



Organizing for Racial Equity Within the Federal Government

by Ryan Curren



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This guide is published by the
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achieve racial equity and advance opportunities for all.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

President Biden's Executive Order On Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government presents a generational opportunity to bring the full force of the federal government to the work of racial equity and justice. To realize its potential, racial equity practitioners will need to **organize from within government** to continually bring people together towards a common vision of racial equity. In order to sustain momentum such organizing should be **coupled with investments in growing organizational capacity and networked infrastructure across the whole of government**.

The work ahead requires a clear vision for a racially equitable government that includes:

- **Racial equity values embodied in processes, outcomes, and products** of the racial equity initiative;
- **Growth in the number and influence of racial equity practitioners** across agencies and offices and up and down the hierarchy;
- **Strong relationships among racial equity practitioners** to develop and share skills, lessons and approaches to strengthen racial equity work;
- **A culture of learning** that makes the disruption of the status quo an opportunity for innovation and building of trust;
- **Structural changes that generate accountable government relationships with communities most impacted by racial inequities as the norm**, as well as the use of tools to change policies, practices, and procedures.

This resource guide **lays out how to advance this vision** through four organizing strategies.

1. Use an inside/outside strategy to learn from communities most impacted by systemic racism and create accountability

Accountable partnerships between equity practitioners in government and communities experiencing systemic racism can serve to manage and accelerate the change process. Initially, external pressure raises the visibility of racial equity issues and may motivate government leaders to act. Over time as partnerships deepen, although community organizing and advocacy will continue to play an important role, solution oriented relationships can be established where communities take more of a leadership role in analyzing disparities and crafting effective responses.

Actions agencies can take include:

- Offer community partners the best resources and information the government has to offer.
- Acknowledge historical harm done by federal agencies.
- Direct funding into organizations building community capacity for racial justice.
- Cultivate and deepen relationships with organizations working for racial justice.
- Prepare for equitable relationships by mapping power dynamics.
- Work with existing federal councils/committees and learn from precedents where community leaders working for racial equity influenced federal policy.



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Early Recommendation for Federal Leadership: Engage and compensate leaders and organizations accountable to communities experiencing systemic racism. Identify opportunities for them to contribute their expertise to the implementation of the racial equity initiative such as reviewing agencies' Racial Equity Action Plans.

2. Build capacity for lasting organizational change

Government institutions often suffer from inertia, resisting change and serving to maintain existing policy, practices, and procedures that perpetuate racial inequities. Building agency infrastructure together with leadership and accountability strategies can generate the momentum necessary to put in place new systems and culture.

Actions agencies can take to build organizational capacity include:

- Allocate resources for capacity-building and training of staff from experts.
- Form agency-specific Racial Equity Core Teams.
- Focus on bringing equity practitioners and leaders together to grow a critical mass of staff committed to racial equity.
- Grow agency leadership to support the agency's capacity through new mandates, funding, partnerships, communication, and addressing resistance.
- Communicate consistently the value of racial equity to the agency's mission and celebrate successes.
- Design or redesign accountability mechanisms to focus attention and grow awareness of agencies' racial equity work within and outside of the agencies.

Early Recommendation for Federal Leadership: Cabinet level leadership should establish Racial Equity Core Teams in each agency authorized to coordinate the implementation of the racial equity plan across the agency.

3. Build networked structures across the whole of the federal government for long-term institutional change

A centralized office – such as OMB or the Domestic Policy Council – responsible for racial equity should function to support a network of structures across agencies to build institutional capacity across the federal government as a whole. Networked infrastructure (re)designed to bring racial equity practitioners and leaders together across the institution can be a catalyst for change.

Actions agencies can take to start building a network and leverage it to affect change include:

- Ensure deep coordination of a broad network of equity practitioners by a centralized office using a collective impact model with racially equitable processes and structures.
- Bring together and strengthen leading agencies currently implementing equity-focused mandates.
- Lift up the work of high-achieving agencies to raise standards for all agencies.
- Hone an organizing strategy to cultivate political champions for the racial equity initiative.

Early Recommendation for Federal Leadership: Develop a legislative strategy to engage and cultivate congressional champions for the federal racial equity initiative.



