

## For RACIAL EQUITY BUDGET TOOL

### Strategic Focus Area 1: Create Intentional Inclusion

1) What activities are you doing to attract and retain a diverse and inclusive workforce in your department? What are the associated costs of these activities?

Working in partnership with the Department of Human Resources, Combined Courts work to post job openings in various online platforms, to host recruiting events in accessible environments (e.g. in-person hiring fair), and to use social media to expand awareness of department openings. All associated expenditures would be charged to Human Resources.

Additionally, Combined Courts work to engage internal stakeholders with meaningful, community-centric work; to ensure an inclusive and culturally competent managerial philosophy that respects all employees; and, to support all employees in professional development opportunities that support career advancement within the department and the County. The management staff take care to encourage employees from backgrounds that have been historically excluded from leadership to develop leadership skills and apply for open positions. The department's workforce is highly representative of Milwaukee County's diverse population.

2) How do you use professional development and advancement opportunities to promote equity in your department's workforce? What resources are used to support these opportunities for professional development and advancement?

All Combined Courts employees are encouraged to pursue career advancement within the department, including receiving training in all functional areas of their job classification. The Senior Administrator leadership role is responsible for professional development services including training, staff mentorship, and performance management. Through the office's training program, employees may be paired with more experienced employees in a mentoring relationship. New leaders in the department receive supervision and training from experienced managers who can assist in skill development and problem solving.

The Combined Courts leadership team is highly reflective of Milwaukee County's diverse population. Included within the Clerk of Circuit Court's office is one elected official, three appointed leadership positions, six department leaders, and five assistant department

leaders. Of these 15 roles, 10 are held by people of color and 11 of the leaders identify as women.

3) Our employees can be a great resources for innovation and knowing what is working well and what needs work. Have you engaged a diverse group of frontline employees to inform decisions about your proposed budget changes? If yes, how was input solicited, who was involved, and what were the results?

The Clerk of Circuit Courts leadership team routinely engages with staff to inquire about their perspectives of daily operations, administrative priorities, and some office policies. Informal conversations about departmental operations are important methods to gain insight into staff priorities. At this time, no additional suggestions were received that would result in major programmatic and budgetary changes.

4) Are you tracking contracts with minority and women-owned business? If yes, please share percentages of each. If no, why not?

The Clerk of Circuit Courts monitors this information regarding the current two entities with which the office contracts. At present, one is a non-profit organization led by a female Executive Director, one is a government entity led by a woman of color.

## **Strategic Focus Area 2: Bridge the Gap**

5) How and when have service users, in diverse and inclusive communities, and other key stakeholders been engaged to inform decisions about changes in funding levels for services provide in your requested budget (who was involved, what was the forum, what were the results)?

The Clerk of Circuit Court's office continues to increase its presence and engagement throughout Milwaukee County. Additional resources have been included to allow the department to participate in additional community events .

6) Describe ways in which racial and economic data were used to prioritize resource distribution. (Data can include sources found in the resources section of this tool, department collected data, or any other relevant data from other sources.)

a. Please provide specific examples of data and how that influenced decision making.

Combined Courts are committed to identifying, addressing, and building beyond the racial disparities plaguing the justice system as a whole. Each year, court leadership and personnel across multiple departments participate in a Racial Equity Conference looking at issues and outcomes in the criminal justice system. This event provides a structure in which to consider policy and procedural changes that would make an impact upon procedural justice and access to the court system. In 2024, this event was focused on mental health in those who charged with and convicted of criminal law violations.

Combined Courts have also established a data analysis group who examine statistics and trends in the criminal justice system. Additionally, Combine Courts are active members in the Milwaukee County Community Justice Council whose work focuses on equity and access in the criminal justice system.

b. **NEW QUESTION:** Are there gaps in the data that need to be addressed to better understand disparities in equity?

Gathering demographic data for parties in court cases is difficult because the internal court records system (commonly known as CCAP) is not a database able to run a variety of reports, but rather is a records management system designed to organize the many documents filed in a court case. Any updates or changes to this system are directed by the Office of the Director of State Courts and are not functions to be changed at the County level. If a different system was possible, we could gather information, for example, on the number of people who are self-represented, the number of people who requested and received fee waivers, the various home zip-codes of parties, and more. As it stands, the Clerk of Circuit Court can glean some of this data based on those self-represented people served at the Milwaukee Justice Center, but that is an incomplete picture of the whole system. (For more information on the Milwaukee Justice Center, see question 7).

