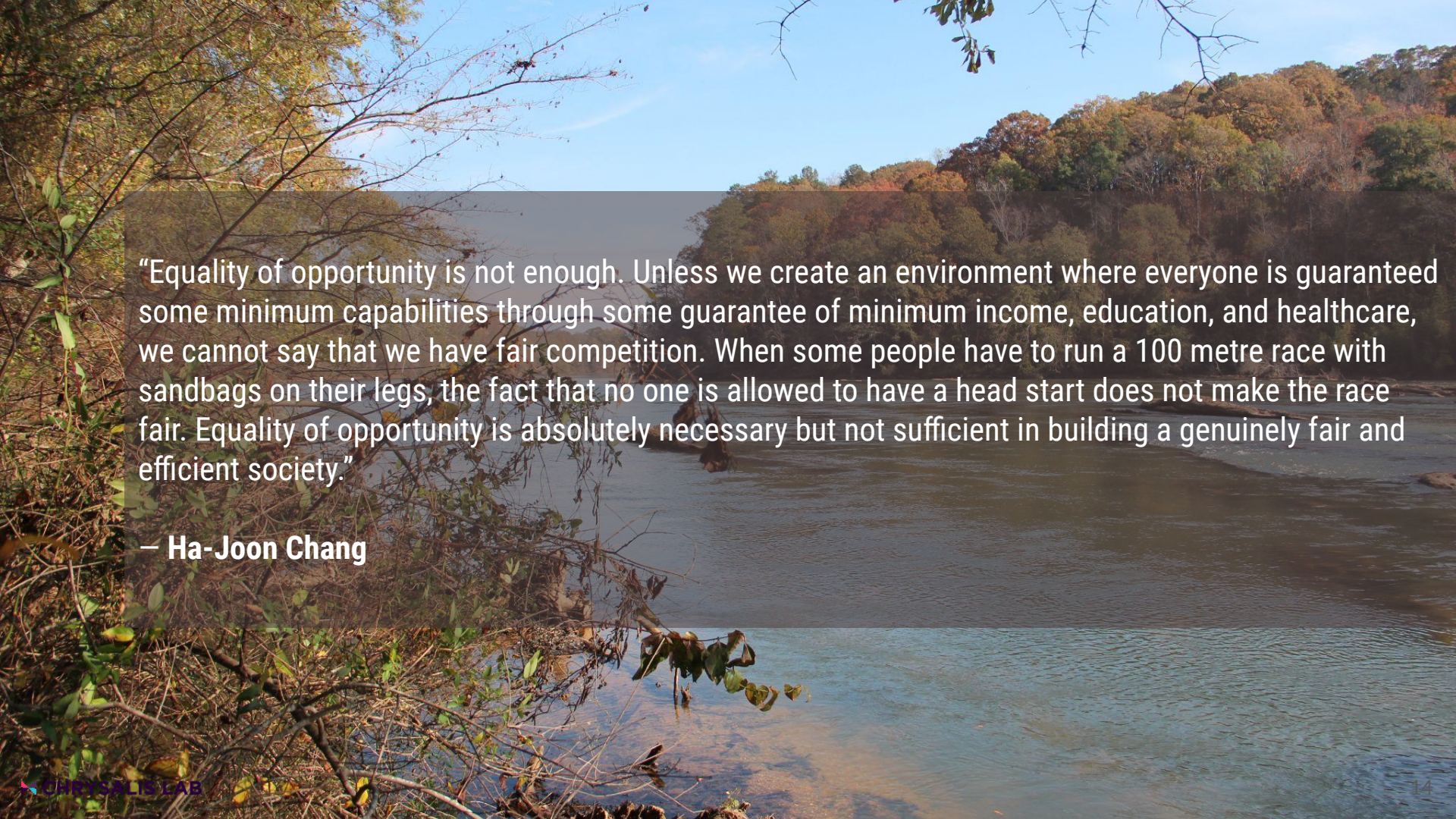


Who is prepared and willing to lead effort(s) to address inequities in Cobb?

