

Annual Report

of the

**PERMANENT COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF
RACIAL, INDIGENOUS, AND TRIBAL POPULATIONS**

Report to the Governor
and Maine Legislature



**Permanent
Commission**
RACIAL, INDIGENOUS
& TRIBAL POPULATIONS

MARCH 2024

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Letter from the Executive Director

On behalf of Commissioners and staff, I am pleased to share the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous, and Tribal Populations' annual report, pursuant to 5 MRSA §25007(1)(C). The Permanent Commission is tasked with understanding the disparities experienced by historically disadvantaged racial, Indigenous, and tribal populations in Maine and seeks to dismantle the systemic racism that underpins and perpetuates those disparities.

The Permanent Commission joins other federal, state, and local government efforts across the country to acknowledge government's role in creating and maintaining racial inequity over centuries. While many explicitly racist laws have been overturned, centuries of such laws, policies, and practices have had a profound impact on many generations. Those impacts manifest today in disparate outcomes in all aspects of daily life, including housing, income, wealth, education, and health. Historically, racial inequity was intentionally created and maintained - dismantling it also requires intentionality. Structural racism continues to drive inequalities in our communities despite the good intentions of individual people. We seek to undertake a systematic, community-based analysis to understand root causes and identify interventions that benefit all Mainers.

The issues touched by systemic racism are broad and interconnected, and the impacts reach deeply into daily life for racial, Indigenous, and tribal populations. Addressing these issues requires centering the knowledge, experience, and voices of those most impacted, and by valuing lived experience as valid data. Accessing this expertise calls for consistent outreach that builds trust. The Permanent Commission seeks to create a bridge between state government and communities with a historic distrust of the state, in order to be a resource to both.

Many of the same barriers to success that harm people from racial, Indigenous, and tribal backgrounds play a role in holding back all Maine people, regardless of race. By analyzing laws, policies, and practices through a racial justice lens, we can identify and remove the barriers that prevent all Maine people from thriving and enjoying life the way it should be.



Ariel Ricci, Executive Director

Building the Permanent Commission

History

In 2019, the Maine Legislature and Governor Janet Mills took an important step toward addressing disparities caused by systemic racism by establishing the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Tribal Populations (the Permanent Commission). The Permanent Commission is an independent state agency with a statutory mission to:

“promote, implement and coordinate programs that create and improve opportunities and incorporate the goal of eliminating disparities for historically disadvantaged racial, indigenous and tribal populations in the State.”¹

The Permanent Commission is mandated to:

- Research the status of historically-disadvantaged racial, Indigenous, and tribal populations.
- Seek public input by conducting public hearings annually.
- Report annually to the Governor and Legislature.

Additionally, the Permanent Commission is empowered to:

- Promote and coordinate activities on state and local levels.
- Conduct public education, including through conferences and workshops.
- Introduce legislation.
- Advise and consult all three branches of government.

The Permanent Commission received its first ongoing funding in October 2021. Commissioners, staff, partners, and stakeholders have worked collaboratively to establish the Permanent Commission as an independent state agency with research, programming, and community engagement capabilities.

Commission Composition

The Permanent Commission’s seventeen Commissioners are appointed by the Governor, the Speaker of the

House, the President of the Senate, Wabanaki Tribes, or by the Commission itself. Statute states:

“To the extent possible, the commission must consist of members who represent the diverse racial, indigenous, and tribal populations in the State.”²

By design, Commissioners are appointed to represent statewide organizations, interests, and communities that:

- Have knowledge of the challenges facing communities of color.
- Have experience of advocacy.
- Provide leadership in programs or activities that create and improve opportunities.

Commissioners all bring a commitment to racial justice and complex layers of identity, along with significant professional and lived experience. The Commission is mindful that it does not and cannot be representative of the considerable diversity of lived experiences within Maine’s racial, Indigenous, and tribal populations. Maine’s diverse populations are not a monolith and there are vastly different lived experiences and perspectives within communities. The Commission regularly and intentionally reflects on which communities and interests are and are not reflected in its membership. Through its community engagement work, the Permanent Commission seeks to engage authentically with all of Maine’s diverse communities, avoid real or perceived tokenization, and build trust and long-term relationships.

