

COVID-19

Homeless System Response: Equity Capacity Building: Hiring, Supervision, Training

Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) have faced systemic, social, and health inequities in the U.S. since its inception. Historically, BIPOC communities have been disparately impacted by strategic practices of geographic isolation by race and ethnicity, laws aimed at controlling housing affordability or the locations where specific racial populations are housed, and growing wealth and resource gaps. Factors such as these have contributed to the continuous overrepresentation of specific racial and ethnic communities in the homeless system. The existing inequities in earning, employment, health, and social conditions have been exacerbated by COVID-19, and the pandemic has increased the risk for BIPOC to need assistance from the homeless response system.¹ Information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) shows connections between higher rates of hospitalization or death from COVID-19 in specific BIPOC communities and the historical oppressions faced by these communities.

According to the 2016 Supporting Partnerships for Anti-Racist Communities (SPARC) report conducted by the Center for Social Innovation, approximately two-thirds (78 percent) of people experiencing homelessness were BIPOC.² At the same time, the study showed that those working in the homelessness field did not represent the racial and ethnic demographics of those being served. Representation is critical for an effective homeless response system; organizational staff should be reflective not just of the racial and ethnic demographics of the community being served, but the diverse experiences and identities as well.

In a 2017 Spreading Community Accelerators through Learning and Evaluation (SCALE) initiative report entitled *Engaging Community Members with Lived Experience*, community residents with lived experiences across a range of social justice issues such as homelessness, substance abuse, and violence were part of the core SCALE teams created in communities. Referred to as community champions, these individuals directly engaged with system stakeholders working to improve health, well-being, and equity within their communities. Their engagement in SCALE efforts not only brought their lived experiences and challenges to the center of the work, but also the lived experiences and challenges of their peers, thus highlighting the broader spectrum of community experience. Inclusion of diverse community members with lived experience also re-established community trust that institutions would not abandon them and valued their leadership in developing solutions and efforts to address critical social justice issues in their communities.³ Organizations that want to address and overcome these disparities must make a commitment to strengthen their internal organizational equity practices.

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 within an organization takes time and effort, and learning continues throughout the process. Every organization will take a different approach and mistakes will be made along the journey; however, if organizational staff can create space for honest, authentic conversations, progress will happen.

Organizations should create a plan to move forward on racial equity work. This plan should be informed by a racial equity audit of the organization's current state of diversity and it should include common values and goals collectively decided upon and shared by all members of the organization. This should be rooted in a mission statement that advocates for racial justice. The mission statement, values, and goals will determine the next

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/racial-ethnic-minorities.html> and https://nlchp.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Racism-Homelessness-and-COVID-19-Fact-Sheet-Final_2.pdf

² <https://c4innovates.com/training-technical-assistance/sparc/>

³ https://app.ihl.org/Marketing/program_documents/P2PH/Engaging-Community-Residents-with-Lived-Experience_7.10.17.pdf

steps in the plan. As these will be created collaboratively, a shared understanding ensures everyone plays a part in determining what equitable outcomes look like for your organization. Throughout this document are ideas and resources that can become a part of your organization's racial equity plan.

The following key practices should be woven into all aspects of the organization to build internal equity capacity:

- Continuous evaluation and development of hiring practices and procedures that promote equity and organizational accountability;
- Supportive and transparent supervision that promotes leadership, retention, and mutual opportunities for feedback and accountability; and
- Provision of ongoing training opportunities for staff to deepen their understanding and analysis of racism and oppression and strengthen their knowledge and practice of equity.

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.

Education

Leaders should create a culture of equity capacity building with the expectation that staff, at all levels of leadership, educate themselves on racial equity. While this seems obvious, it should be noted how integral this is to the work. Racial equity work has been occurring for quite some time, and there are national and regional experts doing great work to build greater racial equity in the world. Leaders should not hold an expectation that BIPOC within the organization lead the internal equity building efforts unless those individuals have expressed a desire to lead those efforts. Leaders should seek out resources from the experts and be committed to lifelong learning on this topic. If staff members see leaders educating themselves, they will see the personal investment and recognize how important this is for the entire organization. PolicyLink just released [A CEO Blueprint for Racial Equity](#), a document that may help leaders begin their own work towards leading their organizations to greater racial equity.