In this report, we present our findings from exploring these questions with Cobb stakeholders and attempt to illuminate appropriate paths for action.

An Important Note: As we explored these issues, we were confronted with a difficult reality: Cobb County is currently experiencing a highly polarized political environment, a dynamic that impacted this discovery process. For those unwilling or unprepared to engage in meaningful dialogue on the critical but nuanced concepts of 'equity' and 'inclusion,' it was easy to position this process as being "political," i.e., conducted to stir public sentiment towards a predefined mindset and political representation. To help combat this, we emphasized transparency and accessibility throughout the work.

"There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about." – Margaret J. Wheatley



“Equality of opportunity is not enough. Unless we create an environment where everyone is guaranteed some minimum capabilities through some guarantee of minimum income, education, and healthcare, we cannot say that we have fair competition. When some people have to run a 100 metre race with sandbags on their legs, the fact that no one is allowed to have a head start does not make the race fair. Equality of opportunity is absolutely necessary but not sufficient in building a genuinely fair and efficient society.”

— Ha-Joon Chang

04. OUR PROCESS

To identify opportunities and challenges to advancing equity and inclusion in Cobb County, Chrysalis Lab led a nine-month discovery process to assess existing conditions and environment, gather qualitative and quantitative data, engage the community, and research best practice.

Residents, nonprofit leaders, academics, public officials, business representatives, and faith leaders provided input in a variety of ways, including an online survey (447 responses), one-on-one interviews (22), strategic conversations (8), focus groups (2), presentations, and community events. The data, information, and lessons learned throughout the process inform the recommendations found in Section VI of this report.

The activities listed above are described in this section.

Community Data & Insights: These activities were conducted to gather data and information, and extrapolate useful themes, patterns, and trends to inform our interpretations – in addition to roadblocks to look out for.

- **Stakeholder Interviews** - One-on-one interviews to understand the landscape of—and attitudes toward—equity and inclusion in Cobb County
- **Community Input Survey** - Online survey to Cobb County residents to gain their perspectives on the opportunities and challenges to advancing equity and inclusion in Cobb County
- **Focus Groups** - Facilitated dialogue on equity in Cobb County

Strategic Conversations: Chrysalis Lab facilitated periodic one-on-one conversations during the discovery process with a diverse set of leaders and stakeholders in Cobb County. These conversations contributed to our approach to outreach, engagement, and data collection,

04. OUR PROCESS Continued

connected us with additional resources, and introduced us to people not previously on our radar. These individuals were sounding boards, providing counsel and direction when needed, particularly when it came to assessing conditions unique to Cobb County.

Stakeholder Engagement: To build an awareness of our work and encourage engagement among diverse stakeholders, we shared information and findings at events throughout Cobb County, including the Cobb International Festival (Aug. 31, 2022), Cobb Chamber DEI Committee Meeting (Sept. 13, 2022), and Cobb County Government Department Head Meeting (Sept. 16, 2022).

Research: To provide deep and wide context for the discovery process and recommendations, we conducted secondary research (online) on the following topics:

- County Equity Initiative Scan (National)
- Existing Equity-Centered Initiative Scan (Cobb County)
- Equity and inclusion best practices and resources

The Power of One Cobb: A Community Conversation: On October 15, 2022, we sponsored a community-wide conversation to both share—and gather—information. We reported the findings from our community data and insights research and solicited feedback as well as additional perspective on pathways to countywide equity work in Cobb. This well-publicized event attracted 70+ Cobb residents and stakeholders, most of whom had not participated previously.