Committee Structure

Since early 2023, the Permanent Commission has operated with the following Committees:

Research Committee: Considers research needs and opportunities, along with appropriate methodologies for ethical research.

Community Engagement Committee: Develops strategies to engage with diverse communities, often with a historic distrust of state agencies.

¹ 5 MRSA §25001

² 5 MRSA §25002

Policy Committee: Considers policy issues that the Permanent Commission should weigh in on, based on potential impacts on priority populations.

Finance and Operations Committee: Oversees budget and advises on ensuring operation as an effective and efficient independent state agency.

Staff Structure

In 2023, the Permanent Commission made great strides to fill recently appropriated positions. The Permanent Commission hired its first permanent Executive Director, followed by a Research Coordinator and a Policy Coordinator. During 2024, three additional permanent positions will be filled: Communications Coordinator, Community Engagement Coordinator, and Operations Director.

Budget

In the 2023 - 2024 state fiscal year, the Permanent Commission’s work is funded through a combination of state and federal funds, as shown below.

Source	Category	Appropriated
State general fund	Personal Services	\$735,016
	All Other	\$538,870
Federal funds*	Maine Jobs and Recovery Plan	\$1,000,000

*One-time funding.

“All Other” funds are used for:

- Operational expenses (such as office space, IT, services from other state agencies, and staff professional development).
- Professional support (such as contractors and temporary staff).
- Contracts to advance the projects described in subsequent sections.

Federal funds received under the Maine Jobs and Recovery Plan are one-time funds that must be obligated by December 31, 2024. These funds are being used for the development and implementation of a fellowship program, along with projects and programs that seek to understand and create solutions for racial disparities exacerbated by the COVID-19 public health crisis.

Examining Disparities in Maine

Our Approach to Research

The Permanent Commission is mandated by statute and motivated by compassion to engage in research that helps to understand and overcome systemic racism in Maine. How we approach this work, the questions we ask, and the methods we use are vital to ensuring that the Permanent Commission disrupts, rather than reproduces harm.

Addressing racial injustice requires understanding how laws and policies are created, interact across systems, and, importantly, how they are experienced by people living in marginalized communities. It also requires, at a deeper level, understanding how social structures—things like language, culture, norms, and institutions

—reinforce and normalize disparate outcomes across communities. Critical research that cuts across these areas can be foundational to sustainable, transformational change. We seek to answer two distinct, but interconnected questions through our research: 1) what is the world that we live in; and 2) what is the world that we want to live in?

Once a research need has been identified, multiple research methods can offer insight into how we answer these questions. Which approach we choose will depend on our research questions, the interests and needs of participating communities, and available resources. To uphold the values of the Permanent Commission and the integrity of the process, research should be

driven by the needs of marginalized communities, and developed and executed **by and for** these communities to the extent possible. The Permanent Commission has also put into place a working contract with the Institutional Review Board at the University of Southern Maine to assist in the ethical review of human subjects research. These partnerships will enhance protections for our work with sensitive communities.

Recognizing and Minimizing Risks for Marginalized Communities

While research is vital to understanding disparities and community resilience, we are acutely aware of the ways research has historically presented significant risks for people of color and are mindful that:

- All research presents a subjective and cultural bias, representing specific ways of seeing the world.
- This subjectivity is often informed by, and in some cases replicates, dominant narratives of the past that have marginalized people of color.
- Communities of color are particularly at risk for data disclosures by being asked to recount traumas that can be painful, triggering, or potentially damaging to social relationships.
- Data has a cultural and economic value which has historically been taken from communities of color without their consent, and then weaponized against them.

To counter these very real concerns in our own research and ensure that our work uplifts and empowers our

state's racial, Indigenous, and tribal populations, we commit to:

- Working closely with communities at every stage in the research process to check our assumptions and center voices of those most impacted under current systems.
- Using clear and precise language in the presentation of findings, while being transparent about data limitations.
- Practicing compassionate and trauma-informed research approaches and where appropriate, working with an Institutional Review Board to ensure the highest standard of research ethics.
- Utilizing community peer review processes that allow for right of refusal and the ability to ensure authentic voices are centered in research findings.
- Repurposing data that has already been collected by the state to reduce creating new data burdens on people of color.
- Avoiding unnecessary quantification of lived experiences.
- Partnering with community groups so that data stays in the communities where it originates, and deferring to community groups about what data they are willing to share, how, and to whom.

