

# Achieving Equity: Why We Must Start with Race First

ALEXIS COBBINS

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States of America was founded with racist beliefs, policies, and practices baked into its core which are still perpetuated today. Black, Indigenous, and Brown people have always been the focus of exclusion and continue to be burdened by these laws and systems. Government created and has been complicit in systemic racism and is now owning their role in fixing the inequities people of color face. Traditionally this work has been couched in a diversity, equity, and inclusion lens which has not been effective at making true change because it is

categorically too broad. By being explicit in calling out attempts to make changes for Black, Indigenous, and Brown populations, government can apply appropriate methods to this work that take the unique experiences of burdened populations into account while creating solutions, as well as be held to higher accountability around whether or not improvements were made. Government needs to dig deeper in their work to get at the root causes of the disparities we see as well as make reparations to the communities affected.

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## Introduction

Equity is defined as justice according to natural law or right, specifically freedom from bias or favoritism.<sup>7</sup> The focus of equity is usually on leveling the playing field between the dominant group and minority groups. This definition is controversial because laws and policies in the United States of America have historically been used to exclude groups of people based on race. As a result, structural racism is deeply embedded into many of our systems. Racism has affected the wealth and economic stability of people of color. By 2020, White American households are projected to own 86 times more wealth than African American households and 68 times more wealth than Latino households.<sup>1</sup> Housing access has been a prominent field for the enactment of structural racism.<sup>2</sup> Redlining is a process where mortgages, insurance, and other goods and services are refused to an area based on race because the non-White residents' presence makes the area an economic risk. This process was in place until the late 60s and directly impacted African American families. They were forced to get predatory loans and excluded from wealth accumulation, and African American soldiers were unable to take advantage of their Veterans Affairs benefits. Property values were also tied to school funding, leading to schools in neighborhoods where people of color resided not having equal resources to educate students. Racism in our justice system disproportionately impacts people of color. More African Americans are under correctional control today than were enslaved in 1850. And, due in large part to the mass incarceration of Black fathers, a Black child born today is less likely

to be raised by both parents than a Black child born during slavery.<sup>2</sup>

Race continues to be an indicator for success in a variety of areas including employment, education, health, and involvement in the criminal justice system just to name a few. From the founding of our country, government has played a role in creating and maintaining racial inequities based on laws and policies created to exclusively deny rights and opportunities to specific groups of people. Local and regional governments have the power to implement policy change at multiple levels and across multiple sectors in order to drive larger systemic change. The Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE) is a national network of governments working to achieve racial equity and advance opportunities for all. GARE leads with race because the perpetuation of racial inequities has been institutionalized into government and focusing on racial equity provides the opportunity to introduce a framework, tools, and resources that can be applied to other areas of marginalization. Racial equity 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.<sup>3</sup>

## Solano County

Solano County is a growing community situated between San Francisco and Sacramento. It has a mix of rural and suburban lifestyles and easy access to urban metropolitan areas. Solano County's Health and Social Services Department was created by the Board of Supervisors in 1992. The department employs over 1,262 employees and is organized into

seven program service areas. Their mission is to promote healthy, safe, and stable lives and have diversity, respect, integrity, fairness, transparency, equity, and responsiveness as their values.

Data from the county indicated that Solano County residents had different experiences based on race. Black students have the highest suspension rate among the K-12 student population, nearly 2.4 times the County's rate and 3 times the rate of White students. Of the Black students who were suspended, 41.6% had more than one suspension. Suspensions disrupt learning patterns for students, making it difficult for them to stay on track with classwork and homework. African Americans and Native Americans are tied for the lowest employment rates in the county. African Americans represent the highest number of individuals living in poverty in the county. The median household income for African Americans in Solano County is \$53,735 which is \$20,208 less than the median income for Whites. Black babies born today in Solano County are more likely to live nearly seven years less than the average Solano County residents. Black mothers have the highest rate in the County for low birthweight births.

