

Homeless System Response: Creating a Cultural Equity Plan: Organizational Policies and Procedures

Homelessness has had a disparate impact on communities of color and individuals identifying with marginalized populations for many years. Policies and procedures within agencies are a key resource in defining how agencies incorporate the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion throughout their core principles. A 2016 study, conducted by the Center for Social Innovation, confirms the dramatic over-representation of specific racial and ethnic groups in the homeless population. Specifically, Black people and Native Americans are the most disproportionately affected in [SPARC partner communities](#). Poverty alone does not explain the disproportionality: the percentage of people of color experiencing homelessness far outpaces their proportion of those living in deep poverty.

In 2020, COVID-19 has exacerbated the inequities for Black, Indigenous, and people of color and put them at further risk of homelessness and in need of assistance from the homeless services system at an even greater rate. Meeting the needs of these communities requires strengthening internal organizational policies and procedures to ensure racial equity to aid in overcoming these disparities. To help agencies review aspects of their own policies and procedures, and identify ways to build equity capacity, this tool outlines the following:

- **Key elements** of policies and procedures, and how they can create cultural equity within an agency;
- **A community example** of an organization that identified cultural racism, and how the new policy of cultural inclusion and procedures that outline how to make progress through diversity, equity, and inclusion standards created a process of change;
- **Next steps** an organization can plan through action steps; and
- Additional **resources** and links.

As centering racial equity is a continuous journey on multiple levels (personal, organizational, and communal), organizations are encouraged to use these practices as a starting point towards deeper discovery and dialogue.

Key Elements of Policy and Procedures

Policies and procedures are key tools used within organizations to help guide institutional knowledge and policy. It is important to delineate the difference between policy and procedures, and how each can affect and change an organization's cultural equity.

A **policy** is a guiding principle used to set direction in an organization.

A **procedure** is a series of steps to be followed as a consistent and repetitive approach to accomplish a result. Procedures often outline staffing roles and provide guidance to employees, funders, and the communities they serve.

Cultural equity embodies the values, policies, and practices that ensure that all people—including but not limited to those who have been historically underrepresented based on race or ethnicity, age, disability, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, socioeconomic status, geography, citizenship status, or religion—are represented in the development of

- agency policy;
- the support of staff and populations served;
- the nurturing of accessible, thriving venues for expression; and
- the fair distribution of programmatic, financial, and informational resources.

Policies and procedures should include how an organization ensures individuals being served receive the most culturally responsive resources and services they need. In order to reinforce this, the organization's policies and procedures must address and build on cultural equity capacity. Building equity capacity may require a review of your agency's policies and procedures. The chart below outlines key topics agencies that should be incorporated when reviewing and revising policies and procedures to ensure equity.

Key Topic Areas for Review

Data Collection and Review: Understanding how to collect, review, and analyze external data regarding the populations and subpopulations your agency serves, including services provided and staff roles within your agency. Data collected can reflect overall effectiveness: e.g., whether staff, at all levels within your organization, is representative of the populations served. Review of hiring policies may lead to amendment of hiring procedures based on data collection.

Cultural Recognition: Review current agency policies for paid time off, focusing on paid holidays. Policies should allow flexibility for staff to acknowledge the holidays they recognize. Create a vehicle to understand which holidays staff would like to celebrate. Policies may allow for a certain number of paid “floating” holidays available for staff who recognize holidays other than federally recognized holidays.

Equitable Professional Development: Include policies that clearly outline what opportunities are available for staff to continue professional development or continuing education for personal growth. These policies should ensure that opportunities and funding for continuing education is equitable for staff at all levels within the organization. Procedures should provide details on how staff can access and gain support in leadership development and staff promotions.

Staff Roles and Organization Representation: Describe the process to review policies and practices concerned with who represents the organization at meetings with stakeholders, funders, and work committees. Include review and revision of the practice of directors and managers being the agency’s representative(s) at outside meetings. It is important to break down hierarchies and to focus on sending staff with the skill sets that best reflect the work being done in the space.

Access to Agency Operations: Describe how your agency distributes and provides equitable access to organizational information, such as agency budgets, information on program funding streams, projections and ideas for new funding sources, or ongoing resources the organization expects to secure. Create procedures that ensures upper management discusses and provides access to internal organizational documents.

Mission Statement: Review the current agency mission statement and determine whether it is reflective of how the agency currently operates. If the mission statement does not incorporate cultural equality or does not reflect the cultural equity the agency includes, the mission statement may need to be reviewed and/or changed.

Community Example

Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence (GCADV)

Domestic violence is an issue of social injustice, rooted in oppression. To end domestic violence, active steps must be taken at individual, local, regional, and statewide levels to end all forms of oppression. More specifically, domestic violence cannot end without addressing the oppression of Women of Color (WoC).