Taken together, we hope these efforts bring us closer to modeling just processes in our work, while always acknowledging that just research is a process of deep and ongoing learning and unlearning.

Ongoing Research Projects

Mapping Maine's Diversity

The Permanent Commission began creating an interactive map that tells the story of Maine's diverse communities. This work will unfold over three phases during 2024:

1. We will develop a map using census data and Maine-based data sets to understand where populations are currently living.
2. We will ground-truth the map through conversation with communities and gather stories of community members' connection to the places they live.

3. The National Association of Community Health Centers reports that "drivers," as opposed to "determinants," is a more accessible and understandable term that communities prefer and emphasizes the ability for policy-makers, communities and individuals to affect change.

3. We will compile the information into ArcGIS story maps offered as an interactive website application.

Social Drivers of Health (SDOH)

The Permanent Commission is taking steps, through two projects, to better understand and take active steps to enhance the social drivers of health (SDOH) in Maine.³

The first project uses publicly-available data to construct a "Social Drivers of Health Dashboard" for Maine, looking at the five categories outlined by the

US Department of Health and Human Services:

- Economic stability.
- Educational access and quality.
- Health care access and quality.
- Neighborhood and the built environment.
- Social and community context.

The dashboard will explore racial disparities that exist within Maine and track how Maine performs against the national average. We anticipate that this dashboard will be live by December of 2024.

The second project looks to build stronger community connections and social cohesion within historically-disadvantaged communities. The World Health

Organization (WHO) and other prominent health organizations highlight the important role that social cohesion plays in bridging between the SDOH and actual health outcomes (Figure 1).^{4,5} Studies from the last 30 years have confirmed that feelings of connectedness to a community are empirically related to reducing cardiovascular disease,⁶ cancer,⁷ and suicide rates⁸ — even when controlling for other economic factors.

Interventions intended to build community cohesion —especially those that aim to empower historically-marginalized communities— have been shown to improve self-rated health outcomes,⁹ in part by establishing important social networks that reduce stress, enhance feelings of connection, provide supportive spaces for advancing healthy lifestyles,

