

Equitable Image Guide

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It is crucial that the visuals in Public Health messaging materials reflect the diversity of the King County communities we serve. When we are intentional about equity considerations, the images that we choose can connect with our audiences by reflecting people in our communities in ways that feel authentic. Images can also counter stereotypes rather than reinforce them if we are cognizant of biases and avoid selecting stigmatizing images.

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1. WHAT WE DO:

Image and Graphic Selection

Choose images that authentically represent the diversity of the intended audience.

Avoid staged or overly posed photos that may come across as inauthentic or tokenistic.

Prioritizing authentic photos taken of actual King County residents over stock photos creates a genuine and relatable representation of the community and builds a stronger connection with

the audience. As much as possible, include your intended population of focus in decisions about image choice.

Example (this is a stock photo in our image bank of fishers in King County that is for editorial use only):



Use heightened cultural sensitivity.

Consider the cultural context of the messaging and select images that respect and honor the traditions, customs, and values of specific communities. Could members of the specific communities see themselves in the images shown? Work with community members, leaders, and those with population-specific, lived experiences to develop and validate images to ensure they are culturally appropriate, clear, and inclusive.

Be intentionally inclusive in representation.

Ensure that the photos include individuals from various ethnicities, races, genders, ages, sexual orientation, abilities, family configurations, skin tones, and body types. Aim for a balanced representation that reflects the diversity of the intended audience.

For example, include in images:

- families with same gender parents; multiple generations in a household; parents of different races; adopted children
- large bodied people, people with dark skin tones, and people with disabilities in a variety of roles (such as in families, teachers, leaders, in work settings) and as examples of healthy living
- a variety of genders (see Language Considerations for Gender in the [Equitable Language Guide](#))

Examples:**Avoid and counter stereotypes**

Steer clear of using photos that perpetuate stereotypes or reinforce biases. Challenge preconceived notions and select images that portray individuals in a positive and empowering light.

For example:

- When selecting images to illustrate communications about the criminal legal system or drug use, avoid using images that reinforce harmful stereotypes of Black and Latinx people as associated with crime or drugs.
- Show people with disabilities involved in active, everyday roles, not as victims/sufferers or as heroes who have “overcome” a disability (see Language Considerations for People with Disabilities in the [Equitable Language Guide](#)).
- Learn about existing stereotypes and harmful caricatures so that you can have heightened awareness of potential stereotypes in imagery and representation.

Taking Photos**Center the community**

When taking photos, be intentional about who is centered in the images. The eye should be drawn to community members over Public Health staff and King County leadership in the composition of photos and images.

Example: the main focus in the photo below is on the members of the Community Health Board Coalition standing in the center. Public Health staff are to the side or kneeling.



Photo: Community Health Board Coalition

Ensure consent.

When using photos of King County residents or PHSKC programs, ensure you have permission to use that photo. Recognize that people might be comfortable giving consent for use of a story or photo and want to withdraw it later. Unless the person consents to future use, only use the photo for the specific project that the person has consented to. Even when people sign a consent form allowing use of the image into perpetuity, they may not understand what that means at the time of signing. Ask for consent again for any future use. *Photo release waivers can be found at the link in the resource section below.*

If you use a photo from a community partner, give the partner a photo credit.

Accessibility for images

Provide alt-text to describe images

Alternative text (alt-text) should accurately describe the content in an image to readers so that it can be read by a screen reader or other assistive technology. Alt-text should provide information about the image's purpose and how the image relates to the rest of the content. *Instructions for inserting alt-text are in the Alt-text resources at the end of this guide.*

When drafting alt-text:

- Use clear and informative language. Avoid using vague or ambiguous language that does not clearly describe the image.
- Avoid using complex descriptions that may overwhelm audiences using screen readers. Keep alt-text brief while still capturing the focus of the image. Put more detailed description in an image description field.
- End the alt-text with a period. This will make screen readers pause a bit after the last word in the alt-text, which creates a more pleasant reading experience for the user.