04. OUR PROCESS Continued

TIMELINE OF ACTIVITIES



COLOR CODE:

Community Data & Insight Activities

Stakeholder Engagement Events

Community Conversation Event

05. COMMUNITY DATA & INSIGHTS

Key Stakeholder Interviews

The key stakeholder interviews were an important preliminary step in learning about Cobb County's landscape and prevailing attitudes towards the concepts of diversity, equity, and inclusion. A total of 22 stakeholders participated in interviews. In conducting the interviews, the following themes emerged:

- Language and communication is critically important (e.g., use of DEI language versus broader "coalition-building" terms).
 - Several interviewees believed that the majority of people in Cobb County do not know what equity is or what it can mean.
- Cobb County elected leadership is polarized politically and ideologically and not ready to align and effect an equity agenda.

- "A Tale of Two Cobbs": Many interviewees perceived there to be a significant disconnect between residents who recognize the existence of inequities in Cobb County and those who don't.

To see the full stakeholder interview results, see Appendix A.

"Messaging is key. Just like affirmative action becoming a racialized policy position, DEI has too. How you say it and show the benefits of this work matter. Getting folks who do not think they are stakeholders, but are necessary to the work, is the key." *-Stakeholder Interview Participant*

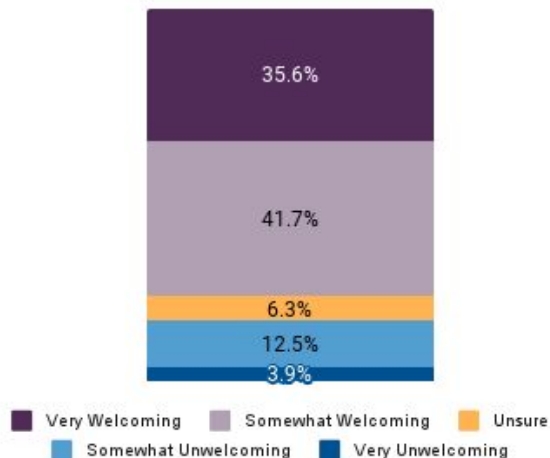
05. COMMUNITY DATA & INSIGHTS Continued

Community Input Survey

The community input survey provided insights into key questions regarding the community's appetite and inclinations toward countywide equity work. To see the full survey data analysis results, see Appendix B. Highlights include:

- ★ **Do we see that inequities exist in Cobb?** While most respondents (77%) find Cobb to be generally welcoming, over 30% believe community members have unequal access and opportunity.

Is Cobb County a community welcoming to all backgrounds?



Do you believe all members of the Cobb County community have equal access and opportunity?

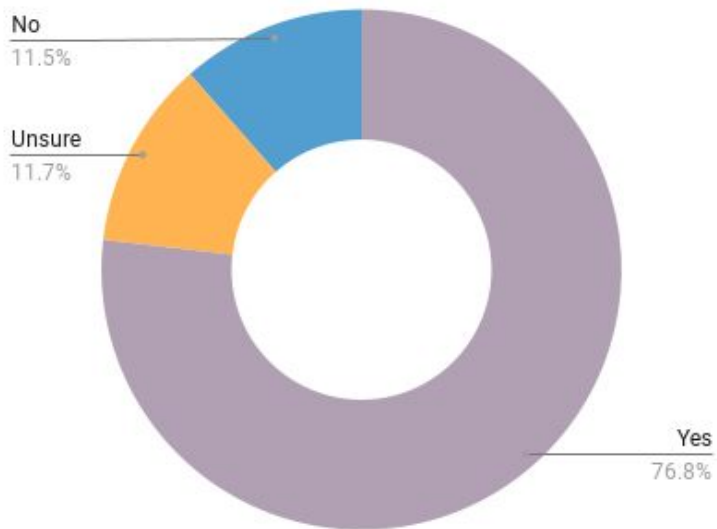


05. COMMUNITY DATA & INSIGHTS Continued

Community Input Survey (continued)

- ★ **Should we do something about it?** The majority of respondents (76.8%) feel there should be equity efforts undertaken in Cobb County. Specifically, the top three areas identified for focus are: K-12 Education, Housing, and Public Safety.

In general, do you think there should be efforts to make Cobb County a community where all residents have equal access and opportunity?