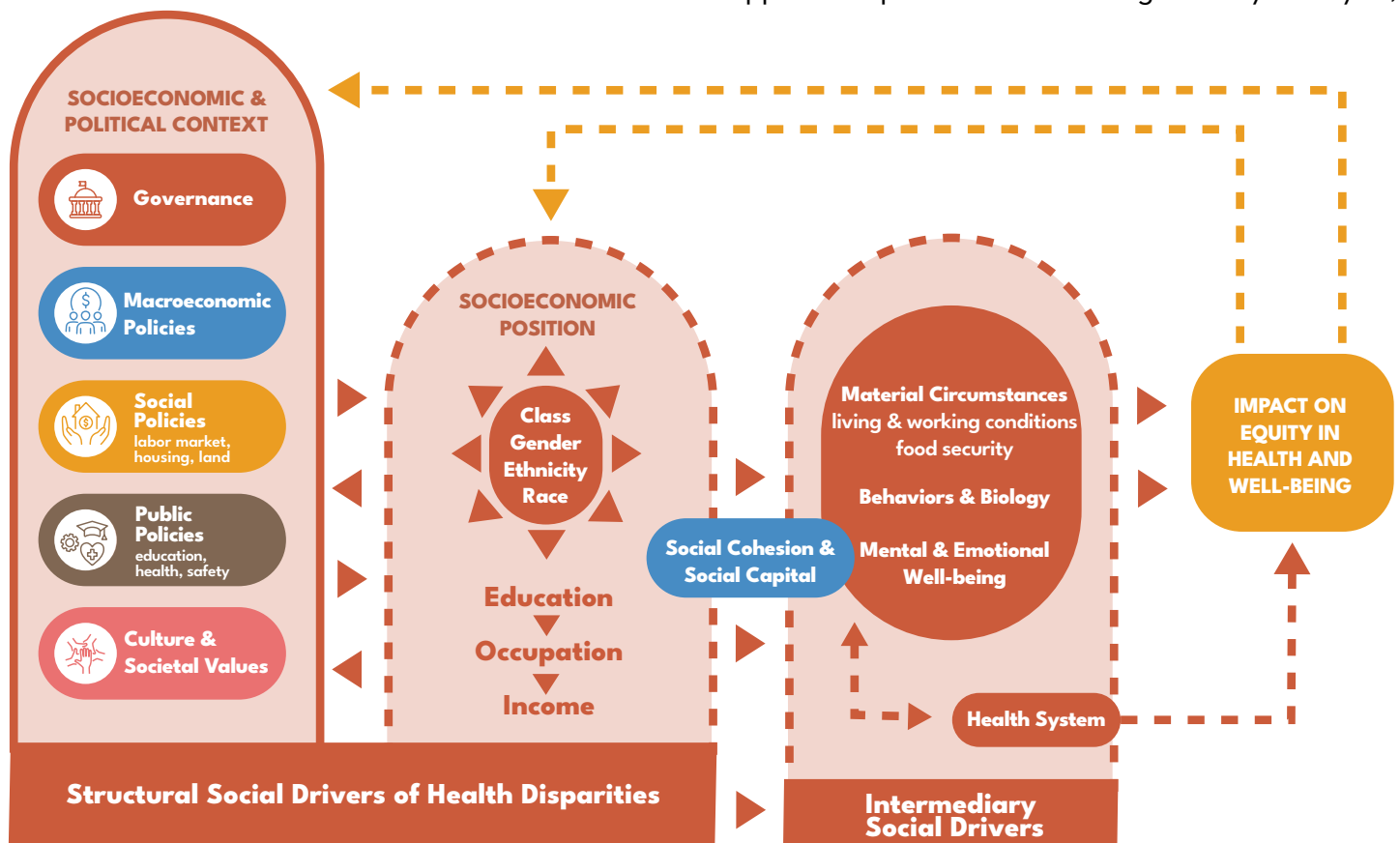


Figure 1. Health outcomes depend on an individual’s position in a web of broader social, economic, and political structures. Adapted from the WHO Social Determinants of Health Framework.

- 4 World Health Organization. (2010) “A conceptual framework for action on the social determinants of health.”
- 5 Hunter, Bradley D., Brad Neiger, and Joshua West. (2011) “The Importance of Addressing Social Determinants of Health at the Local Level: The Case for Social Capital.” *Health & Social Care in the Community* 19, no. 5: 522–30.
- 6 Kawachi I., Colditz G.A., Ascherio A., Rimm E.B., Giovannucci E., Stampfer M.J. & Willett W.C. (1996) “A prospective study of social networks in relation to total mortality and cardiovascular disease in men in the USA.” *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 50, 245–251.
- 7 Kawachi I., Kennedy B.P., Lochner K. & Prothrow-Stith D. (1997) “Social capital, income inequality, and mortality.” *American Journal of Public Health* 87, 1491–1498.
- 8 Helliwell J.F. (2007) Well-being and social capital: does suicide pose a puzzle? *Social Indicators Research* 81 (3), 455–496.
- 9 Giordano G.N. & Lindstrom M. (2010) “The impact of changes in different aspects of social capital and material conditions on self-rated health over time: a longitudinal cohort study.” *Social Science and Medicine* 70, 700–710.

and create bonds that can lead to changes in public policy to support those most at risk for health impacts.

Data Justice

The Permanent Commission is collaborating with the Secretary of State's Office and the Department of Administrative and Financial Services to imagine and operationalize a data governance plan for the state of Maine that centers equity. While overall progress is slow, the Permanent Commission continues to undertake significant work to ensure that Maine's emerging data governance program centers racial equity throughout every stage of the data collection, storage, and usage cycle. We have:

- Explored the status of data governance efforts in five other jurisdictions to learn more about the development of data governance models that intentionally center equity.
- Started preliminary discussions with community-based organizations representing marginalized communities to understand concerns and distrust between communities and Maine state government related to data collection and use.
- Collaborated with other state agencies that are advancing their own internal data governance plans.
- Begun to draft a report that will explore the evolving relationship between race, data, and the state, and opportunities to advance data justice in the public sector.