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4. Prepare for and learn from internal and external backlash

We expect to see resistance to change that advances racial equity in all institutions, including government. It can slow momentum and distract attention— unless you are prepared to address it and learn from it. However, on balance it is more effective to prioritize resources and attention on cultivating willing staff to be champions for the work over responding to every act by resisters. Not everyone has to be on board to establish critical mass and momentum for organizational change.

Specific actions agencies can take to proactively address backlash include:

- Craft communication materials describing the initiative using simple, explanatory language for both internal and external audiences.
- Engage all staff in ongoing conversations about systemic racism and the agency's role in dismantling systemic racism.
- Use appropriate human resources tools to address discriminatory behaviors.
- Engage and train skeptical staff in the implementation of new tools and procedures so they see why the change is needed and the potential to improve their work.
- Conduct research and due diligence to design legally sound race-conscious solutions.

Thank you for your commitment to racial equity and taking the first steps toward bringing more people in the federal government together to proactively advance racial equity. Equity practitioners and leaders in government are not alone on the long-term journey to transform agencies and the whole of the federal government. Race Forward is here to help. Please do not hesitate to reach out and tap into the collective resources of FIRE (the Federal Initiative on Race and Equity) at RaceForward, as well as the Government Alliance on Race and Equity.

Please email comments or requests for support to FIRE@raceforward.org.



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WHAT IS THIS RESOURCE?

To realize the potential of President Biden's [Executive Order On Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government](#), racial equity practitioners will need to organize from within government to continually bring more people together toward a common vision of racial equity. In order to sustain momentum, such organizing should be ***coupled with investments in growing organizational capacity and networked infrastructure across the whole of government.***

This resource guide lays out how to organize and build capacity at the federal level. It is deeply informed by the experiences and insights of racial equity leaders and practitioners who are part of the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE), a local, state, and regional government network of more than 400 members working to advance racial equity.

While this resource guide focuses on organizing strategies and structures, Race Forward will also develop guides on other components of a successful federal racial equity initiative, which will be available at www.raceforward.org.



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VISION AND PRINCIPLES FOR ORGANIZING FOR RACIAL EQUITY

Organizing our federal government for racial equity requires a vision that encompasses both its breadth and depth. It is not solely the job of leadership, nor can it be placed on the backs of those who make government work every day without the support of leadership—it must run through the full depth of government from top to bottom. **It is also not the responsibility of only a few agencies or teams, but rather the broad work of the entire government.** Whether a department is focused on housing policy or accounting procedures, an intentional effort is needed to ensure everyone has a role. Everyone in government can and should be a racial equity practitioner.

Moreover, building relationships among emerging and leading racial equity practitioners within and across agencies is essential to generating the deep, widespread, and sustained commitment needed. Only a critical mass of federal staff with strong and decentralized relationships, and resilient to the inevitable setbacks and shifts in context that accompany any meaningful change initiative, can ensure success. If you are organizing for racial equity, you must reach the point where you can give an affirmative answer to the question: *Are there enough people standing on the rug that it cannot be pulled out from under them?*

The experience of a wide range of local jurisdictions has taught us that to create this kind of resilience requires:

- » **Racial equity values are embodied in processes** as well as the products of the racial equity initiative;
- » **Growth in the number and influence of racial equity practitioners** across agencies and offices and up and down the hierarchy;
- » **Strong relationships among racial equity practitioners** to develop and share skills, lessons, and approaches to strengthen racial equity work;
- » **A culture of learning** that makes the disruption of the status quo an opportunity for innovation and the building of trust; and
- » **Structural changes generate accountable government relationships with communities most impacted by racial inequities as the norm**, as well as the use of tools to change policies, practices, and procedures.

To achieve these outcomes, we must employ strategies where:

- 1. Racial equity is centered and socialized throughout the institution.** All communications and convenings are an opportunity to normalize a racial equity framework. That framework should clearly name the harmful history of government and envision and operationalize a new role, while utilizing clear and easily understood definitions of racial equity.
- 2. Politics and power dynamics are forces to be navigated and harnessed to advance the federal racial equity initiative.** Confronting the reality that government is influenced by a political context that too often marginalizes communities of color is a critical step



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in analyzing the environment; it is possible to then identify racial equity champions and unlock the substantial resources elected officials can provide. Similarly, analyzing how government bureaucracy is a reflection of existing social, political, and economic power relationships is key to understanding the bureaucratic decision-making structure and identifying levers for change, which can unleash the tremendous power agency leaders, as well as staff, have to effect change.