Staff Surveys

Organizations interested in learning more about the agency's culture and perceptions can create an anonymous survey that is distributed to all staff members. If possible, have the survey created and the results analyzed by organizations that specialize in this work. Staff members need to feel they can be completely honest in the survey in order to discover whether the organization's culture is perpetuating cultural stereotypes or suppressing authentic representation from BIPOC and others that identify with marginalized populations. To further transparency, the aggregate results should be made available to all staff. These results can lead to conversations within the agency on next steps toward greater racial equity, and they can also be used as a concrete tool to develop an action plan.

Hiring Practices and Procedures

When the people in leadership and frontline staff roles reflect the communities they serve, their clients receive the most culturally responsive resources and services they need. Accomplishing this begins with ensuring a diverse recruitment process that includes marketing efforts that reach a diverse pool of candidates.

Human Resources (HR) Audit

An HR audit can be as comprehensive as it needs to be, but a basic audit will look at the following:

- **Staff Demographics.** How many BIPOC work in your organization and what are their roles/responsibilities? Are BIPOC represented in all levels of the organization? Are BIPOC overrepresented in certain levels? Are BIPOC leaving the organization at a different rate than non-BIPOC? Organizations should identify any trends that reflect inequity and make corrective plans of action.
- **Salary/Title Promotions.** Are the salaries for BIPOC within your organization equitable for their work and experience? How many BIPOC have been promoted and/or placed in leadership positions within the past 12 months compared with their white counterparts? Looking at how BIPOC are promoted (or not promoted) can begin a dialogue about how promotions occur within the organization and if opportunities are available to all staff members or just a few.

- **Employment Notices.** Where are employment notices posted? Are they accessible to BIPOC? Is the response to your employment postings reflective of the race/ethnicity of the community being served? Organizations should ask why this occurs and make corrective plans of action.

Ideally, an HR audit will be conducted by a third party to guarantee objectivity, but organizations can do this on their own as well, if resources are limited. Organizations can address many of these questions by incorporating exit interviews as a part of staff departure from the organization.

Position Announcements and Recruitment

The hiring process can be informed and impacted by many factors. For example, when hiring for positions, organizations often list requirements that are not essential, may screen out people with lived experience such as grassroots community-based organizers, and post announcements on limited platforms. To overcome this, organizations should ask themselves whether the requirements in a job announcement are necessary. If the organization uses recruitment management software, include expanded keyword or phrase searches that capture particular sets of knowledge, skills, or lived experiences.

Organizations should implement a hiring practice of posting job announcements in publications or on platforms that are frequently accessed by BIPOC. Examples include Historically Black college and university job boards; community-based publications, organizations, or businesses that specifically cater to BIPOC; social media platforms; or faith-based community publications or announcement platforms. Noting the organization's current diversity statistics in announcements and having print material made that is reflective of the population served and the organization's diversity can also encourage a more diverse candidate pool. Additionally, announcements can be strengthened by directly stating the organization's commitment to diversity and that BIPOC and people identifying from other marginalized communities are encouraged to apply.

To evaluate the success of their approach, organizations can set goals and develop measurable outcomes. An example of this could be setting time-sensitive, incremental goals that aim to increase the percentage and retention of BIPOC staff. Setting goals in this manner encourages actionable planning, a process that continuously assesses efforts and allows for adjustments to be made in order to best reach goals. Together, these things contribute to mechanisms of accountability for the organization.

Applicant Selection

Other factors that can unintentionally impact the hiring process include practices of gatekeeping and inherent bias. Examples of these behaviors include having an interview panel that is not reflective of the community served and not using standardized interviews or vetting processes. It is important for organizations to recognize and understand how these behaviors can inform every part of the hiring process, from resume review and selection to candidate interviews. Changes to hiring processes, such as setting diversity goals to more intentionally center racial equity, opens opportunities for candidates to demonstrate diverse skill sets and lived experiences. Examples of ways to approach applicant selection include using structured interview tools and leveraging [artificial intelligence](#) to ensure diverse candidates are not screened out because of unconscious bias.