Place Justice

The 130th Legislature passed a resolve directing the Permanent Commission to review state law regarding offensive place names and to establish a uniform process for renaming geographic features. As a result, the Permanent Commission established the Place Justice initiative in partnership with Atlantic

Black Box, a Maine-based non-profit that empowers communities to research and reckon with Maine's role in colonization and the slave trade. The team examined derogatory place names in Maine and sought to better understand state and federal policies and practices related to naming and renaming. This project involved considerable community engagement, including through:

- The Place Justice Advisory Council, a diverse advisory group consisting of scholars of African American and Wabanaki history, Wabanaki tribal members, state government employees, and community members.
- Virtual and in-person listening sessions.
- Eight public events designed to educate and spur discussion.

This work in turn informed policy proposals to create a diverse and inclusive Maine Board on Place Names tasked with formalizing Maine's process to change place names in a way that centers community input. During 2024, the Permanent Commission will finalize and publish educational materials and resources related to this initiative.

Restorative Justice

The 130th Legislature passed a resolve directing the Permanent Commission to examine restorative justice in Maine. In 2022, the Permanent Commission worked with the Maine Restorative Justice Coalition to begin research about the historical and current context of restorative justice in Maine and across the country, along with hearing directly from restorative justice stakeholders in Maine. In 2023, work on this project paused as permanent staff were hired and onboarded. We anticipate releasing a report on this project in 2024.

Building Trust and Connections

Our Approach to Community Engagement

By engaging communities to understand disparities, we acknowledge their agency and tap into a wealth of knowledge. Generations of systemic discrimination, disenfranchisement, and institutionalized bias have created a deep-seated mistrust towards state government among historically-disadvantaged

populations. The Permanent Commission seeks to build trust and empower these communities. We provide tools and resources, and build partnerships with the goal of fostering resilience, collaboration, and a sense of agency.

Public Listening Session and Community Consulting Events

The Permanent Commission held an in-person public listening session in Lewiston in July 2023 to hear directly from racially-marginalized communities. About 30 people from the area attended and engaged in three hours of discussion and reflection. The event also brought together community-based organizations, including the Community Organizing Alliance, Generational Noor, the Immigrant Resource Center of Maine, and Chance to Advance.

In recognition that many historically-marginalized communities may not feel comfortable or safe attending and sharing their lived experience at a public listening session, the Permanent Commission also began sponsoring “community consulting events.” These events are hosted by partner organizations that bring together their communities, with a Permanent Commission staff member attending in a listening capacity. In late 2023, the Permanent Commission sponsored three community consulting events:

- A virtual, statewide event hosted by Black Owned Maine.
- An in-person event hosted by Gateway Community Services in Portland.
- An in-person event hosted by the Maine Multicultural Center in Bangor.

Common themes that emerged at all events include:

“For people to settle, the first need is housing.”

-Lewiston Listening Session participant

high levels of lead. A need was identified to remove barriers and support people of color on the pathway to homeownership.

Health care: Attendees described difficulty finding affordable healthcare through employment or the marketplace. Barriers to accessing affordable health care include cultural and language differences. Participants noted that increasing pathways for foreign-trained providers to practice in Maine would improve cultural competence and availability of care.

Childcare and early childhood education:

Participants noted the high cost of childcare and the lack of racial and ethnic diversity among childcare providers. There was a desire to professionalize the informal networks of childcare provided within communities, and ensure access to early childhood education (pre-kindergarten).

Education: Community members reported feeling that school staff require more resources and training to address biases and obstacles for children of color. Experiences described include children from immigrant families who speak fluent English being put into mandatory English as a Second Language classes, which prevented them from pursuing more advanced academic interests. Participants

also noted that children of color are more likely to be disciplined. Participants felt that schools are less likely to encourage young people of color towards higher-earning career paths.

Employment and wealth inequality: Attendees described that being employed in a high quality job is more about “who you know” rather than “what you know.” They described being paid less than their white counterparts for the same work and lacking awareness of fair wages. They also noted that young people of color are less likely to have networking connections. Furthermore, when youth see their parents struggling financially, they feel a need to contribute by working low-wage, low-qualification jobs, rather than attending college. Highly qualified New Mainers reported working jobs with low pay because their work experience and credentials are not accepted. Attendees described the gap in state support for individuals who are above the poverty line but still cannot afford basic needs.

