Solid Waste Service Equity: Establish clear goals and measures at the program level to improve outcomes

Why this audit is important

People of color in the region experience worse economic and social outcomes because of a history of exclusionary and discriminatory policies. Metro's Waste Prevention and Environmental Services department found that communities of color experience barriers to accessing some of its services.

To address these problems, the department engaged in several efforts to promote racial equity and ensure equitable services. While racial equity was a clear focus in its planning efforts, the department had not specifically defined service equity.

We conducted this audit to determine:
- How equity considerations impacted the delivery of four solid waste services.
- Which practices should be in place at the program level to improve service equity outcomes.

What we found

We found three areas where additional efforts were needed at the program level to improve service equity outcomes. Clear goals and measures, data-driven decision making, and formal policies and procedures set expectations for stakeholders and can also be helpful in setting expectations for funding priorities and decision making. These were not fully in place for the four programs we reviewed. Without them, the department may miss opportunities to improve service equity.

Improvements were needed across the programs we reviewed

Source: Auditor's office analysis of program information, interviews, and data

In the absence of defined service equity goals and measures for each program, we used existing data and our own measures to evaluate service equity. Our analysis focused on census tracts with high proportions of people of color, people with lower income, people with limited English proficiency, and people living in multifamily housing.

We evaluated access to services before and after the adoption of the department's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion work plan in 2018 and found both positive and negative changes for the four programs we reviewed. Negative changes meant access to department services may have become less equitable. Using different data and measures could have shown different results, which underscores the importance of identifying appropriate service equity goals and measures.

What we recommend

To improve service equity outcomes at the program level we recommended the department develop clear goals, measures, and targets for service equity to set expectations, and formalize policies and procedures to ensure expectations are carried out. We also recommended the department develop reliable cost and output information for its programs and use that information to drive continuous improvement in service equity.