Including race, gender, age, and other identity characteristics in alt-text

- Alt-text is a substitute for an image, so include relevant details and descriptions about people shown. What’s relevant may change depending on the audience--write an alt-text that is as meaningful as possible for the user in the context they’re in. If you are using the image in which the identity attributes are given in the surrounding text, you can consider describing these characteristics.
- Representation matters. So while it’s important to keep alt-text short for screen readers, it can also be important to include information about identity characteristics such as skin tone or ethnicity, age, disability, and gender. This is information that sighted readers would get by looking at a photo. Inclusion of these descriptions also reflects the diversity of people and counters social norms that present White people as the default (see “The case for describing race in alternative text attributes” in the Resources).
- When describing people, we can’t assume identifiers such as race, ethnicity, age, or gender. If you are using photos in which those pictured have offered their identity descriptors, they can be put into alt-text. Describe physical characteristics (e.g., medium-dark skin tone) and use general age terms (e.g., teen, middle-aged) to the degree possible. (see “Best practices for writing image descriptions” in the Resources)

Example alt-text for a flyer about finding shingles vaccination locations for people 50 and older, intended for the Chinese community:

“Three older Asian people smiling, looking at smart phone screens.”



Note that the alt-text might leave out or include different details, depending on the context and audience. If this image was used on a general public blog about looking up vaccination locations online, you could use:

Alt-text: “Three people smiling, looking at smart phone screens.”

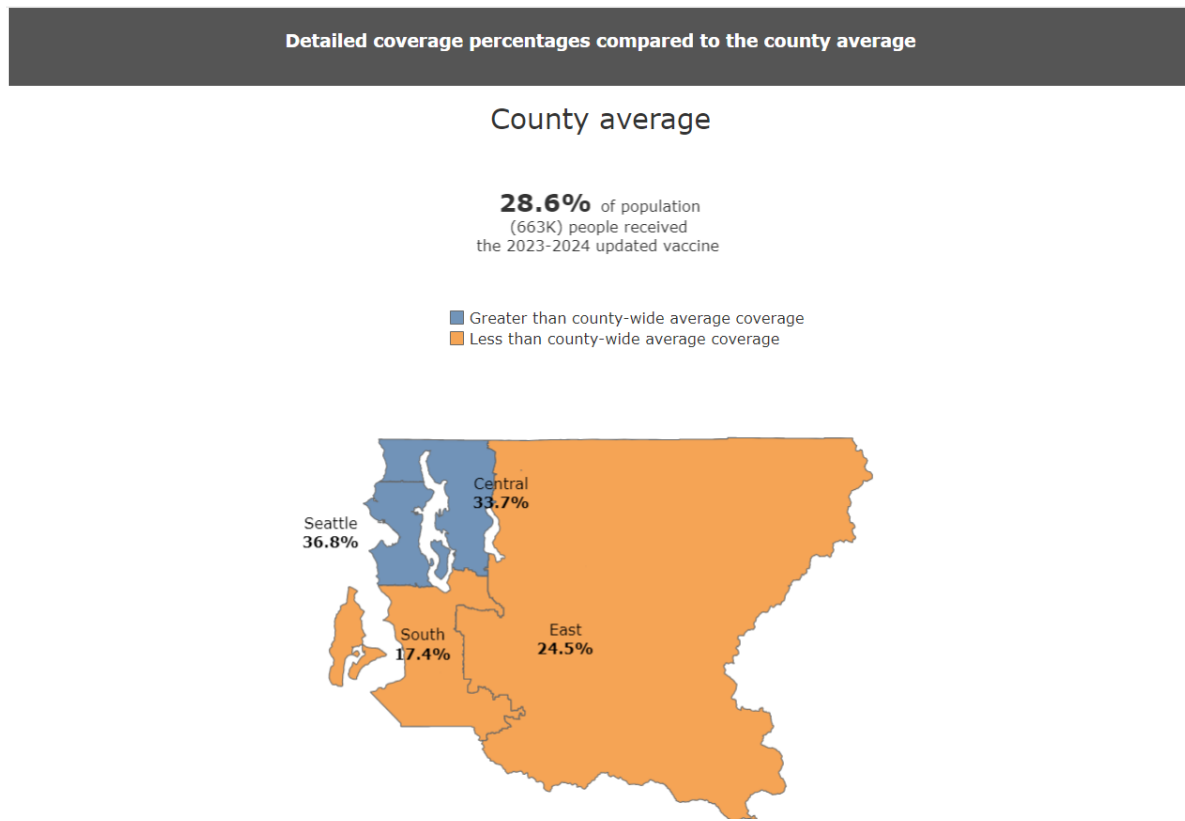
Image description: “Three women with short, black and graying hair and medium skin tone each hold a smart phone. They wear short sleeved shirts in blue and brown and two wear glasses. They are smiling, looking at the screen of the person in the middle as they sit on a couch. Sunlight streams through the window behind them.”

