



## **Conversation with Lindsay Morgan Tracy and Lori Pfingst**

**Ashley Hopkinson**

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**Ashley Hopkinson:** Lindsay and Lori, can you introduce yourselves and share more about what you do?

**Lindsay Morgan Tracy:** I am Lindsay Morgan Tracy, Innovator-in-Chief on the Economic Justice Team, housed in the Department of Social and Health Services in Washington State.

**Lori Pfingst:** Hi, Ashley. I'm Lori Pfingst. I'm a Senior Director with the Economic Justice Team in the Department of Social and Health Services.

**Ashley Hopkinson:** Can you both tell me, how did you get started in this work and what do you think, in your particular area, from your particular purview, is distinctive about the work that you're currently doing?

**Lori Pfingst:** It wasn't a linear trajectory. Like a lot of people that do economic justice work, I have a personal story behind my why. Certainly, coming from a low-income background and a lot of the things that go along with that, I don't think I knew it at the time, but those experiences definitely put me on a trajectory. I started out doing work with survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault and working specifically with tribes down in rural Colorado. That was the kickstart of my career. Prior to that, I had worked in restaurants since I was 13 and put myself through college that way.

But I think working in the rural setting, and working with tribes, and working with survivors...it was a vocational call. So I moved to the Northwest because I wanted to learn more. I wanted to immerse myself in that field, and I ended up going to graduate school here, and poverty and inequality was the common thread throughout all the things I did. I knew pretty early on that I didn't want to be an academic. I'm a sociologist by training and I ended up getting my PhD, but wanted to be a translator of knowledge for change.

I worked in some advocacy organizations, but then the Great Recession (hit) in 2008 when I was coming out of grad school. I was working in the public policy realm, and at that time, every state was dealing with budget cuts and we were balancing budgets on the backs of people with low incomes and just seeing how that was affecting our communities. There was a window of opportunity to bring greater state accountability to poverty, economic justice, and (that question) what does it mean to be economically well?

The key thing about the way we have done our work, (is that) because we are a group of people who have lived experience ourselves and we know how important that is, we centered that in the way in which we did the work. We feel like that is the reason we are seeing success in Washington State on these issues. And not to say it's easy, it is not. But I think the centering of people with lived experience (and) the way in which we work with them as colleagues (helps). We also are trying to align all these different groups toward the common goal of poverty reduction.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Lindsay, how did you come to the work? What do you think makes the work distinctive from your perspective?**

**Lindsay Morgan Tracy:** Very similar to what Lori said. We are very mission-driven. So similar backgrounds, we all come with our lived expertise and why we got into this. Mine was through the avenue of helping to start what is the first national camp for children infected or affected by HIV or AIDS, and seeing the policies around that, as well as seeing deservedness, seeing the stigmas back in the day. I became a teacher to fight stigma through education. How do you communicate that thoughtfully, to teach people how to think, not what to think? That led me to (the question) how are we doing systems work? So I came into the nonprofit space to really do transformational work versus transactional work, and that's hard. That's a different competency to do outputs versus outcomes, evaluation versus research. It just is, and it's expensive. You have to have a lot of good training on it, which brought me to Washington State to do that for a county before Lori hired me to do that for the state.

We really talk about, not the how much we are doing but how well are we doing when it comes to changing lives to raise the economic floor. I really love that shift in thinking. The asset frame, that's critically important, (for example), when Lori said what each of our unique contributions are, we also utilize the theory of aligned contributions. What are each of our unique contributions towards that north star of wellbeing? And that's from an agency side, business side, lived expertise, nonprofit etc. So how are we operationalizing that?

Two more things I'd like to add, (one) is relational partnership. That goes across the board with your supervisors, with other agencies, whether it's data staff, communication staff, program/legislative staff. It's really critical to have all of those connections with the governor's office, the racial and ethnic commissions, with the people with lived expertise, with tribes, with labor, with the faith base, philanthropy, because we can't do this (alone), no one entity can do this alone. So how do we do it better together really matters. And so it's really that relational frame.

We really center humanity in our work. That's really been beautiful. And the fact that you said something about the systems, that it's not just homelessness, or education, or criminal justice, or healthcare, it's all of it. And there's intersectionality with all of it. So how are we doing that and not getting back into our siloed training, which everybody gets because that's manageable. So systems training is really hard, but absolutely necessary. If we're continuing to do the siloed thinking, then we're doing status quo work. How do we really upend the status quo?