3. **We make a long-term commitment to changing structures and relationships for a transformative approach.** Racial inequities are baked into government systems and structures. Reimagining and implementing a new way forward requires new organizational capacity in the form of networked infrastructure across organizational boundaries; this will bring more people together to advance racial equity, and build a critical mass of equity practitioners and leaders in the federal government.
4. **We act with accountability and transparency toward those most impacted by racial disparities.** As this guide expands on below, all interactions (e.g., communications and contracting) between federal agencies and communities of color are opportunities to build relationships and trust, which will help when navigating obstacles to the initiative. When things go wrong, you are then more likely to seek solutions together rather than assign blame. Accountability mechanisms tied to meaningful policy and budget levers are especially effective at keeping agencies focused on advancing a racial equity initiative—in particular, affording power to community leaders accountable to communities of color. Power in this context is surfaced by asking the question, Who does the government listen to? Authentic community engagement designed to create ownership and leadership can result in constituents becoming involved in and fueling the effort; this often lends greater visibility or creates productive tension, two keys to sustaining attention, resources, and urgency for making long-term lasting change.



DACA Rally, New York City, 2017



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5. Everyone in government uses their positional power and has a role to play. “Leader-full” racial equity initiatives often have more diversity and sustainability than those with just one or a few main leaders. Spreading out the leadership is critical for growing and sustaining the work. Analyzing areas where staff have discretion or direct power to influence decisions that have equity impacts helps daylight their positional power. This is an important part of continually identifying, cultivating, and developing new leadership. Having leadership continuity is also important, because the pursuit of racial justice is long-term work. Having seasoned leaders who have worked together over time and weathered storms together can be a real asset. It is critical to engage career staff with deep experience in navigating barriers to equity while also building support from staff who might be skeptical about the overall level of support for their agency’s racial equity action plan. Racial equity leaders will also need to motivate or disarm staff who use their position to wait out political mandates for equity.

Key Terms

Racial equity

Eliminating race-based disparities, so that race cannot predict life outcomes. This will improve outcomes for all.

Equity practitioner

A government employee (elected, politically appointed, or career staff) with a passion and energy for racial equity and the expertise, skills, and relationships needed for implementation. They are skilled at motivating others, working across differences, and building relationships within and outside of government. Practitioners often play a role in coordinating the implementation of racial equity action plans and expanding engagement of more staff.

Inside/outside strategy

Establishing partnerships between equity practitioners in government and communities experiencing systemic racism to guide and accelerate the process of transforming government to advance racial equity. External pressure from communities coupled with internal organizing by equity practitioners—as well as open lines of communication between the two—raises the visibility of racial equity issues and may motivate government leaders to act. In early stages, such partnerships may be informal, but as racial equity plans are developed and implemented, relationships can deepen and more formal, accountable partnerships can be established.

Organizational capacity

The degree of effectiveness of an agency to manage its organizational change process and advance a racial equity initiative. Measures of capacity include budget dedicated, community partnerships, staff infrastructure, and the authority and skills of staff involved in an agency’s racial equity initiative, to name a few.

Institutional capacity

The breadth and depth of a racial equity initiative across the whole of government, supported by a network of structures across all agencies. Measures of capacity include a well-positioned centralized office, cross-agency structures for coordination, internal government communication channels and externally facing channels, and shared accountability measures, including both internal and community impact measures, to name a few.