Use accessible and inclusive graphs and graphics

When incorporating graphs and graphics into content, make them accessible and inclusive for all audiences:

- Use clear and easy-to-understand graphs that effectively communicate the data and information illustrated. Descriptive titles, labels, and legends help readers interpret the content accurately and effectively.
- It is best to use high contrast and accessible color schemes to accommodate audiences with color blindness. Check to ensure the colors are accessible using a [color blindness simulator](#).
- Avoid using complex or cluttered graphics that may confuse or overwhelm readers. Keep the design simple, straightforward, and focused on the key message of the graph or graphic.
- Always provide alternative text or descriptions for graphics to ensure that readers with visual impairments can access the information.
- When making graphs or tables in a document, use techniques to make it accessible using a screen reader. (see [Tables in documents – Accessible Technology \(washington.edu\)](#))

Example of a clear and easy to understand graph (from [Summary of COVID-19 vaccination among King County residents - King County, Washington](#)):



[note: this is an image for illustration purposes. If created in a document, it should use accessibility features to use with a screen reader.]

2. WHY WE DO IT

- When focusing on a specific ethnic group, using images that feature individuals from that community can enhance relatability and engagement. By understanding the nuances of different communities, Public Health messaging can be tailored to address their specific concerns and needs.
- By incorporating diverse photos, these materials can better represent and resonate with the communities we serve. Including people from various backgrounds, ethnicities, ages, genders, and abilities helps to create a sense of inclusivity and ensures that everyone feels represented and valued.
- Using unbiased photos in public health messaging helps to break down barriers and challenge stereotypes, fostering a sense of belonging and acceptance among diverse populations.
- By selecting images that authentically represent diverse communities, we can create a sense of belonging and trust among individuals.

3. HOW WE DO IT

Instead of:	Do this:
Using stock images that depict diversity, but are not specific for your intended audience	Use images that are relevant to your specific program, section, or event. Reflect the diversity of your audience, including different races, ethnicities, genders, ages, abilities, and body types.
Only using photos of conventionally attractive models	Use images of the average person
Using images that reflect a generic, affluent monoculture	Use images that depict individuals from various socioeconomic backgrounds and cultural contexts.
Using photos taken of individuals at one King County event/photo shoot for another project without seeking consent for continued use	Seek consent for use of the photo for the new project or find a different image to use. It's better to err on the side of not using it than to have a community partner or King County resident upset because of continued use of their image.
Using images that depict traditional or cultural dress unless the message is specifically referencing customs in which traditional dress would be worn	Use images that reflect typical attire and settings for cultural groups in King County.

Starting alt-texts with “Image of” or “Photo of”	Start describing the image. Screen readers will automatically start with “image of.” If there’s a special type of image, or text in the image, you can include a note, such as: Parent holding a baby. Illustration.
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4. ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

PHSKC Resources:

This guide is part of a suite of tools on SharePoint to assist Public Health staff with effective and equitable communications:

- [Photo Release Document](#) (update in progress)
- [PHSKC Image Bank](#)
- [Equitable Language Guide](#)
- [Organizational Plain Language and Health Literacy Manual](#)
- [Public Health — Seattle & King County Communications Hub](#) (links to Language Access, templates, and other communications resources)

Inclusive images:

- CDC Resource: [Inclusive Images | Gateway to Health Communication | CDC](#)
- Webinar: [Inclusive Images for Social Sector Communications](#)

Alt-text resources:

- How to use alt text in Microsoft products: [Everything you need to know to write effective alt text - Microsoft Support](#)
- Creating alt text for images, written by a web developer with vision impairment: <https://axesslab.com/alt-texts/>
- [Should we mention race in alt text? | The Clarity Editor](#)
- [The case for describing race in alternative text attributes | by Tolu Adegbite | Shopify UX](#)
- Writing image descriptions: [Best Practices for Writing Image Descriptions - APLN](#)

Visual accessibility:

- [Coblis color blindness simulator](#)
- Colors for map accessibility: [ColorBrewer: Color Advice for Maps \(colorbrewer2.org\)](#)

The Equitable Image Guide is a work in progress

This guide is not comprehensive, and we recognize it is not perfect. We also acknowledge that there may be recommendations on images that will not resonate in all circumstances, and we encourage staff to be aware of the context for a particular communication.

We encourage continued dialogue with Public Health staff and most importantly, continued conversations with residents and communities. The guide will need continual review and revision.

For questions and suggestions, please contact the Communications Team at PHcomms@kingcounty.gov.