THE MOST IMPORTANT ISSUES...

when it comes to ensuring Cobb County is a community where all residents have equal access and opportunity. Respondents were asked to select their Top 3 Issues.



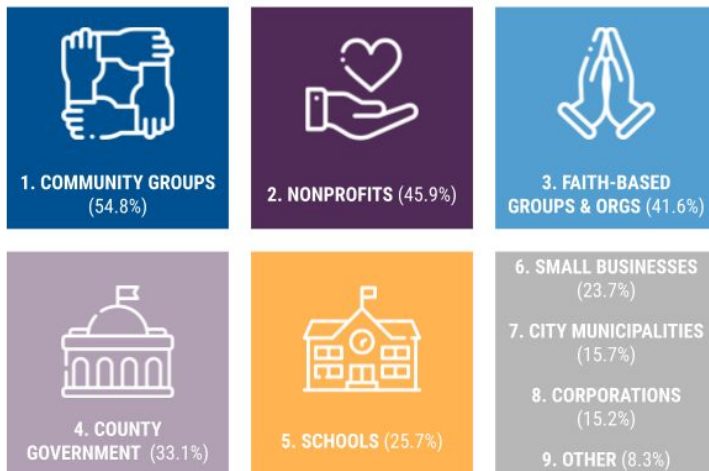
05. COMMUNITY DATA & INSIGHTS Continued

Community Input Survey (continued)

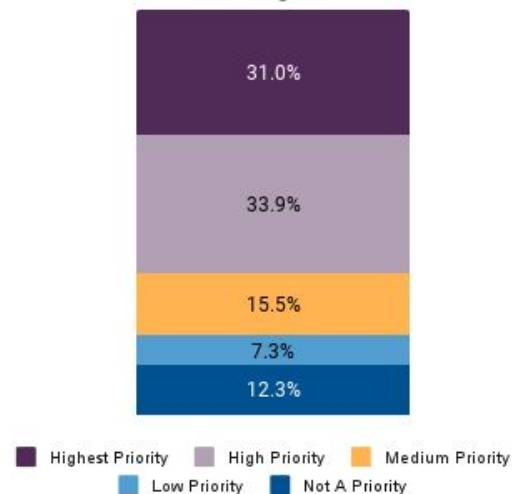
- ★ **Who do we think should do this work?** When asked who is trusted to advance equal access and opportunity in Cobb County, the top four answers were community groups (54.8%), nonprofits (45.9%), faith-based groups/organizations (41.6%), and county government (33.1%). Additionally, 65% of respondents feel efforts to ensure greater equity and inclusion should be a high priority for Cobb County Government.

THE MOST TRUSTED GROUPS...

when it comes to advancing equal access and opportunity in Cobb County.
Respondents were asked to select their Top 3 Groups.



Should efforts to advance equal access and opportunity be a priority for Cobb County Government, and if so to what degree?



“I have lived and worked in Cobb County and there has always been a sense of unfairness based on areas that you reside in...I used to drive my kids to another district just to get a better education.”
-Community Input Survey Respondent

Focus Groups

For more targeted insights, focus groups were conducted with two groups: 1) the United Way of Greater Atlanta’s Cobb Advisory Board and 2) Cobb County nonprofit leaders.

During the focus group with the Cobb Advisory Board, we gathered preliminary insights on participants’ perceptions of readiness for countywide equity work in

Cobb. When asked about Cobb County Government’s readiness, participants raised the following concerns:

- The lack of a clear strategy behind the county’s equity and inclusion efforts; in particular its policy work
- The lack of clear, concise definitions of diversity, equity, and inclusion and what the work might entail
- Political divisiveness

During the focus group with Cobb County nonprofit leaders, participants were asked to respond to survey results indicating that nonprofits leading on efforts of equity and inclusion work in Cobb County. There was consensus that nonprofits should indeed take a leading role because nonprofits are mission-driven, address issues in the community, and are focused on issues of equity and inclusion in their work.