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ORGANIZING STRATEGIES AND STRUCTURES THAT WORK TO SUSTAIN AND SCALE CHANGE

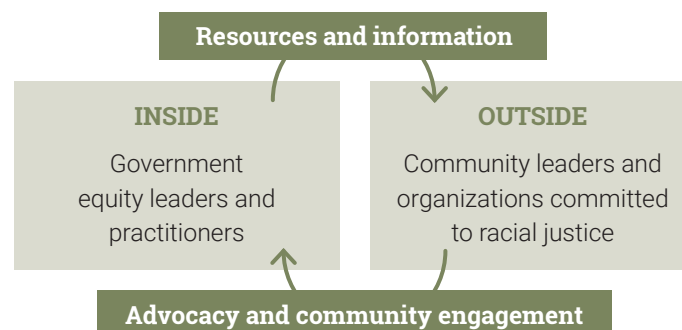
An institutional organizing strategy can create lasting change by taking up a multifaceted approach, from expanding organizing relationships to creating new infrastructure and networks. In turn, these strategies can strengthen and grow the influence of our public institutions so that they serve their highest purpose. Here are some recommended strategies.

1. Use an inside/outside strategy to create productive tension and accountability

As racial equity leaders and practitioners organize themselves in response to the executive order, they should put early thought into what an accountable long-term relationship looks like with communities experiencing systemic racism. While a forthcoming resource guide details community engagement strategies in a federal context¹, this guide describes how accountable partnerships between government and communities serve to manage and accelerate the change process.

External pressure from communities impacted by racial inequities raises the visibility of racial equity issues and motivates government leaders to act. The productive tension has historically been expressed through community organizing and advocacy which will continue to play an important role. However as local jurisdictions have grown their capacity to partner with communities experiencing systemic racism, those communities have taken more of a leadership role in determining what the right solution is, rather than only being voices for defining the problem. Thus the productive tension need not only take the form of opposition to a government action, it can transform into an accountable and solution-oriented relationship. Below is a graphic illustrating the roles, assets, and relationships of those using an inside/outside strategy.

Inside/outside strategies create productive tension and accountability



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¹ Race Forward's guide *From Disenfranchisement to Voice, Power, and Participation* provides an example of a collaborative decision-making process between community leaders and government agencies that led to deeper racial justice considerations throughout one local jurisdiction.

Fear of public critique can be inhibiting for public officials, leading to an internal focus. While there is certainly important and necessary internal work for the government to “get its house in order,” when this results in inaction externally, superficial acts in the name of equity can exacerbate ongoing harm. Racial equity practitioners and leaders in government who instill a culture of learning and take steps toward partnering with communities find that when things do go wrong, community partners are more likely to seek solutions together rather than assign blame. The benefits of better solutions and accelerated change derived from a successful inside/outside strategy far outweigh the perceived challenges of partnership. At the same time, the purpose of partnering with a community should be clear and their role must be defined, or a partnership can be unproductive and even worse, damage trust.²

Early Recommendation for Federal Leadership

Engage and compensate leaders and organizations that are accountable to communities experiencing systemic racism to contribute their expertise to the stewardship and implementation of the racial equity initiative. They can begin by reviewing and commenting on all agencies’ Racial Equity Action Plans (REAP).³ Establish roles for community representatives as trainers or technical assistance providers to agencies and have them serve as embedded consultants to implement the top REAP priorities.

Below are guidelines for preparing to deploy an inside/outside strategy:

- **Offer community partners the best government has to offer.** Government can provide numerous valuable resources, starting with direct funding for community partners (see [Federal Examples](#)). In addition, in-house resources can be made available externally in formats that are most useful to outside partners. Examples include: collecting and making available racially disaggregated data, conducting research on community-identified research questions, elevating community-collected data, developing communications materials partners can use in their work, and providing administrative support to reduce barriers to receiving funding and participating in processes. Timely, accurate, and honest information about how government operates and when and how decisions are made is another powerful and low-cost resource agencies can offer communities.
- **Acknowledge historical harm done by federal agencies and the resulting inequitable outcomes still experienced today.**⁴ This has numerous benefits when designing and implementing legally sound race-conscious solutions that address root causes of inequities. But from an organizing perspective, this act also begins to build trust with community partners who may be hesitant to participate in the federal racial equity initiative, while providing them useful information for their independent work.

² See Chapter 2 of Race Forward’s guide, [Advancing Racial Equity: A Framework for Federal Agencies](#), for a description of a spectrum of community engagement.

³ The City of Austin compensated community members with experience with housing displacement to co-create the Anti-Displacement Racial Equity Tool, which prioritized spending \$300 million to prevent further displacement of low-income households and communities of color. See: <https://austintexas.gov/edims/pio/document.cfm?id=374227>.