In 2010, GCADV recognized that this critical piece of anti-racist analysis was missing from its work, specifically the work of undoing and ending racism. When GCADV took a closer look at itself, it found that not only was this analysis missing, but as an organization, GCADV was contributing to the perpetuation of racism. These outcomes were highlighted through the organization’s audit, which included “exit” interviews with staff. The audit revealed WoC, primarily Black women, were leaving or being fired and cited racism as the key factor. Interviews also made aware the lack of engagement and lack of desire to engage with staff and survivors who identified as WoC. With the results of the internal evaluation, GCADV made strides toward undoing racism through an organizational shift that created new priority overall.

Some specific changes included:

- **Creating a policy to actively incorporate strategies for supporting WoC leadership into GCADV’s strategic plan:** strategies included policy around funding allocations to specific agency roles and practices around supporting survivors of color, both programmatically and financially.
- **Adapting policy on hiring practices to be more inclusive of WoC:** new procedures included ways that interviewers were not just in leadership roles and were more representative of client populations.
- **Developing a plan to hire, develop and retain WoC staff:** new policy and procedures focused around new hiring practices changes and budgeted funds for trainings on cultural equality.
- **Creating and distributing GCADV job announcements to reach WoC:** new procedure included posting job announcements in publications or on platforms frequently accessed by people of color.
- **Dedicating time monthly for aspiring White allies to learn, reflect, and examine the impact of their privilege:** new procedure included a standing meeting referred to as the “undoing racism meeting.”
- **Creating safe spaces for WOC voices to be heard, to receive professional opportunities, and heal from the emotional labor of experiencing intersectional oppression.** New procedure included creating space for

WOC to meet and coordinate on cultural issues, design, and materials; as well as creating procedures for how to develop opportunities for mentorship.

To learn more about GCADV, go to: <https://gcadv.org/racialjustice/>

Next Steps

The first step in any racial equity work is acknowledgement that the work will be difficult, uncomfortable, and ongoing. Creating an equitable culture, and the policies and procedures to support the culture within an organization, takes time and effort. Organizations may take different approaches, and mistakes will be made along the way; however, if organizational staff can create space for honest, authentic conversations, progress can happen.

Organizations should create a workflow and plan to move forward on racial equity work. The plan should include common values and goals collectively decided upon and shared by all members of the organization, and may include a mission statement rooted in racial justice. The mission statement, values, and goals will likely help decide the next steps in the plan, to include new policies and procedures to carry out the new mission. As these will be created collaboratively, there can be a shared understanding that ensures everyone plays a part in determining what equitable outcomes will look like for your organization. Below are some basic ideas for next steps to take.

- **Organizational Change:** At the organizational or agency level, leaders and line staff can champion racial equity. Once policies are created to address organizational changes, procedures need to be implemented to support the new policies. Some strategies for new policies and procedures may include:
 - Train all staff working in the homeless services sector on understanding racism and the intersection of racism and homelessness, so they can target resources and develop or adapt programs for people of color.
 - Establish professional development opportunities to identify and invest in emerging leaders of color in the homelessness sector.
 - Create positions in organizations that are explicitly charged with creating equity-based responses to homelessness.
 - Create greater racial and ethnic diversity in boards of directors for local and national non-profit organizations working on homelessness.
- **Research:** The research and evaluation community working in the homelessness sector should embed an awareness of racial inequity into all of its work. Researchers should work to ensure they are not merely extracting knowledge from communities of color, but rather working in partnership with historically marginalized groups to establish new insights. Agencies can use this research to reflect on their own data and note key discrepancies or lack of racial equity.
- **Policy:** From a policy standpoint, solutions must be systemic, ambitious, and sustained. Such solutions require focused advocacy to shape political will and public support.
- **Trainings:** The racial equity journey is multifaceted, and individuals must engage in personal work parallel to organizational and community-level work. Staff surveys can ask what types of training would be most useful for the organization, and organizations can then follow up to create regular schedules for staff trainings for identified topics. Once trainings are decided, policies and procedures should be laid out for how and when training will be funded and available.

Additional Resources

- **Building Cultural Equity Plan:** <https://www.policylink.org/our-work/community/arts-culture/plan>
- **Racial Equity Resource Guide:** <http://www.racialequityresourceguide.org/organizations/organizations>
- **Tools for Change:** <https://toolsforchange.org/resources/>
- **Definitions worksheet—"The Dynamic System of Power, Privilege, and Oppression":** <http://www.opensourceleadership.com/documents/DO%20Definitions.pdf>
- **Race—Power of an Illusion:** http://www.pbs.org/race/000_General/000_00-Home.htm

Organizations weaving equity into work:

- **Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence:** <https://gcadv.org/racialjustice/>
- **USICH—Leaders Working to Achieve Racial Equity and End Homelessness:** <https://www.usich.gov/news/these-leaders-are-working-to-achieve-racial-equity-and-end-homelessness/>
- **Local and Regional Government Alliance on Race and Equity:** <https://www.racialequityalliance.org/>

Organizations that train on equity and racial justice:

- **People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond:** <https://www.pisab.org/>
- **Women of Color Network Inc.:** <https://WoCninc.org/>
- **Training for Change:** <https://www.trainingforchange.org/>
- **Center for Equity and Inclusion:** <https://ceipdx.org/>