To see the full focus group reports, see Appendices C and D.

06. RECOMMENDATIONS

Achieving greater equity and inclusion in Cobb County requires the willingness to examine where inequalities exist and demonstrating the commitment to do something about it. Only then can Cobb's leaders prioritize and implement focused actions to ensure that all people in all neighborhoods thrive -- regardless of race, ethnicity, income, age, gender, language, sexual orientation, ability, health status, and other markers of identity.

Chrysalis Lab, a social impact consulting firm, was engaged to conduct this discovery. Our findings form the basis for this report. Recommendations are presented in the following categories: #Listening, #Learning, #Leveraging, and #Leading.





#LISTENING

Equitable listening, defined as “the process of receiving, understanding and responding in a way that is fair, impartial and representative of those an organization or leader serves”,⁹ requires us to suspend our opinions and thoughts because we believe in the value of what we are hearing. Both listening and shared dialogue were cited as potential barriers to progress in both stakeholder interviews and focus groups.

When community members truly listen to one another, they learn from one another, resulting in an exchange of opinions, where they feel confident that their ideas and inputs have been heard, considered, and addressed. Optimally, through equitable listening, everyone has the opportunity to understand perspectives or needs that differ from their own, resulting in greater understanding and acceptance of decisions and outcomes.

Several interviewees emphasized the importance of strategic communications: using broad and inclusive language, such as “coalition building” and “opportunity,” when communicating the case for greater equity. They felt this language would enable everyone to “hear” and respond to conversations on equity, and not be turned off by what they perceived to be overused and ambiguous concepts.

#Listening | Recommendation #1: Create opportunities for shared dialogue among groups working on issues of equity. Cobb County is fortunate to host multiple conversations (see Appendix G) that center issues of equity and inclusion. However, our exploration indicated that these conversations are siloed by sector and/or organization, as well as geography. Breaking these silos can be addressed by offering consistent opportunities for conversations in which any interested party -

⁹ Nina Bianchi, “What Is Equitable Listening and What Does It Mean for Democracy 2.0?,” GovLoop (GovLoop, August 3, 2021), <https://www.govloop.com/community/blog/what-is-equitable-listening-and-what-does-it-mean-for-democracy-2-0/>.

06. RECOMMENDATIONS Continued

resident, formal organization, or civic association - working on issues of equity and inclusion is invited to participate – and welcomed. In an environment in which everyone is welcome and valued, these settings can provide a unique platform for expanding relationships and greater shared learning about deepening equity-centered impact. To embody the principle of equity, it is recommended that these conversations occur across Cobb’s diverse neighborhoods and communities to help ensure broad exposure and engagement. United Way would be an ideal convener, as it is trusted as an informed, credible, and neutral community partner.

#Listening | Recommendation #2: Develop strategic relationships with “trusted voices” within Cobb’s Latino and other diverse communities. Across the board, respondents emphasized a need for greater inclusion of Cobb’s Latino and other ethnic communities in the work of defining and advancing equity. Despite outreach to Cobb’s largest Latino-serving organizations and Spanish

There are many concerns that prompt individuals to relocate to the United States, including economic instability, political strife, and better employment opportunities. Depending upon culture, country of origin, and time in the US, American concepts of “equity” and “inclusion” can be alternately ambiguous or unrelatable to many in the County’s ethnic immigrant communities.

survey translation, interactions with Cobb’s Latino communities in the discovery process was unfortunately limited. Additionally, efforts to capture the voice of Cobb’s immigrant and refugee residents—a designation connected to but not synonymous with racial or ethnic identity—proved difficult.

Partnering with Cobb’s Latino and other diverse community leaders to gain their specific perspectives

06. RECOMMENDATIONS Continued

and experiences on issues of equity and inclusion must be a priority moving forward. By engaging in strategic community outreach and relationship building with leaders in these diverse communities, everyone will better understand how equity is experienced—or not—across all Cobb stakeholders.