⁴ One example of this strategy is the City of Portland’s report, [A Historical Context of Racist Planning](#), which was released with a publicly available training program.



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- **Direct funding into organizations building community capacity for racial justice.** Funding leaders accountable to communities of color for their time and expertise is a minimum standard for community engagement. However, for community partners to deeply engage in federal work over a long period of time, the government should provide funding for organizations' operations, capacity-building activities, technical assistance needs, and broader community engagement efforts.

Federal agencies can also leverage their relationships with philanthropy to support community partners in ways the government cannot. Philanthropy can deploy funds more nimbly and is well positioned to fund movement-building and organizing activities that provide community partners autonomy.

- **Start cultivating relationships with organizations working for racial justice.** Federal officials can initiate dialogue with national and local organizations working on issues of racial justice to understand their priorities, but also to have a better appreciation of the expertise and assets they can bring to an agency's work to advance the Executive Order. For example, agencies can send federal officials to racial equity- focused conferences such as the Government Alliance on Race and Equity's membership meeting (typically open only to member jurisdictions, but open to a limited number of federal leaders), Race Forward's Facing Race, PolicyLink's Equity Summit, and the Othering & Belonging Conference held by the University of California, Berkeley's Othering & Belonging Institute. Agencies can also collect information on organizations' capacity and expertise for future contracting opportunities while keeping in mind the importance of those organizations' accountability to communities experiencing systemic racism.

Community-based organizations (CBOs) bring a unique ability to educate, organize, and directly engage impacted communities to identify and advocate for solutions that meet their needs. While likely less familiar with national- level federal work, many CBOs have experience interacting with federal agency field offices and with federally funded place-based grants.

National intermediary organizations bring expertise in using equity tools for data and policy analysis; providing technical assistance and capacity-building support to government agencies and CBOs; and cultivating relationships with philanthropy, academia, and politicians. These organizations are likely more familiar with federal processes but still require active outreach to cultivate relationships, such as solicitations for information or contracting for services. Federal agencies can use the Intergovernmental Personnel Act Mobility Program to bring on equity practitioners from these organizations on a temporary basis to build near-term capacity and relationships.

- **Prepare for equitable relationships by mapping power dynamics.** Harnessing power dynamics in support of racial equity initiatives starts with understanding which groups have more or less influence to define which changes are most desired, and which groups are more or less impacted by the desired changes. It is important to identify where federal staff, management, and leadership fall in this mapping, as well as outside groups. The results will show which groups have high amounts of influence and vested interests in the status quo. It will also show which communities of color are most impacted but have less influence. These results can help equity practitioners prioritize resources and attention for the latter, as well as prepare for resistance from the former.
- **Work with existing federal committees/councils and learn from precedents where community leaders working for racial equity influenced federal policy.** The federal government has experience with committees/councils designed to exert external pressure on federal decisions, a critical design element of the structures used by local governments to advance a racial equity initiative. These are often issue specific, such as



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an agency-convened advisory committee with representation from racial justice leaders to generate policy and budgetary priorities (e.g., the HBCU Presidents' Roundtable, the President's Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, and the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council).

The federal government has also indirectly supported regional equity-focused coalitions formed around issues like transportation, environmental justice, and equitable development. Federal housing, planning, and transportation funds have flowed through regional governments, cities, and counties to provide funding for these coalitions to establish and participate in local policy processes. Those local processes have increased local capacity to also participate in federal legislative and rule-making processes. Many of these coalitions center the leadership of organizations constituted by people of color, but also have local government members participating in a supportive capacity.