Providing staff with opportunities to learn, reflect, and address how factors such as these impact decisions can aid in moving organizations closer to having staff that are more reflective of the communities served. Information on gatekeeping and inherent bias can be found in the New Social Worker's article, ["Achieving Racial Equity Through Social Work: Gatekeeping and Manifestations of Racism."](#)

Cultivating Talent and Advancing Leadership

Organizations should develop ways to internally analyze power structures, lift up BIPOC's leadership, and explore mechanisms for accountability and feedback. For example, review organizational charts to see if the community being served is reflected in the agency's leadership. Find ways to develop new and innovative leadership roles that align with the needs of the organization and skill sets of staff and identify ways to financially compensate. If staff salary increases are challenging, consider other benefits the organization can offer such as a flexible work schedule, additional personal leave, professional development opportunities, and options to apply mainstream holiday time to holidays that are culturally significant to them.

Leadership support that is trauma-informed allows for reflection; support that values racial equity learning occurring on a continuum is critical. Building staff knowledge on subjects such as the historical oppression of marginalized BIPOC communities, racial trauma and its impact across lifespans, micro-aggressions, and implicit bias aid in the development of supervisory skill sets and support greater rates of retention for BIPOC staff. Practical knowledge in how to address these things when they arise within the practices of the organization or among colleagues is equally important. Staff in supervisory roles should also be intentional in how support is provided to staff. Create opportunities for staff to feel safe in reporting micro-aggressions or other situations that have occurred and if conflicts arise between colleagues, address them quickly and offer mediation by an objective third party if the situation warrants this response. Additionally, setting clear expectations, working collaboratively to set consistent check-in times, intentionally supporting staff through new tasks assigned, and providing ongoing, solution-based feedback is key to staff satisfaction. Weaving these practices into supervision and the larger organization contributes to actively centering racial equity and staff retention.

Training

Trainings that focus on equity—both explicitly and at various issue intersections, inform organizational recruitment practices, service practices, and program offerings. This includes trainings that focus on racial trauma, systemic oppression, working through an anti-racist lens, and other key subjects that contribute to building equity capacity. Building such knowledge strengthens an organization’s ability to reach and serve diverse communities and fosters opportunities for the development of programming and services that are creative and culturally relevant. As a matter of best practice, organizations should strive for equity training to be consistent across staffing to ensure that internal reflection and external efforts are occurring from a shared analysis. In welcoming new staff, equity training should be institutionalized as a part of the orientation process. The racial equity journey is multifaceted, and individuals must engage in personal work alongside organizational and community-level work. The staff survey can be used as a tool to ask for recommendations of training topics and encourage the identification of trainings that would be most helpful for the organization. The organizations should then create regular times for staff and leadership trainings on the identified topics.

Conclusion

To authentically embody the principles and practice of racial equity, learning and unlearning must continuously occur at both the individual and organizational level. A holistic systems response that values the experiences and meets the needs of all people cannot be accomplished without taking the conscious steps to enhance our understanding and analysis of racial equity. In addition to the information above, the resources below can be of support on this continuous journey.

Resources and Tools to Orient a Leader New to Racial Equity Work:

- **Racial Equity Resource Guide—**
<http://www.racialequityresourceguide.org/organizations/organizations>
A searchable database, by state and area of focus, of various organizations working at the intersections of racial equity and various issues and topics.
- **Tools for Change—**<https://toolsforchange.org/resources/>
A variety of resources for racial equity learning and practice on both the individual and organizational level.
- **Definitions worksheet: “The Dynamic System of Power, Privilege, and Oppression”—**
<http://www.opensourceleadership.com/documents/DO%20Definitions.pdf>
A list of commonly used terms in racial equity work.
- **Race—Power of an Illusion—**http://www.pbs.org/race/000_General/000_00-Home.htm
A documentary series that lays out a foundational understanding—through a scientific, social, and institutional lens—of how the social construct of “race” was created.

Organizations Weaving Equity into Their Work:

- **Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence—**<https://gcadv.org/racialjustice/>
- In 2010, the Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence (GCADV) sought to address the disproportionate rate at which Black/African American women were dying in the state due to domestic violence. Additionally, GCADV historically faced challenges in the retention and leadership promotion of women of

color within the organization. This site provides background information on the organization's racial equity journey, provides examples of changes that have been made within the organization, and provides a host of resources focused on building racial equity capacity.

- **The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness: 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/>
- This article provides examples of how four organizations are institutionalizing anti-racist policies and practices and centering equity across identity and experience.
- **Government Alliance on Race and Equity**—<https://www.racialequityalliance.org/>
- This is a national network of governments working to achieve racial equity through programming, policies, and institutional strategies. This site provides racial equity tools, resources, and trainings for local and regional governments.

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/>