#Listening | Recommendation #3: Commit to focused dialogue about Cobb's inequities with Cobb elected officials and faith communities. Philosophical and political differences on the Cobb County Board of Commissioners were discussed frequently as a challenge to advancing conversations about equity and

While 67% of survey respondents indicated that issues of equity should be high or highest priority for Cobb County Government, they ranked them the fourth most trusted group to advance equal access and opportunity in Cobb County.

inclusion in Cobb County. Most attribute the tension to the results of the 2020 elections, in which Commission control shifted from Republican to Democratic for the first time in 40+ years. Other seismic leadership changes included the fact that all of the Commissioners are women and three are Black women. Note: the two Republican Commissioners did not make themselves available for dialogue with Chrysalis Lab team members.

As Cobb County's policy body, the Commission has the most pivotal role and opportunity to build vibrant communities for all Cobb residents, carrying out critical, local functions, such as zoning, economic development, public safety oversight and ensuring safety nets for low-income and indigent residents. Cobb leaders should urge the Commission to address equity by calling attention to the poor outcomes in too many Cobb's neighborhoods, particularly in its southern neighborhoods, Latino, and other ethnic communities. This is the power of objective data: numbers do not lie and are not colored by politics.

06. RECOMMENDATIONS Continued

Faith-based groups and organizations were ranked by residents as the third most trusted group—after nonprofits and community groups—to advance equal access and opportunity in Cobb County. Faith leaders were also mentioned in interviews as potential equity leaders and ambassadors, predicated on the belief that the core values espoused in most faiths would be able to bridge Cobb’s deep political and geographic silos to forge a common path to greater inclusion.

Establishing a citizen commission focused on equity and access can be a powerful step and one in which Cobb Commissioners can drive resident engagement, coalesce around equity goals, and support and monitor equity efforts. With diverse, cross-sector, and broad geographic representation across the county, citizen commissions can link disparate and opposing perspectives for the common good and provide a visible reinforcement of a community willing to learn and lead together.



#LEARNING

‘Equity’ and ‘inclusion’ are big concepts. To understand, embrace, and practice these principles, we have to first confront the problem of inconsistent understanding. This sets the stage for more critical listening, learning and introspection on pathways to eliminate inequity. Cobb residents and stakeholders need the expertise, time and space to fully explore both their civic and personal perspectives, such as the distinction between racial inequity in the county vs. individual mindsets, biases, and opinions.

The challenge is illustrated by a statement on the Georgia Municipal Association website, *“Facilitating conversations around diversity, equity, and inclusion in an intense and powerful emotional environment, often reveals significant differences in worldviews or perspectives, resulting in disastrous consequences. The consequences create an atmosphere of tension, conflict,*

06. RECOMMENDATIONS Continued

and fear that inevitably contributes to discomfort developing the hardening of biased views, mitigating the probability of continuing dialogue.”

#Learning | Recommendation #4: Provide consistent opportunities for training on principles of equity and inclusion. More than 75% of survey respondents felt that Cobb County should undertake efforts to ensure greater equity and inclusion. This starts with helping everyone to get on the same page regarding definitions and contexts for equity planning. There are exciting options for offering this resource: by sector or organization and for interested individuals, such as youth, and members of faith communities, and employees of nonprofits and small businesses who cannot access this professional development opportunity. In particular, training and dialogue could be offered as a continuation of the United Way 21-Day Racial Equity Challenge. Existing events and structure, such as the Cobb International Festival and the County’s Youth Commission, can also be leveraged for such learning.

#Learning | Recommendation #5: Compile a “brain trust” of Cobb’s equity efforts that can be used for engagement and action. Our work revealed there are many activities and groups established in the County to address issues of equity and access for all residents, both through direct service and as intermediaries (see Appendix G). The challenge, expressed in focus groups and interviews, is that people are not aware of the good work that is happening.

