

# Equity in Action: Long-Term Disaster Recovery in North-Central Washington

By Maria Estrada, The Nature Conservancy

## “What is equity?”

The answer to that question is both elusive and central when working toward fire adaptation.

When I was in Washington State last May, I met the Okanogan County Long Term Recovery (OCLTR) group. OCLTR formed after the Carlton Complex of 2014 and the Okanogan Complex of 2015, both of which occurred in north-central Washington. Together, they burned somewhere between one-fifth and one-quarter of Okanogan County. OCLTR launched soon after to support the survivors of those wildfires. Since then, they have been coordinating recovery services to individuals, families, businesses and communities who suffered devastating losses. They hired case managers and trained them to partner with survivors to plot out both immediate and long-term recovery plans. The plans are designed to illuminate the hurdles that could stand between people and recovery.

Their dictum—**“What does this person need to recover from this disaster in this community?”**—guides each step of the process. This precept is, in fact, the definition of equity: to give people what they need, taking what has been and is happening around them into consideration. Implicit in the OCLTR motto is the idea that the people impacted by adversity know better than anyone else what they need, and it is up to them to define the terms of their recovery.

When I followed up with OCLTR’s executive director Carlene Anders and disaster case manager Jessica Rounds a few months later, I learned what a profound concern they have for each individual they’ve worked with. Equity and fairness (and tending to everyone in need of help) were centered in each example we discussed. Carlene told me that in the face of so much need, doing the right thing and building trust were essential. OCLTR wanted it known that the group would respond to anyone in need. Jessica told me that in total, case managers logged an astounding 62,000 miles in three years in order to reach everyone. (That’s about 57 miles a day, if they drove every single day for three years straight!) They traveled up



They traveled up and down drainages across the county, looking for survivors, leaving notes and business cards on whatever structures had been left standing. © OCLTR

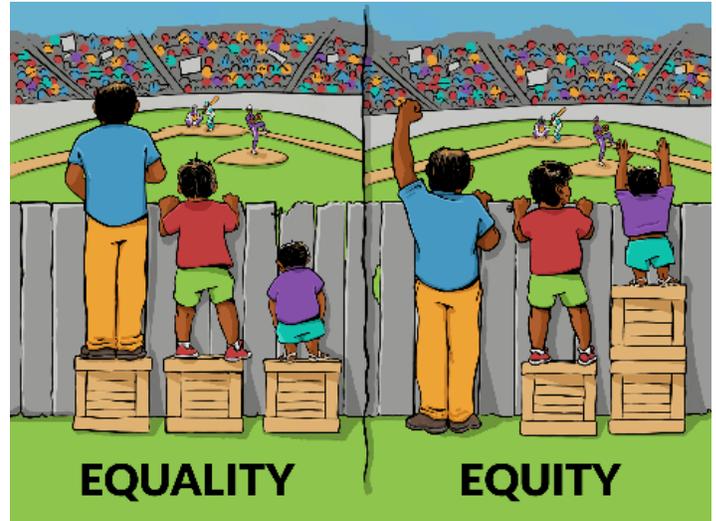


Figure 1: This image is commonly used when describing equity. The notion is that different people (illustrated here by height differences) need different types of support (here, boxes to stand on in order to see over a fence). Credit: Angus Maguire, Interaction Institute for Social Change ([interactioninstitute.org](http://interactioninstitute.org) and [madewithangus.com](http://madewithangus.com))

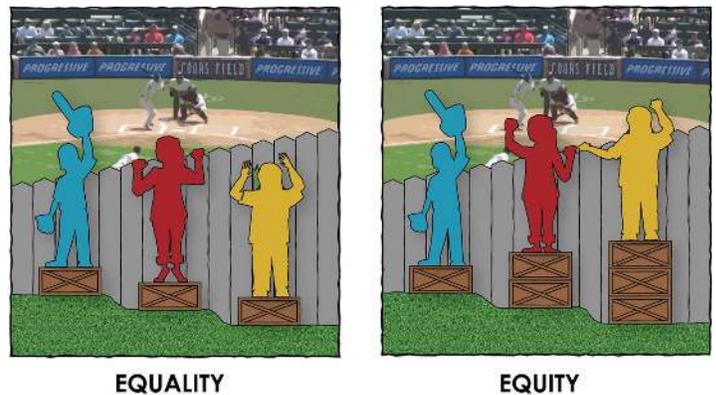


Figure 2. © 2015 Paul Kuttner

and down drainages across the county, looking for survivors, leaving notes and business cards on whatever structures had been left standing. They printed a large banner, and placed it strategically so that the English-as-a-second-language members of the community knew where to look for help. To date, OCLTR has answered 617 requests for assistance after the Carlton Complex Fire and of those cases, only two remain open. Regarding the Okanogan Complex Fire, they served 797 additional people, with 45 or so cases still active. The communities that OCLTR served are rural and financially poor, and they were hit hard. Twice. Their hardships are a reminder that even though no one is immune to the effects of climate change, the financially poor and geographically



