



Washington State

OFFICE OF EQUITY

Insurance Building P.O. Box 43113



Olympia, Washington 98504 - 3113

The Office of Equity respects the distinct legal and political status of sovereign tribal nations while also recognizing that equitable access to state services for all American Indian/Alaska Native and Indigenous people, including those not directly governed by a tribe, requires intentional policy work. Ensuring that state agencies do not conflate EQUITY efforts with Tribal Sovereignty is crucial to maintaining the integrity of tribal governance while improving outcomes for Native communities in all settings.

The Office of Equity's role is not to dictate tribal policies but to ensure that state agencies operate in good faith, with accountability, and in accordance with the law when working with tribes, AI/AN communities, and Indigenous people.

What does “equity” mean in Washington State?

In Washington state, equity means creating access to opportunity and eliminating barriers so that all people can have the opportunity, through hard work *and* access, to thrive and flourish.

Strengthening Tribal Sovereignty and Advancing Equity:

- How does the Office of Equity approach Tribal Sovereignty?
 - The Office of Equity acknowledges Tribal Sovereignty as an inherent and distinct authority held by federally recognized tribes. Our role is to uphold, not supplant, tribal governance by ensuring that state agencies engage in meaningful consultation and uphold government-to-government relationships. While we support fair and just practices across systems, we do not dictate tribal policies or decision-making processes. Instead, we work to reinforce state agencies' responsibilities to honor tribal sovereignty.
- What is the difference and overlap between Tribal Sovereignty and EQUITY?
 - Tribal Sovereignty refers to the inherent authority of federally recognized tribes to govern themselves, determine citizenship standards, manage their lands and resources, and engage in nation-to-nation relationships. It is a legal and political status, grounded in treaties, federal law, and court rulings. Tribal governments exercise this sovereignty through self-determined governance, economic development, law enforcement, and control over cultural and natural resources.
 - EQUITY initiatives, in contrast, focus on addressing systemic barriers to inclusion and access for historically marginalized groups within institutions. While efforts to increase fairness in state systems can align with tribal interests, they do not alter or replace the foundational legal and political status of sovereign tribal nations.
 - While these are distinct concepts, there can be areas of overlap, particularly when supporting tribal citizens who live off-reservation, Native-led nonprofits, and individuals who may be descendants or non-enrolled in their home nations.

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- How does the Office of Equity ensure it does not supplant Tribal Authority?
 - EQUITY ensures that its efforts enhance, rather than override, Tribal Governance by:
 - Advocating for tribally led decision-making processes
 - Encouraging state agencies enterprise-wide to engage in consultation and coordination early and often, with an emphasis on going to where the people are, place-based efforts
 - Recognizing that equity measures cannot redefine or diminish sovereignty
 - Supporting tribal priorities as identified by tribes themselves rather than imposing external frameworks
- The Office of Equity's Commitment to Tribal Nations
 - The Office of Equity actively supports Tribal Sovereignty through the following initiatives:
 - Advocating for Tribal Priorities – Using the Office's platform to champion issues important to tribal communities, from land rights to educational opportunities
 - Prioritizing Tribal Needs and Perspectives – Implementing policies that center tribal voices and reflect their self-determined priorities
 - Promoting Cultural Competence – Encouraging state employees to deepen their understanding of tribal cultures, histories, and governance structures
 - Facilitating Meaningful Tribal Consultation – Establishing and reinforcing consultation processes that ensure tribal voices shape policy outcomes
 - Supporting Tribal Initiatives and Projects – Providing resources and collaboration opportunities for tribal-led initiatives
 - Addressing Disparities – Identifying and dismantling systemic barriers that disproportionately impact tribal communities
 - Highlighting Successes – Celebrating and amplifying tribal-led successes to shift the narrative from deficit-based to strengths-based
 - Policy Alignment – Ensuring state policies respect tribal sovereignty and align with federal law
 - Accountability – Maintaining transparency and measurable benchmarks to ensure state agencies uphold their commitments to tribal nations
- Why Tribes and the Office of Equity?
 - Equity was established to identify and remove barriers that prevent Washingtonians from accessing services, opportunities, and resources within state government. This

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includes ensuring that state agencies uphold their legal and ethical obligations to federally recognized tribes.

- Washington State has clear statutory commitments to tribal nations, particularly through:
 - RCW 43.06D – Office of Equity
 - This law mandates that state agencies advance principles of equity by identifying systemic barriers and improving access to state services. While it applies broadly to historically marginalized communities, it does not supersede or alter Tribal Sovereignty. Instead, it provides a framework to ensure that state agencies do not create or reinforce inequities when engaging with tribal nations, AI/AN communities, and Indigenous people.
 - RCW 43.376 – Government-to-Government Relationship with Indian Tribes
 - This statute outlines Washington State’s obligations to uphold government-to-government relationships with tribes, ensuring meaningful consultation and collaboration. It requires state agencies to respect Tribal Sovereignty, engage in consultation before implementing policies that impact tribes, designate a tribal liaison, and maintain accountability in tribal relations.
- Together, these laws guide the Office of Equity in ensuring that:
 - State agencies uphold Tribal Sovereignty and treaty obligations
 - Government-to-government consultation is meaningful and authentic
 - Tribal voices and priorities are centered in state policy decisions
 - State agencies do not conflate EQUITY efforts with sovereign tribal governance

Tribal Data Sovereignty and Digital Equity:

- How does the Office of Equity support Tribal Data Sovereignty and Digital Equity?
 - Tribal nations have the right to govern their own data, just as they do their lands, resources, and governance structures. Tribal Data Sovereignty ensures that data about Native peoples, lands, and governance is collected, stored, and used in ways that align with tribal laws, values, cultural protocols, and priorities. The Office of Equity recognizes that data is a sovereign resource and that equitable access to digital infrastructure is critical for tribal communities to exercise self-determination.
 - The Office of Equity supports Tribal Data Sovereignty and Digital Equity by:





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- Advocating for Tribal Data Governance – Advocating for state agencies to honor tribal authority over data and require tribal consent in data-sharing agreements
- Expanding Digital Access – Supporting broadband expansion and digital inclusion efforts to improve connectivity in tribal communities
- Aligning State Policies with Tribal Sovereignty – Encouraging state agencies to adopt Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles when working with tribes
- Ensuring Ethical and Responsible Data Practices – Promoting ethical data use and preventing the misuse of tribal data by external entities

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