**Ashley Hopkinson: That's a really good point. In a recent interview someone said, "We need systemic leaders," sort of like people who are really leading from the space of interconnectedness. I wonder if you can share an initiative, a pilot, a program, a framework, that you believe had an impact and was representative of your values. This leans toward what you were saying, Lindsay, with transformational work and what you were saying, Lori, with being a translator for change. Can you think of anything that comes to the surface?**

**Lori Pfingst:** There are so many examples but the one that immediately comes to mind probably for both of us is our work with a coalition called Just Futures. We're really leveraging the contributions of so many folks, we see ourselves as the connective tissue to hold up a result and to support all the aligned work, but no one person necessarily owns it. It's everyone doing their thing, and we're just that connective tissue that tries to bring it all together. One of the more profound examples is we released our 10-year plan to dismantle poverty. We released a draft of it in late February of 2020. We were about to go on this big roadshow, a community roadshow, to get all this feedback. And then of course, the pandemic hit, the shutdown happened, and we didn't let that stop us. We ended up doing probably over 100 presentations that year and just got tons of feedback. What we were worried about at the time was that all this work we had done up until that point with the emergency response, the focus on COVID, that our work would be brushed to the side. But because our work just illuminated all the inequality that exists and the uncertainty that accelerated all of that, it ended up being a plan that still resonated deeply, and leadership saw that.

However, a lot of folks we work with were deeply (concerned about) "How are we going to get vaccines out? How are we going to serve people?" all those very tactical challenges, and we had the

opportunity to step back and say, "We have a bigger plan. Where do we want to be on the other side of this crisis? Because there will be another side. And who do we want to be leading what that other side should look like? What would success look like if we did this well?"

"How would we measure that, and who's defining it? Who gets to define wellbeing on the other side of this monumental shift in our lives?" So out of those conversations with a lot of our partners in the community, Just Futures Coalition was born. The purpose of the coalition was really to start having the conversation with communities who had been historically left out. What does wellbeing look like? How would we define that? How would we measure it? What measures are important to you? But beyond that, who gets to tell the story? And it was really that piece that we realized is a huge. There's not a lot of opportunities for communities to own the story. We have a lot of data, but who gets to tell the story? Sometimes people are completely left out of data, and how is that story being told?

So that led to this model called Community Assemblies, in which we were able to secure funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and get this coalition's work off the ground, and it just got funded in the state budget for \$2 million to pilot this community assembly model. It's been four years of very deep collaborative work where we saw a need, but really helped bring a coalition's vision to the next level. We're going to pilot those community assemblies over the next year. So that's an example, that's about participatory decision making, that's about community definitions of wellbeing and measures of wellbeing, and what could be a transformational way in which decisions are made around policies, programs, and funding in our state. That's the systems change work that might not be intuitive...but is a missing ingredient at any level of decision making.

**Ashley Hopkinson : How did this all happen? How did it work out so well? Would you say that it was multiple people working together?**

**Lori Pfingst:** It's the expertise of many people coming together. And to what Lindsay said earlier, because of the way in which we did our work, we had built up a fair amount of trust with our community partners. That trust was hard won, but we put in the time. And so because of that, we were able to pivot during a huge crisis and work with those partners to ask ourselves those tough questions, and we had a foundation to have them. If we didn't have that, I don't think they would've gone anywhere. People wouldn't have given us the time. Everyone was so busy, but they saw the value in the questions we were asking, but it really was the expertise of so many great folks that trusted one another and were willing to lean in.

**Lindsay Morgan Tracy:** There's that quote, "Systems change moves at the speed of trust."

**Ashley Hopkinson: Lindsay, what program, initiative, pilot or framework comes to mind when you think about an example that has produced something that you would say, 'this is a wellbeing framework; this is economic justice.' ?**

**Lindsay Morgan Tracy:** Everything that Lori shared. I would also say that, because of how we've done our work, too, we've done a basic income feasibility study for the state, and what I'm really proud of was, in the way that we created the 10-year plan, we centered the experiences of those who stand to benefit the most from changes at the state level. We did that also with the basic income feasibility study, those who stand to benefit the most from a basic income, how would you co-design it, not have the academics and the researchers, but we were there to co-create all along the way to educate, teach them what this is, how much, where, all of the things, and it's a study that's been now used across the nation for others because of the how we did and put it together. So that's another example I would like to share, outside of the ones that Lori mentioned.