Maria Estrada came to the U.S. from Colombia in 1988. She graduated from Virginia Tech in 2001 and received her Ph.D. from the University of Utah in Education, Culture and Society. She is associate director of the Global Diversity Equity and Inclusion team at The Nature Conservancy (TNC). In her role, she helps TNC build strong relationships of trust and mutuality, internally and externally, to reach the diversity of partners needed to assure that both nature and people thrive. This work involves building capacity to partner with communities and working on equity and inclusion aspects of conservation. © Charles Uibel

isolated are, increasingly, feeling the brunt of its catastrophic effects. To prioritize the overwhelming number of requests, OCLRT developed a list of vulnerabilities that they then referenced. For example, a request became a priority if the survivor was a widower, unemployed, disabled, a veteran, a tribal member, a speaker of English as a second language, uninsured or a single parent with children.

The practice of equity requires the recognition that we are not starting from the same place given historic and present systems of oppression. Look at the alternative image below, Figure 2. How is it different from Figure 1?

Figure 2 addresses important nuances that Figure 1 does not. The locus of the disadvantage is not the individual, whereas in Figure 1, disadvantage is represented by the individuals' height. In Figure 2, people are disadvantaged not because of their height, but by an uneven playing field. The inequity is not inherent to the individual. Rather, the inequity is in the context, i.e., the historic and present systems of oppression.

For an example, consider American Indians. Together, the genocide of indigenous tribes after European contact, the subsequent displacement of survivors, and the hundreds of violated and broken treaties since then are the *raison d'être* for the overwhelming challenges indigenous groups face today. That history is represented by the uneven ground on which the people in Figure 2 stand; American Indians are standing on lower ground than European Americans.

The fence, then, represents the evolution of historic systems of oppression into the present. The fence could be the school-to-prison-pipeline, where African-American, Native-American and Latinx children are disproportionately suspended and funneled out of school, eventually into juvenile and criminal justice systems at higher rates than their white classmates. Combined, the historic and present systems of oppression yield compounded, intersectional oppression. The yellow person on the left in Figure 2 not only starts at a disadvantage but also has to overcome a taller fence. Returning to the school-to-prison-pipeline example, a brown child from a financially poor family may be unnecessarily and disproportionately punished. The OCLRT team understood that for someone who is financially poor or is a member of a tribe, there has not been a level playing field, and if those individuals also find themselves unemployed or uninsured, their fence is also taller. Their recovery requires extra care and additional resources.

**To offer recovery services in deeply inequitable contexts, you need courageous leadership and steadfast commitment.** Even the most well-intentioned approaches are subject to another hurdle: unconscious bias, which also emerged during my conversations with OCLRT. Unconscious biases are quick judgments and assessments (both positive

and negative) that our brains make about people without even realizing it. They can, for example, result in someone unfairly favoring some people, while disadvantaging others. Fairness and equity are impossible if we think our decisions are merely the product of rational processes. Our (irrational) biases infiltrate all aspects of our decision making, and the only way we can mitigate their impact on our decisions is to be honest about them.

Jessica spoke honestly and courageously about her own judgments and biases. She told me that when she visited clients, she noticed her gut reactions to people and the way they lived. Knowing that her bias and judgments could get in the way of fairness, she made efforts to recognize them as they surfaced and put them aside. She began reminding herself: "Everybody needs help. Everybody."

In looking and listening for examples of equity in action, I used to anticipate complicated answers. However, equity as practiced by the OCLRT team simply begins with courage, commitment and well-grounded intention. I have also witnessed that this work entails love, as Curtis Ogden has defined it. The whole-hearted embracing of another person's humanity and legitimacy. I will also add that in the deeply inequitable time in which we live, serving others calls us to account for the complex systems within which we work and how they became so inequitable and unjust. By understanding how ignored and unresolved historic and present systems of oppression place human beings at the margins and in vulnerable situations, we can then begin to work for equity. OCLRT and their post-wildfire recovery efforts are an example of this practice, and it's guided by a **simple, yet profound, approach that we can all learn from: love.**



Originally published on the Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network blog. Read it online at [bit.ly/EquityAndFire](https://bit.ly/EquityAndFire) or by using the QR code at left. FAC Net publishes blogs about community wildfire resilience weekly; visit [fireadaptednetwork.org/subscribe](https://fireadaptednetwork.org/subscribe) to have more stories like this delivered to your inbox.

The Okanogan County Long Term Recovery group is a member of the Washington State Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network ([fireadaptedwashington.org](https://fireadaptedwashington.org)). WAFAC is supported by the Bureau of Land Management through a prime award to the Washington Resource Conservation and Development Council. For more information, contact Hilary Lundgren at [hilary@washingtonrcd.org](mailto:hilary@washingtonrcd.org).

The Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network is supported by Promoting Ecosystem Resilience and Fire Adapted Communities Together, a cooperative agreement between The Nature Conservancy, USDA Forest Service and agencies of the Department of the Interior through a subaward to the Watershed Research and Training Center.

*An equal opportunity provider and employer.*