

Racial Equity

The Responsibility and Opportunity for Local Government

THE PROBLEM

From the inception of our country, government at the local, regional, state and federal level has played a role in creating and maintaining racial inequity. Despite progress in addressing explicit discrimination, racial inequities continue to be deep, pervasive and persistent across the country. Racial inequities exist across all indicators for success, including in education, criminal justice, jobs, housing, public infrastructure and health, regardless of region.

Many current inequities are sustained by historical legacies and structures and systems that repeat patterns of exclusion; for example, because funding for schools comes from a local tax base, racial and economic segregation in housing leads to tremendous inequities in education, which itself perpetuates inequality. Although there is a strong relationship between race and class, simply talking about class is not enough. Taking a “color-blind” approach to governance allows racial inequities to continue. Local government should therefore explicitly target both racial and economic inequities.

THE SOLUTION

Local government has the ability to implement policy change at multiple levels and across multiple sectors.

Examples of local government successes include the following:

- Passage of policies such as ending zero-tolerance discipline policies (in **Philadelphia**) and ending use of criminal background checks in employment decisions (in **Seattle**),
- Fundamental shifts in the inclusion of communities of color in government (in **Madison, WI**),
- Working to eliminate racial inequities in employment (in **Minneapolis**),
- Use of a Racial Equity Tool in budget, policy and program decisions (in **Seattle** and **King County**),
- Analyzing and using data to motivate action (in **Dane County, WI**), and
- Developing and implementing a Campaign for Racial Equity (in **Seattle**)

Key lessons learned across jurisdictions include the following:

ANALYSIS: Jurisdictions must use a racial equity framework that clearly articulates the differences between individual, institutional and structural racism, as well as implicit and explicit bias.

CAPACITY: Jurisdictions need to be committed to the breadth and depth of institutional transformation so that impacts are sustainable. While the leadership of elected and appointed officials is critical, changes take place on the ground, and infrastructure that creates racial equity experts and teams throughout local government is necessary.

TOOLS: Racial inequities are not random; they have been created and sustained over time. Inequities will not disappear on their own. Racial Equity Tools must be used to change the policies, programs and practices that are perpetuating inequities. Such tools lay out a process and a set of questions to guide the development, implementation and evaluation of policies, initiatives, programs, and budget issues.

DATA & METRICS: Measurement must take place at two levels – first, cities should measure the success of specific programmatic and policy changes, and second, they should develop baselines, set goals, and measure progress. Use of data in this manner is necessary for accountability.

PARTNERING: To achieve racial equity in the community, local government must work in partnership with community and other institutions to achieve meaningful results.

URGENCY: While there is often a belief that change is hard and takes time, history has shown repeatedly that political will can lead to rapid reforms. The alignment of political priorities with concrete policy and behavior changes has led to important societal shifts. Similar success can be had in achieving racial equity if local officials are motivated by urgency.

INCREASING EVERYBODY’S WELLBEING: Local government’s focus on racial equity is critically important to getting to different outcomes in our communities. The goal must be beyond closing the gap; leaders must establish appropriate benchmarks that lift up all populations while paying close attention to those often excluded. Implementing

strategies to “close the gaps” from this perspective has been called “targeted universalism.” Advancing equity means focusing on more than just disparities. Systems that are failing communities of color are actually failing all of us.

For instance, although there are a disproportionate number of youth of color who do not graduate from high school, there are many white students as well. Evidence has shown that truly systemic strategies work better for all youth. Additionally, disproportionalities in the criminal justice system are devastating for communities of color, most specifically African-American men, but are financially destructive and unsustainable for everyone. Dramatically reducing incarceration and recidivism rates and re-investing funds in education would work to our collective benefit. Lastly, when voting was/is constrained for black and brown voters, low-income white voters are also likely to be excluded. The goal is not to just eliminate the gap between different races, but to increase success overall.

Targeted universalism develops goals and outcomes that will result in improvements for all groups, but the strategies are targeted based on the needs of a particular group. Targeted universalism will increase our collective success and be cost effective.

LEADING WITH RACE: Focusing on race provides an opportunity to also address other ways in which groups of people are marginalized, including based on gender, sexual orientation, ability, and age. To have maximum impact, focus and specificity are necessary. Strategies to achieve racial equity differ from those to achieve equity in other areas. “One-size-fits-all” strategies are rarely successful.

However, a racial equity framework that is clear about the differences between individual, institutional and structural marginalization, as well as the history and current reality of inequities, does have applications for other



“Without a broad and deep commitment to a genuinely shared and comprehensive strategy, we are never going to get beyond small, fragmented, often narrow programs and services that are insufficient in scale, intensity, continuity, and scope to make a lasting impact on the life trajectories of at-risk children and their families.”

– Race to Equity, Wisconsin Council on Children and Families

marginalized groups Race can be an issue that keeps other marginalized communities from effectively coming together. An approach that recognizes the inter-connected ways in which marginalization takes place will help to achieve greater unity across communities. It is critical to address all areas of structural inequity, and an institutional approach is necessary across the board.

LANDSCAPE AND RESOURCES

John Powell, Director of the Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society at UC Berkeley, and Julie Nelson, Haas Institute Senior Fellow and former director of the Seattle Office for Civil Rights / Race and Social Justice Initiative are working to support and align local government’s work on race and equity, including by: (1) Conducting a baseline assessment of work being done by local government to eliminate racial inequities; (2) Supporting a cohort of local governments that are at the forefront of work to eliminate racial inequities; and (3) Identifying best and next practices for racial equity.

To learn more about the project, contact Julie Nelson, Senior Fellow at the Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society at UC Berkeley, julie.nelson62@gmail.com, 206-816-5104.

Local Progress is a national municipal policy network of local elected officials and partners who want to create more just and equitable cities. Our purpose is to build a broad network to support and learn from each other, share best practices and policies, and develop strategies for advancing shared goals.

The **Center for Popular Democracy** promotes equity, opportunity, and a dynamic democracy in partnership with innovative community-based organizations, elected officials, local and state networks, and progressive unions across the country. We work with our allies to design, pass, and implement cutting-edge state and local policies that deliver tangible benefits for working families.