In January 2016, Solano County Health and Social Services Department engaged in a year-long learning collaborative hosted by GARE. The objectives were to introduce tools and resources for advancing racial equity which included a racial equity tool for use in program, policy, practice, and budget decisions, a racial equity training curriculum, and building an actionable Racial Equity Plan. Currently they are hosting race-based groups where they are going over all of the data as it relates to race in the county and inside of the agency while continuing to work on their Racial Equity Action Plan.

Solano County's Racial Equity Action Plan covers six key areas. The first one is organizational commitment, where strategies include normalizing conversation and building internal commitment. The second area of focus is on hiring, recruitment, and retention, where the goals are making sure the workforce reflects the community it serves at all

levels and carrying out intentional inclusiveness for hiring a diverse county workforce and incorporating equity language into the whole hiring process. Contracting is another area of focus, where the key goal is to make sure contractors reflect the communities they serve at all levels. Community engagement is the next area of focus, where the goals are to ensure the provision of efficient and effective service and to foster leadership within communities of color. The Racial Equity Action Plan also focuses on data, where strategies include developing a policy to standardize how county agencies gather race/ethnicity data and developing a comprehensive understanding of racial demographics in Solano County, including changes over time. Lastly, there is a focus on understanding the racial history of Solano County.<sup>4</sup>

### **City and County of San Francisco**

San Francisco is a unique metropolis known for its historic monuments, diversity, and being on the cutting edge of innovations. In 2004, The Departments of Human Services and Aging and Adult Services were merged to create the Human Services Agency. In 2012, the Office of Early Care and Education was established inside of the department. The Human Services Agency employs over 2,200 employees and provides over sixty services. The mission is to promote well-being and economic security among individuals, families and communities in San Francisco.

Similar to Solano, data from San Francisco County also indicates that residents have a different experience based on race. African American residents have the highest unemployment rate in the city. The median income for African Americans in San Francisco is \$46,571 compared to \$106,919 for whites. The median value of assets for White families is \$116,000 compared to \$2,000 for Hispanic families and \$1,700 for African American families. As the cost of living in San Francisco rises, the demographics are expected to shift; by 2040, the White population is anticipated to increase by 10 percent while the Black population decreases by two percent. African American youth ages 10-17 in San Francisco represent less than 10 percent of the group

but account for almost half the percentage of youth booked into the San Francisco Juvenile Hall.<sup>2</sup>

Through its partnership with GARE, HSA seeks to eliminate race-based outcome gaps so that race does not predict a person's success, while also improving outcomes for people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds.

In 2018, The Human Services Agency who had also been participating in GARE convened a Racial Equity Work Group made up of a mix of employees and developed strategies to advance racial equity with the agency. They created a Racial Equity Action Plan focused on three domains. The first one is Recruitment and Hiring, where strategies include performing active recruitment in underrepresented communities of color, enhancing clarity and accessibility in the hiring process, and using data to inform policy and practice. The second domain is Leadership Development and Promotion, where the focus is on encouraging learning at every level of the HSA workforce and facilitating career development aligned with professional growth. The final domain is Organizational Culture, where the strategies are leadership demonstrating a commitment to promoting a culture of racial equity, fostering staff capacity to operationalize racial equity in professional practice, and sustaining an explicit and ongoing commitment to advancing racial equity.<sup>5</sup>

## Recommendations

Commitment to equity means an organization must restructure power in a way that the organization's accountability is reflected in leadership, priorities, and organizational structure. To truly achieve equity for all marginalized groups, you must start with race equity. Race equity is the condition where one's racial identity has no influence on how one fares in society. Through the work of GARE and the recognition from organizations that something must be done from an organizational standpoint, several county agencies have begun the work of being thoughtful and intentional about doing work to advance racial equity in their respective agencies. Race continues to be a difficult subject for most

people to discuss; people tend to find more comfort in discussing diversity and inclusion rather than race specifically. In order to move race equity work forward in more intentional ways, the approach to the work must be explicit and adept.

