

# **OUR AMBASSADORS**

OREGON'S BIPOC FORMER ELECTEDS FOCUS GROUP REPORT



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## ABOUT OREGON FUTURES LAB



**The vision of the Oregon Futures Lab (OFL) is to uplift leaders of color to enter public service and govern effectively across Oregon.** OFL's mission is to create a BIPOC leadership pipeline with an emphasis on seeking, supporting and sustaining BIPOC community leaders and elected officials. We work closely with our community based organization partners to identify BIPOC leaders and cultivate them in community organizing, effective governance and power-building. Our work is successful when our leaders are in positions to leverage power for their local communities and Oregon.

# LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



At Oregon Futures Lab, we envision an Oregon where elected officials come from all communities — not just communities with privilege and wealth. But in a state and a country with such a deep history of exclusionary laws and practices targeting BIPOC communities, it's clear that we need more than changes around the edges to make this vision a reality. We need to transform the systems that have excluded our BIPOC community from having a seat at the table for so long.

**We embarked on this project with a simple goal: to better understand the barriers faced by BIPOC leaders so that we can create new systems to equip, protect and support future leaders.** Former BIPOC elected officials bring a unique perspective on leadership because they are directly involved in their local communities, have an established local community and believe in community engagement and governance. We chose to interview former BIPOC elected officials because we believe that shedding light on the lived experiences of BIPOC elected officials is a critical step towards creating an inclusive and empowering environment that ensures that all future BIPOC leaders can thrive. Former BIPOC elected officials serve as the ambassadors for future BIPOC leaders.



*I ran for office because I believe in an Oregon where Black, Indigenous, communities of color have the rights, resources and recognition needed to build our futures.*



**- Current School Board Member**

The energy, passion and momentum is there. Our findings show that there is a wave of new leaders who have the courage, determination and grit to run – but they are not always equipped with the tools and support they need to take on the formidable systemic and structural barriers within the electoral and governance systems.

Put simply, our current systems are not built for BIPOC leaders to succeed and the lack of safety, time, compensation and emotional support has discouraged leaders from running for re-election. Across the state, BIPOC leaders are stepping down to heal after turbulent and isolating experiences in office.



“ I wasn't prepared for the Proud Boys to hit me with a US Flag, or put my partner's information out there, or let me know they knew where I lived. What made it more challenging for me was that when I reported this to city officials, I was told if there was no clear threat, there was nothing the city could do to protect me and my family. It was clear the city I was supporting didn't have the systems or consciousness to support me. ”

**- Former City Council**

By recognizing and addressing the unique challenges faced by BIPOC elected officials, we have an opportunity to create a more reflective democracy across Oregon. We hope you'll find a way to incorporate these findings into your approach and services. These are not just wins and losses, these are first and foremost people on their own leadership journeys. I look forward to working together to create a more equitable and reflective democracy in Oregon and for my children.

**Erin Kothari**  
Executive Director

# INTRODUCTION

With the generous support of the [The Cake Sherwood Fund of Oregon Community Foundation and Ann J. and William Swindells Fund of Oregon Community Foundation](#), OFL embarked on a mission to host focus groups with former elected officials to further understand their experiences, observations and takeaways from their endeavors in office. OFL believes in the importance of gaining perspective about the realities of public service to better equip the leaders of tomorrow.

## The goals of our focus groups were to:

- 1. Build** a space for BIPOC leaders to gather, create community and share experiences.
- 2. Develop** a better understanding of gaps in resources, capital and infrastructure to support our BIPOC leaders across the state.
- 3. Allow** OFL to stay responsive to the political ecosystem and economic experiences of participants of different elected positions, ethnicities and localities across Oregon.
- 4. Identify** opportunities to support the rising demand for community care and wellness support/services in political spaces.
- 5. Create** a report that captures themes and recommendations to align current and future OFL programs to be trauma-informed and culturally-responsive support programs.

# ABOUT THE FOCUS GROUPS

In October 2022, OFL hosted two 1.5-hour virtual focus groups with a total of nine participants who had experience serving as elected officials in Oregon. Their elected positions varied from school board to confederated tribes council to county-level leadership and represented six different counties and sovereign nations across the state. All participants identified as BIPOC and were speaking from their own personal experiences. Participants were asked a series of questions (see Appendix) in a “hot seat” format. Participants were offered a \$100 honorarium for their time.

# KEY FINDINGS

## 1. Participants felt they were not adequately informed when they began their leadership career and entered into governance.

Participants expressed a need for additional training and support services in order to deepen awareness of the political processes, governance systems and coaching around change management with an emphasis that change is gradual and collaborative to their success.

## 2. Participants felt that BIPOC staffers are vital to their success and that hiring BIPOC staffers is challenging.

There are many challenges to recruiting and retaining BIPOC staffers. Public service is not a traditional career path in many BIPOC communities due to the low and often nonexistent pay, increasing demands of public office, lack of support, and lack of professional development opportunities.

*Before holding office, I didn't understand structures of power and how governance works. It was a struggle finding BIPOC staffers, being the only BIPOC person or culturally specific person in a space, made it hard to feel supported and ask for help.*

- **Former County Commissioner**

## 3. Participants emphasized that the public safety and mental health of BIPOC candidates, elected and former elected officials needs to be a greater priority.

With the internet, information about leaders' daily whereabouts are easy to find, leading to escalating threats on leaders and their families. Moreover, candidates for public office in Oregon are required to have their home addresses available as public information.