Criminal legal system: There was a desire to deeply examine the criminal legal system and the disproportionate incarceration rates of people of color in Maine, along with challenges related to re-entry. Participants felt this was exacerbated by insufficient substance use disorder and mental health awareness and treatment within immigrant communities.

“If [a student] has behavior problems or has more energy, instead of trying something that might be more productive [...] it is much more likely that [the school] goes straight to disciplinary actions.”

-Lewiston Listening Session participant

African American Voices in Maine

The Permanent Commission has observed that although there are considerable resources invested in community networks for New Mainers (immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers), there are few formal networks for African Americans in Maine. There is also a widespread perception among Mainers that there is little to no presence of African Americans in Maine, despite records showing their presence going back centuries. In order to better understand the experiences of African Americans in Maine, Permanent Commission staff held one-on-one conversations with African American community leaders across the state. The following common themes emerged:

- The state has not recognized the generational or current challenges experienced by African Americans in Maine. This continues to be reflected through a lack of investment in this community. The lived experiences and challenges for African Americans in Maine are unique and different from those experienced by Black first- and second-generation immigrants.
- The state has not recognized the historic and ongoing significant contributions made by African Americans in Maine. This lack of visibility contributes to the perception that African Americans do not have a historic or current connection to Maine. African Americans who moved to Maine from another state feel particularly out of place due to being painted as being “from away,” even when they have lived here for decades.
- There is a shared desire to build a more cohesive community of African Americans in Maine. There is a desire for community members to come together to learn, elevate their shared history, and celebrate contributions and achievements. Members of the older generation hope that the youth will carry forward previous efforts to build community and tell the shared history of African Americans in Maine.

The Permanent Commission is committed to engaging with and investing in African American communities in Maine and finding ways to elevate their voices.

Community-Based Collaborations

State of Black Maine Symposium: The Permanent Commission supported the Maine Black Community Development Fund in organizing the “State of Black Maine Symposium,” a day-long event attended by several hundred attendees on Juneteenth to highlight and celebrate Black excellence in Maine.

The program included panel discussions with elders and high school students about personal experiences, and an examination of the state of Black business, education, justice, and arts in Maine. The program also included a discussion of the history of Juneteenth and uplifted Black history through poetry and theater.

“Great job - many diverse voices, powerful narratives, and important conversations.”

-State of Black Maine attendee

Martin Luther King Jr. Day: The Permanent Commission supported the Bangor Branch of the NAACP to host their annual Martin Luther King Jr. Day Breakfast. The long-standing annual event was attended by more than a hundred people. It featured a keynote address on continuing Dr. King’s legacy of civil rights activism from Dr. Judith Josiah-Martin, a prominent educator and longtime member of the University of Maine’s School of Social Work faculty.

Wabanaki Public Health and Wellness: The Permanent Commission continues to collaborate with Wabanaki Public Health and Wellness, which provides community-driven, culturally-centered public health and social services to all Wabanaki communities. We supported a 5k road race at the University of Maine at Orono to raise awareness for missing and murdered Indigenous women. We also supported a pilot series to bring Indigenous ceremony into detention facilities throughout the state, with a goal of supporting community healing prior to re-entry.

“I hope that [...] you can feel [our] thanks, in a chorus of all the men and women whose lives you touched deeply in the special events at Maine State Prison and the Maine Correctional facility this past week. Truly, they were remarkable events on so many levels.”

-Feedback on Wabanaki Public Health and Wellness prison engagement series

Working Toward Positive Change

Our Approach to Public Policy

Our goal in advising the three branches of Maine state government is to expand the availability of quantitative and qualitative evidence that helps us to understand racial, ethnic, and tribal disparities and community impacts. We seek to provide a bridge between state agencies and communities so as to integrate historically-marginalized community voices into decision making.

This year the Permanent Commission released “Justice for All,” a guide to policy priorities for the Second Regular Session of the 131st Legislature. The highlighted bills aim to enact meaningful change across critical areas impacting racial, Indigenous, and tribal populations in Maine. The report, which is available on the Permanent Commission’s website, presents a strategic approach to legislative action that prioritizes equity, justice, and the well-being of all Maine people.