7) How does your budget reflect efforts to work across departments to break down silos to maximize access to quality of services offered? How does this help us achieve the vision of achieving equity and health [*what a horribly constructed sentence!*] ?

One of the most important Clerk of Circuit Court's collaborations is for the Milwaukee Justice Center ("the MJC"), the civil legal aid self-help center in the Courthouse serving our Milwaukee County neighbors who are unable to afford an attorney for their civil issue and yet who are ineligible for free legal representation. Other private funding is provided by the Milwaukee Bar Association and Marquette University Law School.

Those receiving help at the MJC are primarily people of color and a majority are women who have 2-3 minor children and all are people who are struggling regularly with economic and housing insecurity. The work of the MJC is to help self-represented people to overcome barriers to accessing the court system. Each year between, thousands of people receiving direct assistance, knowledge, and referral information about their civil legal issue, thus helping to promote better access to justice in Milwaukee County.

Additionally, Combined Courts participates in the Milwaukee Community Justice Counsel ("the CJC") whose focus is to improve the quality of services in the criminal justice system and whose goals are influential in the development of court activities. Other partners in the CJC include the County Executive's Office, the County Board of Supervisors, Milwaukee County Corporation Council, the Mayor's Office, the United States Attorney for the Eastern District, the City of Milwaukee Police Chief, the District Attorney's Office, the State Public Defender's Office, the Milwaukee County Sheriff, State Department of Corrections, Milwaukee Community Reintegration Center, Milwaukee Homicide Review Commission, and City of Milwaukee Municipal Court.

8) What are the expected benefits and potential unintended consequences to disadvantaged communities of your proposed budget changes?

There are no significant budget changes at this time. Therefore, no negative or unintended consequences are anticipated for the citizens of Milwaukee County as a whole.

a. What analysis did you do to determine the expected benefits and potential unintended consequences?

N/A

b. What will your department do to mitigate unintended consequences resulting from your proposed budget changes?

N/A

c. **NEW QUESTION:** What are the demographic impacts of any fines and fees assessed by your department? Are there disproportionate impacts on any particular groups?

As part of the general court process, parties who do not prevail in their court case may be assessed court costs (e.g. filing fees, services fees) and attorney fees. These are not assessed by the Clerk of Circuit Court, but are collected by the office.

As noted above, the limitation in the CCAP record management system does not allow for specific reports on racial identity of parties. However, as Milwaukee generally follows the national trends, there are significant racial disparities in convictions, imprisonment, and fines in criminal cases. And, on the civil justice side, many more people of color are unable to afford to hire a lawyer and are more likely to experience adverse outcomes in their cases, which may lead to a higher number of money judgments or other financial consequences for people of color in Milwaukee county.

### **Strategic Focus Area 3: Invest in Equity**

9. If your department were to receive some additional funding for addressing racial equity, what specific strategic plan priorities would you address, what would be the project/activity and intended outcome, and how much would it cost?

If additional funds were available to the Clerk of Circuit Court, they would be used to improve access to justice for Milwaukee County court users. For example, the funding would go to offset growing costs for certified interpreters who can translate simultaneously during a hearing. Once again, some of the interpreters used by the county have increased their fees and, in many cases, courts have no other options but these interpreters.

10) What is your department doing to dismantle barriers to diverse and inclusive communities, including meeting multilingual needs and other communication or accessibility barriers?

Combined Courts is committed to creating change that works to dismantle barriers to access to justice.

First, at the time of the AmeriCorps program closure in April, the Clerk of Circuit Court noted the importance of someone staffing the Ground Floor information desk full-time. The office worked to identify the availability of an unfilled clerical specialist role that could be assigned as a full-time employee at that desk. The position was posted and filled in just over one-month's time.

Further, the AmeriCorps program plans to return in Fall 2025 with funding through Serve Wisconsin, the AmeriCorps state commission in Wisconsin. The redevelopment of this program means the Civil Legal Helpline can be reinstated as will the Courthouse Navigator program.

Second, the office is exploring opportunities for partnership with area educational institutions to develop a process by which interested students / new graduates could

gain exposure to and skills in court interpretation. This program is in a planning stage and we look forward to sharing more in this report next year.