

Pitt Human Rights Initiative
Report on work: 2017-2018

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Background

In the fall of 2016, with the support of a Global Studies Center faculty fellowship, Pitt Sociology professor Jackie Smith organized the Pittsburgh Housing Summit between November 9th and 12th. More than 300 people participated in the Summit. The summit was convened with an intentional goal of defining new forms of cooperation between the University and community aimed at addressing critical problems in our city, and the program was developed by a [Housing Summit Steering Committee](#) made up of an equal number of Pitt faculty and community organizers. The experience of hosting the housing summit provided the framework for launching an ongoing human rights initiative.

Institutionalizing Community-University Cooperation for a Just City

The housing summit work led to a proposal for a seed grant from the Office of the Provost/University Research Council to allow Jackie Smith and Housing Summit Advisory Board member Waverly Duck (also on the faculty in the Sociology Department) to continue work with community organizers who were part of the Housing Summit Advisory Committee. Starting with the relationships built through the Housing Summit process, Smith has built a larger **Community Advisory Council** that will help advise a faculty/staff/student **Human Rights Working Group**.

During the 2017-2018 Academic Year, the Pitt Human Rights Initiative accomplished the following tasks and projects (which go well beyond what we initially proposed), all of which helped to advance goals of our initial proposal, that is to *center the perspectives of underrepresented groups and to advance ideas and practices to enhance inclusion and diversity at the University of Pittsburgh.*

- Established a group of university and community leaders together under the framework of the Human Rights Initiative. This body is interdisciplinary and includes faculty, staff and graduate students. It also works in close cooperation with community organizers addressing the needs of the city's historically marginalized and most vulnerable residents. In addition, its membership includes the Directors of the City's Commission on Human Relations (Carlos Torres) and the newly established Gender Equity Commission (Anujain).
- Presented a poster at the Academically Based Community Engagement (ABCE) forum in October.
- Convened a meeting of members of the Working Group with visiting speaker, Peter Evans (UC-Berkeley), whose campus talk and book, *Livable Cities?: Urban Struggles for Livelihood and Sustainability*, addresses issues relevant to our work. (November 2, 2017).
- Working Group members led by Lisa Alfredson drafted a joint statement to the Chancellor addressing the needs of students impacted by national immigration policies

and the DACA legislation. Our aim was to both generate more action from University leaders to protect the rights of immigrant students and to expand conversations and consciousness on our campus about the importance of human rights for all. This statement, along with numerous concrete suggestions for action, was published in the *University Times* and in the Center for Latin American Studies's *Panoramas*.

- We convened two public meetings to provide space for residents and university members to reflect on the human rights implications of the City's proposal to host the proposed Amazon 2nd headquarters. Members of our Working Group observed how little space was provided for public input on the City's proposal to the company, despite the overwhelming impacts such a development would have on our region. In particular, concerns our group had about pervasive racial and class inequities in our region as well as about the growing problem of affordable housing motivated our work to call for a more critical exploration of the Amazon bid and its alternatives. We hosted a university panel on Feb. 7, 2018, followed by a community forum on Saturday February 10th. The panels were entitled: *Forged for All? Amazon HQ2 & the Future of Pittsburgh: Human Rights, the Right to the City, and Equity implications of the City of Pittsburgh's Future. Forged. For All Plan.*

Both panels were well attended, and the community forum was live streamed and recorded by local independent media, PublicSource. The sessions helped educate audiences about important conflicts and trends related to corporate-led urban development, and introduced resources that promoted further learning and dialogue around these issues. Along with other community groups, Smith helped organize another community forum on democratic accountability and transparency in March 2018, and this forum was also recorded and streamed by PublicSource.

- Working Group members led by Jackie Smith, Noble Maseru, and Cory Holding produced a grant proposal for the Social Science Research Initiative to further cross-disciplinary and community-based work on the theme of Health, Human Rights and Cities. That proposal has not been funded, but will be used to seek other funding to support Working Group members' involvement in national discussions on this theme and to strengthen the new partnership Dr. Maseru is building between Pitt's School of Public Health and its counterpart at Jackson State University. We plan to help bring these national conversations into a local convening of scholars and practitioners to develop further the cross-disciplinary work in this area and to link academic work with local practice.
- On March 25-27, the Working Group hosted visiting speaker Jacqueline Patterson, the director of the NAACP's Climate Justice Program. During her visit, Patterson met with leaders involved in the City's newly established Gender Equity Commission and with members of our Working Group and other community organizers working to address racial, economic, and environmental justice issues in Pittsburgh. She also met with students from different programs. Her public presentation, "Environmental Justice is Racial Justice is Gender Justice" was open to the public and drew around 100 participants from different programs across the campus and from the larger community.

- The Working Group also provided a statement in support of the initiative of the Dean of the School of Public Health to change the name of Parran Hall in recognition of the human rights concerns this issue raises.
- Working Group members met with Carlos Torres, the Director of the City’s Commission on Human Relations, to discuss ideas for how we could support the Commission’s effort to raise consciousness around the 50th anniversary of the Fair Housing Act. This led to our providing assistance to the Commission with the preparation of a report on the results of the Human Rights Assessment survey the Commission undertook last year. It also led to the organization of another public forum on “**Housing as a Human Right: Legal and Ethical Considerations**” on April 24 2018. This panel included speakers from the Law School (Gerald Dickinson), Sociology (Jackie Smith), and community organizer (and Working Group member) Carl Redwood, and it was co-sponsored by Pitt’s School of Law and Urban Studies Program in addition to the Commission on Human Relations. The session was well attended (over 40 people in attendance), despite taking place during finals week, and the discussions among students, community residents, and housing organizers was lively and instructive.
- Working Group members Jackie Smith and Carl Redwood organized a panel at the Left Forum in New York City, which allowed us to engage with other experts working on human rights in cities and to share information about our work in Pittsburgh. The panel was entitled: *Human Rights Don’t “Trickle Down” they Rise Up! Using Human Rights Frameworks to Unite Cities and Communities*

Plans for continued work in 2018-2019

- Next year the Sociology department will host a postdoctoral fellow whose work addresses human rights and urban housing issues. Dr. Emily Cummins will be invited to assist this working group during her fellowship, and we anticipate her involvement especially in our work related to affordable housing and water rights.
- Smith is working with graduate student Working Group member Sam Shepherd to organize an OSHER Life Long Learning Institute course on “Human Rights in Local and Global Perspective” for the coming fall. We expect this to be a regular course featuring presentations by different working group members.
- Pittsburgh Community-University Housing Summit-November 2018 –Together with community leaders, we have made plans to convene another Housing Summit on November 10th, drawing from the lessons of our work in 2016. We are working to raise resources to support this work and expect to build on the models and lessons from the first Summit, and will work with community leaders to orient a program that draws from our previous work, including:
 - Website, <http://housingsummit.org>
 - [annotated film list](#)
 - [book discussions outline](#).
 - [Summit Program Book](#)

- Neighborhood tour: “[Universities, Displacement, and Struggles for Affordable Housing in Pittsburgh](#)”

Moving Forward

Smith plans to work with members of the Working Group to find ways to institutionalize and support this work in an ongoing way. Thus far, the work has depended upon considerable voluntary efforts on the part of Smith and a few Working Group members. Our work over this past year shows that there is interest on the part of community leaders and university members to continue this kind of initiative, and members of the Working Group are interested in exploring ways to further develop and sustain this project.

A task force has been formed to submit a proposal to the Provost’s [Year of Pitt Global initiative](#) to organize public events as part of a dialogue series on “**Human Rights in Pittsburgh and the World: A Year Honoring the 70th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights**”