**Ashley Hopkinson: This is a good segue to the next question. You hinted earlier that transformational work takes time, and it takes funding, and it takes a lot of flexibility. So all this considered, given the right support, what would you like to see replicated or scaled?**

**Lindsay Morgan Tracy :** I don't think I can pick just one thing. I'm going to answer your question differently.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Sure, take the question and rework it. It's totally fine.**

**Lindsay Morgan Tracy:** What I'm finding is that with our state budgets, we are so confined to what we can do in a finite time frame. And so you could only do what's allowed in that budget line item, or in the proviso, or what have you. So I think, in order to be flexible and responsive to emergent themes and needs that arise from doing something new, philanthropy has been super helpful with that, and partnering with specific philanthropic entities has really been able to allow us to scale and/or create the proof points to scale and get them in budgets.

When you think of partnering with the government, most people probably wouldn't, but we really do that, and that comes with community, with all of the sectors that we have mentioned. I would just challenge those who are in the philanthropic sectors to look at government and those who are creating innovative solutions to upend the status quo and get to wellbeing, whether it's economic justice, racial justice, health justice, environmental justice. How do we do it better together? Because their dollars really do help us get the flexibility that we typically don't get with government dollars. We

need to fund community programs so, so, so much (but) how do we also do that where we're shifting policies that continue to undermine positive outcomes communities are trying to get?

**Ashley Hopkinson: In covering education policy in California, specifically early childhood and bilingual education, I would hear a lot, "Budgets are statements of value." I wonder if that's a challenge along the way. Do you feel like you're trying to convince people of the value of economic justice, the importance of financial security as a value? Is that something that you feel like you face as a challenge in this work?**

**Lori Pfingst:** Yes. We are definitely of the mindset and share the mindset that budgets are moral documents. And to Lindsay's point, the government has a role to play and, in many ways, is made out to be the villain. And that really undermines the public goods we all need to thrive, like education, or the roads that are being built, or so many things. And that narrative has been intentionally driven over a long period of time. Narrative is what drives policies, so we have to always counter those narratives. It's part of why we love Traban Shorters's work. There's a pathway there to be able to shift people's mindsets and mental models and how that might get a voter or a legislator to support a policy.

So I would say, yes, it's fundamental to everything that we do. And one of the biggest challenges we have is fighting the stereotypes of why people experience poverty. One hard lesson I've learned as a researcher is that a lot of the work that we do, research wise, is at this macroeconomic level, and the data that we report is at a population level. We are really good at talking about how much we do and how well we do it, "We serve this many people each year, or we put \$100 million into the community," or whatever it is. I'm just making up numbers, but did those things actually make a difference in somebody's life?

So the difference between our macro goals and the micro experiences of Washingtonians, both are super important, but how do we weave them together so that change is possible? You're seeing it right now in the current election cycle, where many indicators of economic wellbeing look good, but people's experiences with inflation, or the ability to afford food or groceries...they're not good. So there's this cognitive dissonance, and those stories are going to trump the narrative every time. It doesn't matter what the macro data says.

When you work directly with the community, you elevate those stories as a primary source of data, just like other data points, you're more likely to start shifting those mental models, and fight those narratives, and get budgets to invest money where the people are telling you it needs to be invested. People ask us a lot, "What did you do? How are you all having success? How are you doing this?" We're like, "Well, people share their stories with us and we listen, but beyond that, we just believe them." It's

actually not that hard to just believe somebody when they're telling you their story. And it just so happens that most of the data lines up with what they're telling you.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What would you say could improve collaboration and advance wellbeing in this space? How do you manage the work you do for economic justice with the real polarization that's happening in cities, counties, states, and our country?**

**Lindsay Morgan Tracy:** Yes, I'm going to give an example and attribute this to Lori. Back when we were creating the plan...you have 80 people in a room every single month creating a plan from all sorts of places, all different experiences, so you are not going to agree. And Lori couched it, saying, "We will not agree. We will disagree on the how, but we need to agree on that north star. And when we disagree with one another, will we show up the next day or the next month to continue this work?" And everyone said, yes. And I really think we've approached the work like that, how do we disagree and continue to do the work matters.