*I chose to run, they didn't. My family and I got security cameras to monitor our home because we did not feel safe.*

- **Former School Board Member**

**4. Participants felt that they did not receive transparent information about the true costs (physical, intellectual, emotional, social and financial) associated with public leadership.**

**Figure 1. The Cost of Running**

<p><b>Physical Cost</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public safety needs to be considered; public records hold a lot of personal information and are used to dox public officials. Doxxing is when private or identifying information is published on the internet typically with malicious intent. Doxxing is not an uncommon occurrence and many of our former electeds have been a target of it.</li> <li>• Violence and threats are often inflicted on the leaders and their families.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Intellectual Cost</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Political structures and the campaign process are not transparent.</li> <li>• Working in systems and with people who are deliberately working against a shared mission of a reflective democracy can be extremely challenging.</li> <li>• Fatigue and burnout are typical. It can be challenging to ask for help as a public leader because of cultural stigma, a perception that leaders should not ask for help and difficulty in finding care within one's own community.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Emotional Cost</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional labor is constantly required and emotional support is often limited or nonexistent. Some political experiences can be traumatic. For example, BIPOC leaders receive death threats at home and are the targets of harassment in public meetings.</li> <li>• Time and energy is diverted from the leader so they have limited capacity for their other critical responsibilities, such as family responsibilities and self-care. Some people's lived experiences make it harder to take on this cost.</li> <li>• After passionately advocating, having to compromise on the solution to an issue that affects their communities can feel disappointing.</li> <li>• Progress is hard, not linear, incremental and requires making compromises. BIPOC leaders can feel ineffective when they cannot achieve their goals and have to deal with the inequity and injustice deeply rooted in the political systems.</li> <li>• The illusion of running for office is wholly different from the actuality of holding office.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Social Cost</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social capital is lacking; allied people/organizations might be challenging to collaborate with and being BIPOC/underrepresented first and/or only person in a space makes it hard to feel supported.</li> <li>• It can be isolating because it is a struggle to find BIPOC staffers and peers with shared experiences.</li> <li>• Frequently, leaders' backgrounds are exposed, scrutinized and used to discredit. Leaders are constantly in the public eye and held to a higher standard.</li> <li>• Community members can and do lash out with abusive tactics (ex: harassment, assault, libelous signage, smear campaigns) against elected officials and their families (specific identities are more likely to be targeted).</li> <li>• Their lived experiences are why they were wanted in office and yet those same lived experiences were used as a means to attack them while holding office.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Financial Cost</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial security is often a consideration. Campaigns have significant financial costs and many public offices do not pay well (if at all).</li> <li>• The lack of compensation and low pay for certain offices and the demanding nature of public service presents a formidable challenge for elected officials who also hold day jobs and have familial responsibilities.</li> </ul>



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## HATS (Honor - Apply - Transform - Share)

### **Honor our outgoing electeds by creating opportunities for engagement and knowledge sharing across former and current electeds.**

- Create an alumni network and mentorship program for outgoing electeds.
- Support the creation and funding of professional development opportunities about governance and movement power-building for leaders across the state.

### **Apply trauma-informed care principles to leadership approach, organizational design and public governance structures.**

- Build and update individual, governmental and organizational policies and procedures with a [trauma-informed care](#) lens.
- Make long-term commitments to fund, design and implement leadership development opportunities.

### **Transform government structures to support our BIPOC leadership pipeline from organizers to electeds.**

- Address and organize around the root causes of racial injustice.
- Advocate for fair compensation in currently unpaid and low-paying public service positions.
- Lead on strategies, legislation and resources to address leaders' safety concerns that protect them and their families.
- Champion a healthy and thriving BIPOC leadership pipeline centered around building community power by investing in people and organizational infrastructure.

### **Share resources specifically for BIPOC electeds and community leaders.**

- Provide our leaders with a deeper understanding of what public service, governance stewardship and holding office entails through training and other resources.
  - Support programming that creates ecosystems of informal and formal culturally responsive support for our leaders.
  - Invest in programs and networks that foster resiliency skills.
  - Share fundraising tactics, leadership training, community outreach and Get Out The Vote (GOTV) strategies.

- Be honest with BIPOC candidates and leaders about the realities and opportunities of public service in Oregon.
  - Present honest information about how our identities may be targeted.
  - Create structures and mechanisms to prevent and heal from common issues many BIPOC electeds and local leaders face.
- Be mindful of setting BIPOC electeds up for success and ensure commitment to the individual beyond an election outcome.

**We all have different HATS (Honor - Apply - Transform - Share) to wear.  
Let's do our part to support our local leaders!**



# APPENDIX: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

## General

- What inspired you to run? What made holding office meaningful? (History/narrative focus)
- Why are you no longer in office?
- What are the considerations for someone considering running for office?

## Structural (centering self - community, time and place in life, financial, composition of peers)

- What leadership skills or strategies did you use (or wish you used!) to care for yourself?
- How has your family/community been impacted by your service?

## Systemic (beyond self - redistricting, racism, harassment, institutional oppression)

- What was your relationship like with your peers?
- How can we build resilience within ourselves, our campaigns, our leadership and our communities?
- What embodied skills or training could OFL offer to better align with our stated mission?

## Institutional barriers (fail-safe systems, structural support, formal and informal networks)

- What support would have been helpful in running for or staying in office (i.e: leadership skills and governance strategies)?
- What skills or training could OFL offer to build a BIPOC leadership pipeline in Oregon?
- In your experience, how has the political system fallen short? How has that shaped you and your community?

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [‘I Don’t Want to Die for It’: School Board Members Face Rising Threats](#)
- [Former Bend city councilor says transphobic, racist bullying led to resignation](#)
- [Newberg Schools Board Director Ines Peña Resigns From Office](#)
- [Coefield resigns from Newberg City Council](#)
- [When a man with a pistol shows up outside a Congresswoman’s House](#)
- [Laural O’Rourke resigns from 4J school board, alleges ongoing racism](#)
- [David Douglas School Board candidate the target of racial slur](#)

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