Additionally, the Permanent Commission collaborated with several state agencies, including on:

Data governance: We are part of an ongoing collaboration with the Department of Administrative and Financial Services and the Secretary of State on development of a statewide data governance program. We have held discussions with representatives of the Maine Justice for Children Task Force, a standing committee of the Maine Judicial Branch, to understand their goals to conduct cross-agency analysis of outcomes for Maine children. We have engaged with the Office of Population Health Equity about integrating equity in their approach to data governance. We have also responded to requests from agencies for advice and support on approaches to demographic data collection.

Place names: We collaborated with the Maine Office of GIS and the Maine State Geologist, along with community members, to develop proposals for an inclusive, community-led process for naming and renaming place names that aligns with federal efforts and best practices.

Procurement: We responded to requests for advice and support from the Division of Procurement Services about how to engage with historically-marginalized communities to understand barriers to contracting with the state.

We are in the early stages of considering future collaborations with additional agencies, including the Department of Corrections and the Maine Health Data Organization. As we continue to build our capacity, we look forward to discussions with other agencies about how we can support bringing a racial equity lens to their work.



Appendix A - Guiding Principles

Shortly after it was established, the Permanent Commission identified seven guiding principles for addressing structural racism through public policy. These guiding principles remain central to the work:

- **Building awareness takes resources.** Existing quantitative data show significant disparities in socioeconomic and health outcomes based on race, ethnicity, tribal citizenship, and immigration status. The Permanent Commission also recognizes the importance of qualitative data - the lived experience of people most harmed by systemic racism. This requires open dialogue, active listening, and respecting lived experience as valuable and valid data.
- **Awareness alone is not enough.** Building awareness of disparities is a first and important step. Action needs to be taken to address root causes alongside a long-term commitment to listening and learning.
- **Financial and human resources must be allocated.** To truly address the deep-rooted impacts of racism, we must demonstrate our commitment to change through the commitment of resources.
- **Policies that are ‘race-neutral’ will ultimately maintain existing disparities.** The Permanent Commission advocates for the explicit consideration of race in the analysis of a policy’s impact. Only a fully-informed approach can build a foundation for more equitable outcomes.
- **An adequate response requires a structural analysis.** Specific bills and policies may help provide relief in the short-term, but it is necessary to take a systemic view to understand root causes.
- **Developing solutions should be led by impacted communities.** The Permanent Commission strongly believes that the most effective solutions will come from the communities most impacted.
- **Policies that affect tribal nations must be enacted in a government-to-government relationship that honors and respects sovereignty.** Policies that impact tribal nations should be crafted and implemented in collaboration with tribal governments and their representatives.

Appendix B - Members of the Permanent Commission

Commissioner	Seat
Spkr. Rachel Talbot Ross*	a statewide organization promoting civil rights that has racial justice or racial equity as its primary mission
Amb. Maulian Bryant*	Penobscot Nation
James Myall	an economic policy organization or other data-focused organization
Deb Ibonwa	an organization with expertise in legal and policy matters related to public benefit programs that assists individuals with low incomes
Dr. Marcelle Medford	specializing in the history, the culture or the civil and human rights of historically disadvantaged racial, Indigenous and tribal populations
Jason Shedlock	organized labor with expertise in labor rights and working conditions
Dina Yacoubagha	an immigrant or refugee rights organization
Amanda Comeau	a housing or homelessness advocacy organization
Keith Bisson	a community development financial institution
Bruce King	historically disadvantaged racial population of the state
Rev. Kenneth Lewis	representing the faith-based community
Reginald Parson	representing youth
Vice Chief Richard Silliboy	Mi'kmaq Nation
Dr. Theo Greene	representing the LGBTQIA+ community
Juana Rodriguez-Vazquez	representing Latino and migrant communities
Vacant	Houlton Band of Maliseet
Vacant	Passamaquoddy Tribe

*Co-Chairs

Previous Commissioners: Amb. Osihkiyol (Zeke) Crofton-Macdonald, Darrell Newell, Isaiah Reid, Ian Yaffee, dee Clarke, Garrett Stewart, and Joby Thoyalil.