Federal Examples

- In the lead-up to the Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing (AFFH) Rule, which was meant to strengthen implementation of Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act of 1968, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) required jurisdictions awarded a Sustainable Communities Initiative Grant to conduct a Fair Housing and Equity Assessment (FHEA).⁵ FHEAs served as a beta test for the analytical framework being considered for inclusion in the AFFH rule. HUD provided direct technical assistance to jurisdictions to collect and disaggregate data by race and other demographics. Grant recipients were also required to dedicate ten percent of grant funds for community engagement, with an emphasis on communities historically marginalized from planning processes. This funded community-based organizations to engage their constituents in the FHEA processes. For many jurisdictions, the results were the first time a public discourse had occurred about how racial injustices shape a community's growth and cause current-day racial disparities. Community coalitions that were formed in some jurisdictions to participate in the advocacy and review of the final AFFH rule continue to advocate for racial justice at the federal level to this day.
- In response to advocacy by African-American leaders in the Gullah Geechee community, Congressman James Clyburn sponsored legislation in 2006 to establish a Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor along the east coast, from South Carolina to northern Florida.⁶ The corridor serves to preserve the history and sustain the culture of a distinct group of Americans who are descendants of enslaved Africans from the west and central regions of Africa. The National Park Service (NPS) deployed significant resources to create a federal commission to manage the corridor. NPS continues to support the commission with technical assistance and by identifying NPS assets within the corridor that can help preserve Gullah Geechee culture.



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⁵ *FHEA Results Summaries*. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2015, www.hud.gov/sites/documents/FHEARESSUMM_CV.PDF.

⁶ *Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Management Plan*. National Park Service, 2012, parkplanning.nps.gov/showFile.cfm?projectId=24119&MIMEType=application%252Fpdf&filename=GUGECChapter1%5FIntro%2Epdf&sfid=138162.

- Federal agencies are formally committed to recognizing tribal sovereignty and meeting their trust obligations, yet Native American nations and tribes often struggle to engage agencies in ways that align with the principle of self-determination. Ohkay Owingeh tribal members' restoration of their historic central village in New Mexico was led by tribal members through a community-informed planning process. After community-led research produced a clear community vision, the Ohkay Owingeh tribal council and housing authority initiated a partnership with HUD to financially support a preservation-focused planning process⁷ and construction of affordable housing and other community amenities in the village center, not on the outskirts, as had been HUD development practice to date.
- The Obama administration's process to develop its Climate Action Plan included local listening tours and a task force with tribal representation. To broaden participation in planning, the administration also provided communities with AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers, who were then embedded in community organizations to implement local climate-related actions. Some agencies, such as the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), also contributed field staff who acted as liaisons between the community and the public sector.
- Between 2010 and 2013, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) convened community and interfaith leaders from economically depressed communities to develop a framework for community partnerships that address the root causes of community behavioral health issues. HHS provided follow-up resources to help community leaders form local coalitions grow and coordinate resources that better meet the needs of underserved communities and culturally diverse populations grappling with substance abuse and mental health issues.⁸ As a result, more than 20 local collaboratives and coalitions formed, and many are still active today.



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⁷ Office of Policy Development and Research. Ohkay Owingeh, New Mexico: Tribal-Led Cultural Preservation. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2013, www.huduser.gov/portal/casestudies/study_08082013_1.html.

⁸ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. *One Voice, One Community: Building Strong and Effective Partnerships Among Community and Faith Based Organizations*. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013, store.samhsa.gov/product/One-Voice-One-Community-Building-Strong-Effective-Partnerships-Among-Community-Faith/SMA13-4739. HHS

2. Build capacity for lasting organizational change

While government institutions embody much-needed stability and predictability, they also suffer from inertia. As a result, they resist change and serve the role of maintaining existing policy, practices, and procedures that perpetuate racial inequities. Thus, even when there is a political opening and receptivity to change—such as the President’s Executive Order—equity practitioners and leaders must overcome inertia to effect that change and sustainably chart a new course. Building infrastructure, together with leadership and accountability strategies, can generate the momentum necessary to put in place new systems and cultures. And because government institutions tend to be stable, once put in place, these changes often prove to be durable.

Early Recommendation for Federal Leadership

Cabinet-level leadership should establish Racial Equity Core Teams in each agency. The team should be diverse, representative, passionate, and visionary, with the responsibility for building capacity within the agency and coordinating with the whole federal racial equity initiative. The team should have dedicated full-time staff with an ongoing budget, and be authorized to coordinate the implementation of the racial equity plan and activities across the agency that are needed to build buy-in and momentum for organizational change.

