



## First and foremost...

Getting started on Community Development on the west side of the Cascades has been eye opening, overwhelming, and insightful. My role is designated the following counties: King, Pierce, Thurston, Lewis, Skamania, Cowlitz, Clark, and Mason. As I've visited the first few counties, it's apparent to me that CHA has been doing incredible work laying the foundation for the CDOs to build on across the state. Many community leaders know of CHA, are connected to Commissioners, or other folks connected in our agency. It has been exciting to share updates from our agency, learn about resources, and gather authentic input from community members. Over the last few months, I've been focusing on researching each county, networking, and coordinating Community Connection sessions.

Over the first five Community Connection sessions, I've noticed there are a few topic areas from the questionnaire that I've had the most conversations around:

[Learn more about the Washington State Commission on Hispanic Affairs](#)

(1) *When someone asks you your race or ethnicity, how do you respond?* The initial reaction from the majority of the community members is – “I don't know.” It's been humbling and affirming to see how many of us struggle with the question – even when we have resources to define each term. Some community members shared that the context matters – so depending on who is asking the question, their answer might change. Many individuals aren't comfortable writing out all three (race/ethnicity/nationality) and will often just write “Hispanic,” “Latino/a/x” or “Mexican” depending on how they identify. Many of the participants shared that they feel confused every time and feel forced to check “white” even though they don't have the same privileges of white people.

For me, there isn't a “right” answer; rather, you are who you are, so I invited them to share who they are in whatever way is most affirming to them. It also led to many conversations with individuals who are bi/multi-racial. One individual shared they don't feel “enough” to write down one or another other for fear of judgement or having to justify it to someone.

I had so many conversations around honoring both/multiple identities, and I did my best to help them see that they are enough of who they are regardless of how others racialize them. Some of these conversations are heartwarming, while some showed the weight many individuals are carrying around trying to figure out “who they are” because they know it; rather than “who they are” because others tell them. Each conversation has felt like a humanizing example of why it’s okay to be vulnerable with each other and lift one another up as we grapple our own truths.

*(2) If you could change our agency name to one that represents you best, what would it be?* Generally, many of the community members response to this question has been a shrug and “what do you think?” I always respond sharing some of the CHA history and talk about how some individuals use the term “Hispanic” while some in the community do not. It always leads to interesting conversation, and I’ve experienced a spectrum of responses. For example, one individual at the “We the People” convening shared that we are “Hispanic” and should embrace the term whether we like it or not because it’s on government forms, while another individual at the UW Tacoma Latinx Celebration shared that they believe the naming of the commission is outdated and they would “never serve on a commission using the term Hispanic” as it erases large groups of Latinos. As a CDO, I have done my absolute best to honor each truth and create the space to hear each perspective. Frankly, I think it’s going to be a dynamic conversation for CHA as we explore this topic further.

Beyond the content of the sessions, I’ve had several folks who are skeptical that we’re giving out fake gift cards and are hesitant to complete the survey as a result.

One high school student at the Latino Youth Forum shared their skepticism with me but offered to move forward with the questionnaire. They completed the questionnaire, received their stipend/gift card, then walked over to the coffee shop to test the gift card while looking back at me as they went over. They bought a coffee with the gift card, turned around and yelled to me across the concourse “IT WORKED!” with a huge smile on their face. After that, I had a full table of students the rest of the event.

We’re just getting started with the Community Connection sessions and I cannot wait to dive deeper. It’s been exciting to share more about CHA, learn from individuals across the state, build new relationships, and strengthen existing ones. It has been humbling to focus on the individual perspectives of our community and humanize each voice beyond the data we’ve been researching. Onto the next few counties!



**AMBER HOEFER**  
Community  
Development Officer

Phone: 360.742.1759  
Email:  
amber.hoefer@cha.wa.gov

Counties: King, Pierce,  
Thurston, Lewis,  
Skamania, Cowlitz, Clark,  
Skamania, Mason

#### About Amber

Amber Hoefer (she/they) was born in the Pacific Northwest but was raised throughout the country as her father served in the Navy. They hold a Bachelor of Arts in Communication Arts from the University of West Florida. Following their undergraduate degree, Amber moved back to the Pacific Northwest and earned a Master of Education degree from Oregon State University.