A centralized resource on Cobb’s equity and inclusion initiatives would be a gift to the community. Demographic, programmatic, and public agency equity data could be gathered in existing (and new) venues and highlight the issues that are on the hearts and minds of Cobb residents, such as Education, identified as priority issues in survey responses (see Section V: Community Data & Insights). The United Way’s Child Wellbeing Index, to be updated in 2023, provides a unique opportunity to facilitate this resource.

06. RECOMMENDATIONS Continued



#LEVERAGING

A strategic and holistic approach to any equity pursuit requires tapping into all of a community's assets: financial, relational, intellectual, and social. As organizations begin to coalesce around equity initiatives, there is opportunity for smarter, more integrated strategies than any one organization can handle on its own. Integrated strategies have the best potential to catalyze systems change, influence public policy, and lead to sustainable improvements for Cobb residents to access opportunity.

#Leveraging | Recommendation #6: Explore interest in creating a “collective impact” initiative or similar model to coordinate Cobb’s equity efforts and greater leverage effort and resources. Collective impact is a commitment by actors from different sectors and communities to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem. Collective impact models required shared vision and

direction, infrastructure and/or staff, shared measurement, continuous communication, and mutually reinforcing activities among all participants. To explicitly prioritize equity, work must be grounded in data and context, focus on systems change in addition to programs and services, and deliberately “shift power” (i.e., leadership roles).

An initial component of Chrysalis Lab’s engagement was to convene key leaders willing to examine the data and frame opportunities for more structured, aligned actions to combat inequities in the County. Our findings did not indicate current readiness for this work, given the political dynamics identified in Section III: Cobb County Overview.

At The Power of One Cobb: A Community Conversation event held on October 15th, 97% of participants said they felt inspired to engage in work that addresses inclusion and equity in Cobb County and wanted to continue the dialogue.

06. RECOMMENDATIONS Continued

#Leveraging | Recommendation #7: Leverage the 2021 American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding to drive attention and direct resources to address inequity. ARPA funds provide Cobb County with a singular opportunity to invest in advancing equity, providing \$147.6 million¹⁰ in funding to “build a strong, resilient, and equitable recovery by making investments that support long-term growth and opportunity.”¹¹

In support of a strategic equity commitment and plan, ARPA funds can be the fuel that lays the foundation for a stronger, more resilient Cobb County in the future. Outcomes of ARPA funding, which will be disbursed over several years, should be included in the braintrust proposed in an earlier recommendation.

¹⁰ “American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA),” American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) | Cobb County Georgia (Cobb County Government), accessed December 26, 2022,

<https://www.cobbcounty.org/communications/info-center/american-rescue-plan-act-arpa>.

¹¹ “Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, October 17, 2022, <https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/coronavirus/assistance-for-state-local-and-tribal-governments/state-and-local-fiscal-recovery-funds>.

#Leveraging | Recommendation #8: Tap into the will and interest of Cobb residents to achieve greater equity together. A strong democracy requires active public participation and robust resident outreach and engagement. This ensures that public decisions and policies result in government processes, practices, and decisions that are more responsive to community priorities, avoid many unforeseen consequences, and create relationships that hold all sectors accountable.

In surveys and conversations, Cobb residents indicated an overwhelming desire to support efforts to drive greater equity and to do this work collectively. Creative avenues to leverage community interest include social media and communications channels, and learning and discussion forums (recommended earlier). Note that the operative words are “working together”, avoiding the silos that characterize existing forums.

06. RECOMMENDATIONS Continued



#LEADING

Equity leaders must be both courageous and vulnerable, nuanced in their approaches, focused on inclusion of authentic community voices, and able to see the systems at play. The equity movement must be “leaderful,” employing a democratic approach of many people enacting together.

Nearly 100% of key stakeholder interviewees and 76.8% of survey respondents indicated that they think there should be efforts to make Cobb County a community where all residents have equal access and opportunity. Given this response, Cobb’s history of leadership, which has primarily represented white, male-dominated culture, must transform, concurrent with the County’s rich and deep diversity and amidst a universal demand for greater equity and inclusion.