Below are guidelines for federal agencies building organizational capacity:

- **Adequately resource capacity-building.** Equity practitioners in the GARE network warn that relying on racial equity assignments that are “add-ons” to existing positions is not a sustainable model. Un- or under-resourced racial equity mandates that do not establish new staff structures set staff up for failure. Racial equity mandates must be accompanied by training, funding, and support from experts. Agency staff initially charged with launching the initiative should be supplemented by committed full-time staff and on-going funding.
- **Bring equity practitioners and leaders together to grow a critical mass of staff committed to racial equity.** GARE members have found the “tipping point theory” popularized by Malcolm Gladwell and adopted by organizational change theorists to be a useful organizing construct to effect organization-wide change.⁹

This starts by bringing people with racial equity expertise together who are strategic and vocal advocates for the work. Identifying internal advocates across functions and at varying levels of hierarchy is critical. Creating space for these early adopters of the agency’s racial equity work allows them to build their skills together. They can then use their collective positional power to maintain the agency’s attention on its commitments to racial equity.

An important responsibility of early equity practitioners and leaders is to continually cultivate more leaders. Using a “train-the-trainer” approach can maximize contact between racial equity advocates who are well-distributed throughout the agency and others so that employees have the opportunity to learn about racial equity from practitioners. These interactions also provide opportunities for others who are more



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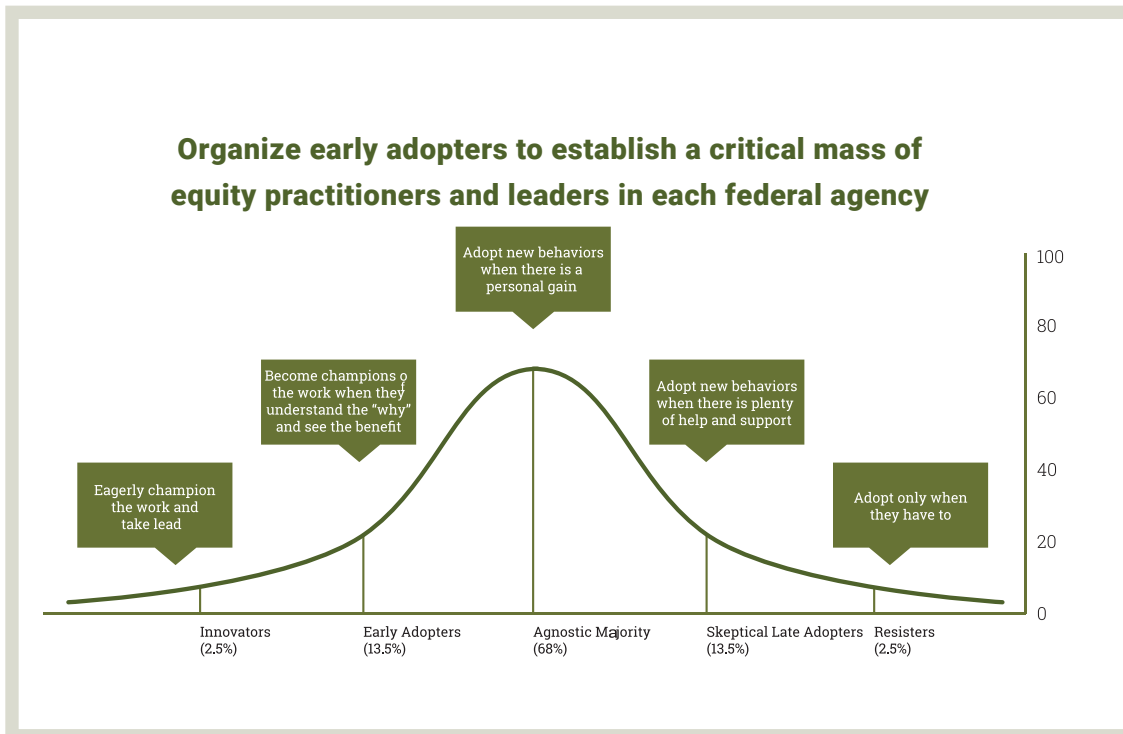
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⁹ Gladwell, Malcolm. *The Tipping Point*. Little, Brown, 2000.

ambivalent about the work to ask questions, raise concerns, and learn firsthand about the advantages of racial equity practices. Employee orientations provide the first opportunity for new staff to meet equity practitioners and be exposed to the agency's racial equity work and resources.

