



Bread for the City Washington, DC

Our New Mission

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Guest Author: Kristen Kozlowski

When we set up shop 43 years ago, Bread for the City operated with a simple goal: to provide food, clothing, medical care, and other services to DC residents in an atmosphere of dignity and respect. We've evolved a lot in that time. We added services (social services, legal assistance, and advocacy) and buildings (our second opened in Ward 8 in 2002.) But one thing that didn't change was this mission statement:

The mission of Bread for the City is to provide vulnerable residents of Washington, DC with comprehensive services, including food, clothing, medical care, and legal and social services, in an atmosphere of dignity and respect. We recognize that all people share a common humanity, and that all are responsible to themselves and to society as a whole. Therefore, we promote the mutual collaboration of clients, volunteers, donors, staff, and other community partners to alleviate the suffering caused by poverty and to rectify the conditions that perpetuate it.

What do you notice about this? It's a bit...long and wordy, right? Plus, it uses language that Bread for the City has moved away from as our racial equity work has expanded— in particular, the word “vulnerable”, which make our strong, resilient, and independent clients sound like a poor shadow of themselves. That's why in 2017, Bread for the City set out to update our mission for this new phase in our organizational life. Through a process lasting several months, staff, clients, and Board members worked together to craft a mission statement that would meet a few different requirements:

1. **Meet our high standards for racial equity** by acknowledging the strength and resilience of the people we serve
2. **Be simple, short, and readable for people with different literacy levels** so that all of our stakeholders can understand our mission and hold us accountable for meeting it
3. **Emphasize our commitment to social justice** as we continue to shift from being a service provider to also being an advocate

Here's what we came up with:

The mission of Bread for the City is to help Washington, DC residents living with low income to develop the power to determine the future of their own communities. We provide food, clothing, medical care, and legal and social services to reduce the burden of poverty. We seek justice through community organizing and public advocacy. We work to uproot racism, a major cause of poverty. We are committed to treating our clients with the dignity and respect that all people deserve.

Can you see the difference? The new mission explicitly focuses on ending racism and supporting those living on low income as they build power to fight for change. We still provide the vital services that our clients rely on for stability, like grocery bags of nutritious food, medical care, and legal and social services assistance – services that give our clients the breathing room they need to fight inequality alongside us, or simply provide a hand in times of trouble – but we also know that these actions alone will not end poverty. We kept our values intact (dignity, respect, service, justice are still represented) while moving the focus off individual services for “vulnerable” residents and on to systemic change.

Plus, at only four sentences, this new mission is simply more clear and easier to read, so that everyone knows exactly where Bread for the City stands.



Chairman's Corner: Why Are We Here?

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Guest Author: Paul Taskier

Why Are We Here?

I'm not really asking the philosophical question. Each of us has grappled with that existential issue. My personal view is that the Bible gave us the best answers – to love your neighbor as yourself; to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God; to seek justice. And those directives are baked into Bread for the City's DNA. Our motto, after all, is “Dignity, Respect, Service, and Justice.” It's a motto that is our

touchstone as we grapple with lending a helping hand to the tens of thousands who struggle daily with the burden of a low income.

Last week [the Census Bureau](#) reported that [poverty in the District is up in the past year, to 18.6% of our residents](#). Worse yet, the poverty rate for African Americans in the District is 27.9% – an astounding four times higher than the 7.9% poverty rate of whites. This should not be tolerated in a civilized society.

Our food stamp system, which used to be sufficient to purchase minimal food for 28 days in the month, now – thanks to Congress – provides for 26 days a month. Where do those missing five days of food a month come from when you have no money? Well, from places like Bread for the City. We are the safety net. We provided food for that three-day gap, and now we provide the food for that five-day gap. Last year we gave food to over 27,000 people who had nowhere else to go – an increase of 10% over the year before. Of course, it comes at a cost to us – having to give five days of food instead three days cost us two-thirds more in food costs. And on top of this growth, the District changed its food stamp computer system – against the advice of the federal government – and now we see thousands of people without normal timely re-certification who have lost their food stamps altogether solely because of the computer failures. ([Bread for the City is a named plaintiff in a suit against the District for this shocking example of mismanagement.](#)) And as a predictable result, the number of people coming to us for *emergency* food assistance – as in “*we have nothing in the house to eat, please help us*” is up by 40%!

We also know, [from a study by D.C. Hunger Solutions](#), that between 2014 and 2015, 27 percent of families with children in the District had periods when they were simply unable to afford food. *Twenty-seven percent!* How can we let that happen?

We are the richest country on earth and yet we still must confront this dire reality for too many of our neighbors. The median annual income in the District last year was one of the highest in the country – at \$75,506. Yet once again there is enormous disparity between white and black. The median income for whites in the District was \$125,747; for blacks it was a meager \$37,891, less than a third. How can that be the product of a just and equitable society?

We know that this massive gap in wealth accumulation is the result of hundreds of years of institutional and economic racism – let’s call it by what it was. It was an intentional, systematic effort by white elites to disenfranchise, diminish, segregate, impoverish, limit and deny African-Americans. Unequal access to schooling, unequal schools, bank red-lining, unequal sentencing, unfair policing, and outright segregation are just some of the many techniques that our society used to diminish and oppress. Why should we be surprised that with all the cumulative disadvantages heaped on black Americans and all the advantages given to white Americans that there is so huge a gap in wealth?

So again, let’s ask the question, “**Why are we here?**” We are here because we are committed to helping our neighbors in need – giving them nutritious food, social services, legal advice and representation, medical and dental care, training, clothing, and assistance in finding housing. Last year we helped over 33,000 people in all of these areas. But that’s not all we are about. We are equally committed to combating racism in all its forms, and advocating for justice and racial equity in our society.

Our health professionals, our social workers, our lawyers, our community advocates and all the staff who work tirelessly to meet our motto of “Dignity, Respect, Service, Justice” do their work because they are committed to making our world a better place, to doing whatever we can to repair the dynamic that has short-changed so many, who now live with the burden of low incomes in a society teeming with wealth. [Join us](#). Become a part of our 40 year crusade to help those who need help the most. **This is why we are all here.**