#Leading | Recommendation #9: Join voices with other Cobb leaders to ensure issues of equity and inclusion are centered in discussion. We spoke with many Cobb leaders, including CEOs and senior staff of corporations, nonprofit and academic institutions, faith communities and civic groups, who represent thoughtful and vocal proponents of greater equity in the county. Purposeful action to convene these leadership voices, potentially utilizing the convening and collective impact recommendations included in this report, would constitute a powerful force for progress.

“Our diversity is just not racial or geographic. It’s economic. We are one of Georgia’s most affluent counties, yet 70,000 of our residents live in poverty. The question is how Cobb can retain our strength as an affluent suburban county without leaving parts of the community behind.” -Cobb County Commission Chairwoman Lisa Cupid

06. RECOMMENDATIONS Continued

#Leading | Recommendation #10: Support the County's hiring of a Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and promote the inclusion of equity policies and practices across all county departments and operations.

The Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion will report to the County Manager and be responsible for creating and executing a strategic plan for diversity, equity, and inclusion for the County, its workforce, and its services to the community.

Adopting an enterprise-wide equity framework requires the will and expertise to change policies, habits, and cultures; and county staff must begin to “normalize” conversations, understanding, and expectations of commonly held definitions of implicit bias and institutional and structural inequity. This prepares them to operationalize and integrate equity principles into routine decision-making processes and develop and implement measurable actions to hold itself accountable.



According to Cobb County Manager, Dr. Jackie McMorris, county agencies and divisions have already begun to utilize an “equity lens” for areas under their purview. This is very encouraging. As this work advances, the County should be encouraged to commit to the deliberate, strategic inclusion of Cobb’s diverse racial and ethnic groups in their planning processes, commissions, and other efforts, prioritizing engagement of Hispanic, Latino, and immigrant communities.

06. RECOMMENDATIONS Continued

#Leading | Recommendation #11: Build coalitions between Cobb County government and Cobb cities to drive greater equity. Several respondents credited city municipalities in Cobb County with progress in identifying and addressing issues of equity and inclusion with and on behalf of residents. We recommend that opportunities be created for all Cobb elected leaders to share the impacts of inequity on their communities with one another and residents across the county; and brainstorm how they might make a positive impact.

During the period of discovery, four Cobb County communities voted to determine if they would become “independent” city governments within the county. Three of the four, East Cobb, Lost Mountain, and Vinings, which represented some of the wealthiest, and whitest, real estate in Atlanta’s western suburbs, voted decisively to remain a part of the county. Feedback through strategic conversations highlighted this outcome as a promising opportunity to invite these particular communities to a conversation about greater equity and inclusion.

Promising Practice: Racial Equity Core Team

The Government Alliance on Race & Equity (GARE) recommends municipalities establish a “Racial Equity Core Team” responsible for designing, coordinating, and organizing racial equity plans and activities across a government authority or institution that is committed to equitable systems change. The Core Team often serves as the engine for change, leading the way, pulling others along, chugging through sometimes challenging terrain, keeping things on track, moving a diverse community of people in a common direction, and building the movement and momentum to arrive at the destination of equitable outcomes.

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Cobb County Board of Commissioners

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- Commissioner Jerica Richardson, *District 2*
- Commissioner Monique Sheffield, *District 4*

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08. APPENDIX

APPENDIX SUMMARY

- A. Stakeholder Interview Results
- B. Community Input Survey Results
- C. UW Cobb Advisory Board Focus Group Overview & Themes
- D. Nonprofit Focus Group Overview & Themes
- E. Power of One Cobb
 - a. Flyer
 - b. Agenda
 - c. “I Like, I Wish, I Wonder” Notes
 - d. Event Evaluation
- F. County Equity Initiative Scan (National)
- G. Existing Equity-Centered Initiative Scan (Cobb County)