

COLUMBUSCEO

Business

Franklin County creates equity and inclusion office

By Rebecca Walters

Posted Oct 19, 2020 at 9:40 AM

Franklin County Board of Commissioners creates new position to promote equitable access to opportunity to residents and businesses.

In an effort to promote equitable access to opportunity throughout Franklin County, the commissioners' office has tapped Keena Smith to fill the newly created position of chief economic equity and inclusion officer.

In her new role, Smith, who was formerly the deputy county administrator, will develop policies for the commissioners to ensure pathways to success are equally accessible by all Franklin County's residents, including through the county's general services and purchasing departments. She will also serve as the commissioners' liaison with partner organizations such as Forward Cities and the Franklin County Equity Alliance, and create a diversity, equity and inclusion dashboard with defined measures of success, targets and incremental short- and long-term goals.

Columbus CEO asked Smith about a variety of topics. Here's what she had to say.

As you step into your new position, what is your vision for managing and moving the organization forward in an impactful way?

I think my boss, Franklin County Administrator Ken Wilson's, email signature aptly sums up my vision: "The inseparable twin of racial injustice is economic injustice." The Franklin County Board of Commissioners has established itself as a bold and aggressive leader in moving the needle on racial justice, creating a more racially equitable and just county for "Every Resident, Every Day."

With the Poverty Blueprint as our north star, COVID-19 as our backdrop and a growing acknowledgement that systemic racism has long economically injured people of color, working to improve economic equity is a natural next step.

Work that erases the stubborn legacy of enslavement, the 13th Amendment, Jim Crow, redlining, bias in access to capital, wage disparities and more. The Franklin County Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion will collaborate with internal and external stakeholders to advance transformative system change that creates an inclusive economy and greater shared prosperity.

Stay up to date with the region's dynamic business scene.
Subscribe to *Columbus CEO's* weekly newsletter.

We already started this work by collaborating with One Columbus and Columbus Urban League to launch a new public/private economic development partnership called the Franklin County Business Growth and Equity Alliance. The alliance is a platform for collective community action to break down barriers and resolve disparities that prevent parity and scaling for black-owned businesses and other minority businesses. For our region to continue to grow, we are coming together to cultivate and fertilize an environment where small and minority businesses can survive the pandemic and thrive in the mainstream marketplace beyond it. Small business success is an important element in diminishing the racial wealth gap and ensuring the vibrancy of our neighborhoods through robust job creation—it's the backbone of our economy. Internally, we will sharpen the process tools we use to measure and improve utilization of small and emerging business enterprises in county procurement.

What attracted you to this newly created position?

When I was about 14 years old, I read that African American women were the lowest rung of the socio-economic ladder in America. That was shocking to me. I was emotional about it. I took it personally and have been called to economic development, economic empowerment and what we now call equity and inclusion. So, this work is really a culmination of my experiences. In addition, I love breaking new ground, innovating. This opportunity is truly a blessing.

How will you identify and measure short- and long-term goals in terms of promoting equitable access to opportunity throughout the county?

First, I'm going to listen and learn. This position is the first of its kind at the county, and we have a lot of customers who may not even know how we can help. There are solutions that can help us journey together and collectively improve our outcomes. But this is the type of work where one size does not fit all. Our approach and tools will be dynamic, changing with need. Some will want to go fast, some slower, we will figure out the cadence together.

In light of nationwide and international protests against systemic racism and police brutality, many organizations are ramping up their diversity and inclusion efforts. How do you see this playing out five to 10 years from now, and what specifically do you think needs immediate attention within Franklin County government?

DEI professionals are some of the most courageous people you'll ever meet. Many that I know have been working in the trenches for years, with little to no recognition, especially those who work in the economic inclusion/supplier diversity space. This work is not new!

What I know for sure is that we now have a window to advance our work in new ways. Our work will have more sustainable impact when we raise our work to system level. Right now, we have an opportunity to solidify new partnerships that can result in important policy changes. For example, this week I attended the International Economic Development Council (IEDC) virtual annual conference alongside the Franklin County Economic Development and Planning team. Kenny McDonald, CEO of One Columbus, is the current resident of IEDC. Under his leadership, economic equity and inclusion was centered at the conference. This is being done not to merely increase membership but to illuminate solutions to challenges and issues in new ways, informed through an equity and inclusion lens. They are making space for economic inclusion in economic development, and that will result in more inclusive economies and more equitable development, including resolving place-based issues like more equitable zoning, more equitable real estate development incentives for smaller developers and ending displacement caused by gentrification that often results in loss of generational wealth opportunity.

Most immediately, we will continue to focus on ensuring our small, black, diverse and emerging businesses survive the pandemic. The board of commissioners continues to meet this historic moment by prioritizing resources that support anti-racist efforts and the continued operation of our most vulnerable businesses. So far, the commissioners have provided more than \$5 million dollars in business pandemic aid including the Franklin County Equity Fund administered by the Columbus Urban League as a first initiative of the Equity Alliance. Their efforts have awarded operation-sustaining support to more than 200 businesses thus far. And of course, this work will involve completing the planning and funding of the Equity Alliance, including the development of Franklin County Capital Inc., a new CDFI that will increase capital options for Black and other minority business owners in Franklin County.

What's one thing people at work would be surprised to know about you?

I was once a pretty good radio DJ in Cincinnati and in Columbus.

If you weren't in a leadership position with your current company/organization, what would else would you like to do? Or was there a different career path that you ever considered?

I would definitely own my own business, although I'm unsure of the industry or sector.

Describe a point in your career where you felt stifled, bored, angry or frustrated, and what did you do about it?

I've enjoyed my career in local government. Challenges come and go, but I view the challenges as an opportunity to grow. I am always trying to improve my skill set, expand my network, deepen my friendships, grow my knowledge base and help more people. Franklin County is tackling some wicked problems on behalf of our residents. And when you see people who have been held back begin to gain economic growth that is the reward unlike any other. It's very satisfying.

Who or what inspires you in life, and why? How does this inspiration affect life choices—personal and professional?

I am inspired by my mom and my children. My mom grew up in the Jim Crow era, marched for civil rights in the 1960s, worked for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and at 61 marched in the civil unrest after the Cincinnati race riots of 2001. When I was a young girl, she gave me books to read on Harriet Tubman, Phyllis Wheatly, Mary McCleod Bethune and more heroic African American women. She taught me to be proud of who and what I am, even when the world is unkind at best and racist at worst.

I am also inspired by my children. Becoming medical doctors is a long, tough road. They have each had their ups and downs along their journey, which is not yet over, but they've preserved and held fast to their God-given dreams. That inspires me immensely. I live out their influence and try to give voice to it—personally and professionally—on a daily basis.

What was your first job, and how old were you?

I was an order girl at McDonald's. Back then when you visited McDonald's, you first gave and paid for your order at the order counter. We used a microphone to call out the order to the counter team across the store who put the order together. I was 15 with a work permit—economically empowered!