

Meet Mahi



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Mahlet Zeru

Equity and Social Justice Manager

My name is Mahlet Zeru, and you may call me Mahi. I am the Equity and Social Justice Manager at the Washington State Medical Commission (WMC). My position supports the WMC's mission by ensuring that equity, diversity, inclusion and social justice are integrated into policies, processes, programs and decisions that protect and improve the health of people in Washington State, particularly those that are disproportionately impacted and historically marginalized. In this role, few of my goals, as the Equity and Social Justice Manager, are to coordinate and implement the work of the WMC's workgroups on Healthcare Equity and Healthcare Disparities, identify healthcare disparities and support the reduction of these disparities, and integrate community engagement within program efforts. Ultimately, I strive to lead transformational changes within WMC through practices, policies and culture to advance equity, diversity, inclusion and cultural humility by delving deeper into healthcare disparities and designing solution-oriented process improvements and best practices.

I am thrilled to begin this work as I am passionate about health equity and social justice and am ready to take on the challenges this new recognition brings forward. Prior to 2020 the focus on health equity and social justice was merely an after-thought. However, 2020 is a pivotal moment will be remembered as the year George Floyd lost his life to police brutality which then ignited protests across the country to condemn police violence and systematic racism. Black Lives Matter protests brought injustice to the forefront of American conscience which has long been a Black American reality. Protests intensified and leaders across the country denounced racism and inequality; vowed to make institutional changes to hold public employees accountable. Recognizing the numerous documented healthcare disparities that occur in the context of broader inequality, city and state health departments raced to declare racism a public health emergency. These declarations were important first steps in the movement to advance racial equity and social justice. This recognition in Washington State led to the allocation of resources, inclusion in strategic planning, creation of coalitions, formations of partnerships, and the creation of this position.

Providers can capitalize on the current nationwide momentum and continue to improve patient health outcomes. We can start by raising awareness and normalizing conversations around race/racism and other systems of oppression and the ways in which they relate to health outcomes and institutional practices. Providers

can discuss the role of implicit bias in medicine and how it contributes to premature mortality and morbidity. These outcomes and impacts are at the center of our response to COVID-19 as marginalized populations face greater healthcare disparities and vaccine hesitancy is highest. For the COVID-19 response at the Washington State Department of Health, I spent the last 16 months on the Department of Health incident management team focused on the testing branch, conducting needs assessments to determine equitable distribution of resources when testing specimen collection kits and viral transport mediums were scarce. I also created a GIS based Covid-19 Testing APP which is a new decision-making tool to guide advance planning in COVID-19 testing and prevention. The APP aids Local Health Jurisdictions and Tribal Nations to Identify hot spots that need focused intervention and pinpoint areas of the state where there is more need and less access/ or uptake of testing to target interventions. implemented the use of GIS to assist Local Health Jurisdictions and Tribal Nations determine areas of high vulnerability.

I look forward to our journey together in advancing and strengthening health equity and social justice at WMC.



More Facts About Me

- Current home: Seattle, WA
- Currently Reading: *While Justice Sleeps* by Stacey Abrams
- Favorite Achievement: Publishing my first children's book- *Menelik and Taytu Won!*
- What Inspires Me: My Ethiopian heritage that values harmony with nature, family, higher education, and collective achievement.
- Favorite TV show: *Wild Kratts, Nature Cat and Peppa Pig* (TV shows limited by my 5-year-old)
- Favorite city: Rio de Janeiro – Rio has everything- world famous beaches (Copacabana and Ipanema), Food, Carnival