**Lori Pfingst :** Lindsay's being incredibly kind. That principle, that question of how do we show up when we disagree and when we disappoint one another, because we will (is important). And too often in this environment, when that is happening, we turn our backs on one another and we walk away. That is all about this divide and conquer strategy that has worked so well over hundreds of years that is intentional. And I know how hard it is...But it was interesting when there were people who I vehemently disagreed with in this process, but when Lindsay or I, or a lot of people would call each other up and say, "I don't agree with you, but I do want to hear ... I want to try to understand where you're coming from." When people felt heard, just the act of listening to them made them less defensive, took their guard down, made it feel like you really cared about what they were saying, and then it opened up this space where we could actually, for the most part, (see) the things we value and that we wanted were the same, and that we could say, "Well, I think that we know that this policy actually would really get us there."

We didn't have 100% agreement on every recommendation in the 10-year plan, but we had broad agreement that, "We agree with most of what's here and the things that we don't agree with, we understand why you would want that, and we're not going to get in the way. We may not be out there frontline advocating for it, but I get you and we're not going to be in the way of that."

The gravitational pull of the status quo is so strong. We need to have not just an equal and opposite reaction, but an equal, opposite, even more forceful reaction to these forces that are trying to keep us apart. There's a real reckoning around the justice movement right now that we're trying to deal with in

that way. If we don't come together, then the status quo will prevail. I don't always like what I hear, but I do respect people and try to give them the grace of understanding where they're coming from.

**Ashley Hopkinson:** That's really good. In doing this work, what would you say is one of your insights or takeaways? Do either of you have anything that comes to mind that you want to share? You shared a lot of great points, like community work, and interdependency, and bringing people together, but anything else?

**Lindsay Morgan Tracy:** This work is really messy, and being comfortable in ambiguity is also a super hard skillset. This work is iterative. It's not the thing. So many people are like, "It's this framework," or, "It's this thing we have to do." I think it's moldable. If we're trying to go someplace we've never been before, it has to be iterative in nature.

**Lori Pfingst:** Similarly, like we've shared in the conversation, when people share their story, believe them. If you don't, ask yourself why. What's going on in your mind that you wouldn't believe them? I think that kind of self-reflection needs to happen more often because we all have those built-in biases or ideas of what we think we know. People who have lived experience, recognizing their expertise as of equal value with all the other forms of expertise, it's not either/or, it's just that that has been such a missing piece in public policy.

The for-profit sector does it all the time, user experience, user testing, all of that. We don't do that for people who are experiencing poverty. So the more we can value that on equal measure with other experts and compensate them accordingly, I think that is a big nugget of wisdom. They bring so much, and they're colleagues of ours.

The other big thing is that when people ask ... "what are you doing? how'd you get in your career?" Try to tell people, the sooner you can develop the sense that it's not about you, the critique, when somebody is telling you that the program you're in, or the work you're doing, or they're asking you hard questions and your inclination is to take it personally, the sooner you can develop this idea that this is not about you, (the better).

However, once you really hear people out, you do have a personal responsibility to do something about it. If you can just check your ego and learn that skill sooner than later, it's going to give you the emotional intelligence and maturity to be in this work and sustain yourself and the work, because it's not easy.

That is a hard thing to learn, and it took me a long time. But now when people are upset or they don't like something, instead of getting defensive, I just lean in, like, "Tell me more. Okay, I hear that," and



they still may be mad at me but I know where it's coming from. It's usually coming from a place of deep, deep pain, and I respect that. There's so many things about seeing yourself as an agent of change in this bigger body of work and what that means. We've grown as people. So many people would say that, and so many people are responsible for creating a space where we were able to grow as people.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Yes, I imagine that it's really hard to continue to do this work if you're not growing, and changing, and evolving. I have a long definition for wellbeing economics but the short of it is, it's about "social justice on a healthy planet." And thinking about how our systems can better serve communities and the environment. How would you define wellbeing in connection to the work that you do now in economic justice?**

**Lori Pfingst:** Some of the things we've heard from folks, economic justice is the freedom to thrive, no matter what you look like, where you live, or who you love. Economic justice is not about being rich, it's about being well. There's other quotes in there, but it's no poverty, abundant opportunity, and the ability to be or just reach your full potential, the freedom to reach your full potential, whatever that is. Those are the themes that come to mind.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Thanks again. Really enjoyed our conversation.**

*Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.*

*\* This conversation has been edited and condensed.*