### RECOMMENDATION ONE:

#### MOVING PAST UNCONSCIOUS BIAS TRAINING TO TRANSFORMATIVE TRAININGS

Training around unconscious bias tends to stay at a shallow level and does not push participants to think deeper about the ways structural racism has impacted their biases. Staff need to be connected to why they are being trained and there needs to be accountability built in around what they are going to do as a result of the training as it relates to their role in the organization. Trainers must combat the perspective that racial equity only concerns people of color by explaining that racially equitable solutions improve life for everyone. The training should be facilitated by someone experienced in race equity rather than being placed in the lap of the Human Resources Department to run. Training should take participants through a journey around our country's complex relationship with race which requires an understanding of race, structural racism, and adult learning theory. People of color must be represented in the curriculum design and facilitation of the training; agencies should be intentional about bringing in facilitators of color to provide trainings they have designed. If their perspectives are excluded, racial bias is further perpetuated by not taking into account the validity of their experiences in an area they are directly impacted by. Training must be ongoing and thought of as a journey to be effective. Self-awareness, empathy, the eradication of racial and unconscious or implicit bias, and acknowledgement of the humanity of Black and Latinx people cannot happen in a one-day training once a year.

### RECOMMENDATION TWO:

#### FOCUS ON BLACK AND LATINX COMMUNITIES

Accountability is critical in advancing racial equity. Blanket terms such as "marginalized" lead to room

for debate about who we are talking about and distracts from the work that needs to be done. By explicitly naming Black and Latinx communities as a focal point, the impact can be measured. All communities are impacted by structural racism; by focusing on groups that have been most impacted by it, we can apply our learnings and strategies to all marginalized groups. Structural racism continues to have effects on these communities mainly because it is invisible. By understanding the historical context of our country, it can be better understood how race is structurally situated. American systems have historically and deliberately decimated wealth that these communities created for themselves through various policies such as preventing Blacks from participating in the GI Bill, the creation of Jim Crow laws, the mass deportation of Mexican Americans to Mexico, and the mass incarceration of Black and Latinx people in private prisons. American systems were designed to oppress these groups and being intentional about making changes for these groups is the real work of advancing racial equity. Effective actions taken for these groups can be applied to other marginalized groups once success is proven.

#### **RECOMMENDATION THREE:**

##### **RECOGNIZING RACIAL EQUITY AS A JOURNEY**

Racial equity is not a destination to be arrived at. It is a continuous journey where agencies should always be seeking to improve themselves. Agencies should continuously assess themselves as it relates to where they are in the journey with racial equity and seek to reach the next level. Agencies often start on the journey by focusing on diversity and representation. The focus is on increasing the number of people from different racial backgrounds. The next level is to evolve the organizational culture to value the contributions of everyone, with a focus on creating an environment where everyone is comfortable sharing their experiences and equipped to talk about race. The primary goal is inclusion and internal change in behaviors, policies, and practices. To be fully thriving in racial equity work, the organization should

get to a place of dismantling systemic racism and the root causes of inequity, both internally and externally. The focus at this level is on systems and the goal is to integrate a race equity lens into all levels of the organization.<sup>6</sup> Focusing internally on staff, policies, and culture will radiate out externally for clients served by the agency. Agencies should give a larger role and voice to people of color and their lived experiences.

#### **RECOMMENDATION FOUR:**

##### **VALUE QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE DATA**

Quantitative data is structured and statistical. It is designed to collect facts and provides support when you need to draw conclusions from research. Qualitative data collects information to describe a topic rather than measure it. It brings a depth of understanding to research questions but is harder to analyze. It seeks to gain information about people's thinking, attitudes, and motivations. A higher value is often placed on statistics than the lived experience of people and there is a common misconception that you must use one or the other, rather than both together. Both are important and critical to understand while doing the work of advancing racial equity. Data gives context to the personal experiences of people and the stories of people complement data. Qualitative and quantitative data are both valuable to informing the work of advancing racial equity and will help an agency mature in its efforts.

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