



Members of Renton's Mayor's Inclusion Task Force (from left): Violet Aesquivel, Benita Horn, Dr. Linda Smith, Caleb Mayberry, Preeti Shridhar, Balwant Singh, Hamdi Abdulle

MAJORITY REPORT

In Renton, serving diverse communities keeps city government relevant.

PASCO, OF COURSE, ISN'T ALONE in its quest to court a diversifying population for leadership positions in local government. In Renton, a westside majority-minority city that's grown by 150 percent in the past three decades (from 41,688 residents in 1990 to 104,100 in 2018), a dedicated Mayor's Inclusion Task Force has been a part of the fabric of local government since 2008. That's not surprising, given that Renton's nonwhite population has expanded by over 165 percent in the past 20 years, a trend that's driven by growth in tech jobs in nearby Seattle and at companies like Kaiser Permanente and Boeing's Commercial Airplanes Division, which are headquartered within the city.

"There is no doubt we are one of the fastest-growing minority cities in the country," says Renton Deputy Public Affairs Administrator Preeti Shridhar, who notes that 85 different languages are spoken by students in the city's school district. Renton's Mayor's Inclusion Task Force—originally called the Community Liaison Group—was formed in the wake of the Hanukkah Eve windstorm of 2006 that devastated western Washington and left 14 dead. In Renton, some residents in minority communities brought barbecues and propane heaters inside their homes to stay warm during the widespread power outages that followed the storm, resulting in two cases of carbon monoxide poisoning. To Shridhar, that was unacceptable.

"Communication was key, and that was kind of an eye-opening thing: that we really needed to have better ways to reach out to our communities," she says. Vowing to do more than just translate and distribute safety information pamphlets that might never get read, she collaborated with the city's emergency management department, brought an AmeriCorps volunteer on board, and launched the Community Liaison Group.

Shridhar, who came to the US from her native India in the mid-1980s and has been involved in municipal management in King County for the past 25 years, has helmed the Mayor's Inclusion

Task Force since its inception. While the group may have been inspired by shortcomings in the city's response to a natural disaster, its mission has evolved into a more introspective evaluation of how effectively the city interacts with its quickly growing and changing population. "How do you make sure that we as government are relevant and meeting the needs of the communities who are now calling Renton home?" Shridhar asks. "That was the launch point."

More than a decade later, the Mayor's Inclusion Task Force contains various subgroups led by one of more than 30 Task Force members representing 14 different demographics, ranging from Sikhs to seniors. She points to a range of successes—from free blood sugar and blood pressure screenings held at the city's various places of worship to the Renton Police Department's recent hiring of a Vietnamese patrol officer—as examples, small and large, of where the task force has influenced local decision making.

King County, which is becoming increasingly ethnically and racially diverse (248,000 of the 451,000 residents who moved to the area between 2000 and 2017 are foreign-born), has been following Renton's example. "We formed a group with other city leaders that are doing similar things called Governing for Regional Equity and Inclusion, and we actually had our first conference last year," says Shridhar. "We have monthly meetings to share our progress on different topics."

The community's embrace of the Mayor's Inclusion Task Force is on display every September at the Renton Multicultural Festival, which last year was awarded a Certificate of Excellence from the Puget Sound Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America. The event celebrates the city's diversity with cultural performances—and subtly highlights the continued importance of city leaders connecting with all of Renton's cultural groups.

"I'm from an immigrant community," says Shridhar. "So there's this understanding of, on the one hand, wanting to hold on to my cultural roots, and at the same time wanting to belong."