Career staff are especially important to engage early on in the federal initiative. They are essential to a long-term change initiative that will bridge many administrations. Their knowledge of levers for and barriers to change are major assets. Most take pride in their roles as public servants and want to see the government be a force for social good. Tapping this reservoir of knowledge and talent for early equity practitioners and leaders should begin immediately.



- **Form agency-specific Racial Equity Core Teams.** While the leadership of top officials and centralized coordination of the racial equity initiative is critical (see [section 3](#)), changes take place on the ground. Infrastructure is needed to bring together racial equity practitioners and leaders within each agency.

Racial Equity Core Teams are a critical piece of many GARE jurisdictions' infrastructure, and are distinct from groups focused on diversity or inclusion. A Core Team is a primary leadership team responsible for designing, coordinating, and organizing racial equity plans and activities across the agency. The Core Team often serves as the engine for change, leading the way, and pulling others along the organizational change journey.

While a Racial Equity Core Team should be officially authorized to play a leading role in operationalizing the agency's commitment to equity, it cannot be its responsibility alone. These teams can help grow capacity by bringing in outside technical expertise and trainers, and by disseminating learning, skills, and tools for operationalizing equity. They can play a role in coordinating the implementation of the racial equity action plan by communicating its progress internally and externally, making course corrections, and celebrating successes.



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From an organizing perspective, their role in developing new leadership and creating opportunities for greater understanding and buy-in from all staff is paramount. Having a staggered rotating membership over the years, mentorships, and a robust onboarding process are effective techniques for expanding leadership opportunities.¹⁰ FAQs, newsletters, office hours, and staff listening sessions are common tools for building staff trust, understanding, and commitment more broadly.

GARE's resource "[Racial Equity Core Teams](#)" provides more detail on the breadth of Core Team composition and the depth of members' desired characteristics. In general, you want a diverse, representative, passionate, and visionary team leading the way forward. Having a diversity of members across the agency's functions and levels is important to weave the work throughout the agency. Members should have: passion and energy to motivate others, strategic bridge building skills to work across differences, existing relationships within and outside of government to leverage and expand engagement, and humility to learn and grow new leadership.

Some practices for getting started include trainings and facilitated conversations to increase understanding of systemic racism, developing relationships, and getting on the same page about the agency's racial equity plan and framework. These early team-building opportunities help establish and then practice equitable practices that can be modeled for others in the agency, through the use of group agreements, shared facilitation, and transparency in decision-making.

- **Ensure leadership grows the agency's racial equity capacity.** Agency leaders have the power to maintain the agency's focus and grow its capacity to operationalize new racial equity practices until an organizational tipping point is reached; at that point, a new agency culture ensures these practices will continue and expand. Leaders, in consultation with their equity practitioners, can strategically use their power by:
 - » Proposing stronger equity mandates be adopted, such as embedding racial equity priorities in strategic plans and major programs;
 - » Using regular communication channels to reinforce the urgency and importance of racial equity within the agency's programs, policies, and practices;
 - » Intervening to support staff in seizing opportunities or addressing resistance (covered in [section 4](#) of this document);
 - » Ensuring Racial Equity Core Teams have ongoing, sustainable funding for their capacity-building activities. Supportive leadership can identify strategic opportunities for funding sources and political support. For example, a dedicated budget line item in an appropriation bill for the agency's racial equity work would ensure lasting resources. Crosscut budget requests that are reviewed by multiple congressional committees could raise visibility and help generate broad support; and
 - » Formalizing partnerships sought by racial equity practitioners (whether other agencies, national organizations, or CBOs) and helping to identify other actions to leverage the partnership to expand engagement of the agency's racial equity work.

- **Consistently communicate the value of racial equity to the agency's mission and celebrate successes.** Not all agency leaders will be natural champions for the work, but they have numerous opportunities to practice. Equity practitioners can help them communicate the value proposition for why racial equity is important, and flag opportunities to do so. Savvy leaders will use every opportunity to communicate the



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¹⁰The EPA's former Community Action for a Renewed Environment program was an example of a leadership matrix. It rotated which program or division was in charge every two years to enhance ownership of the program goals across the agency. See: archive.epa.gov/care/web/html.

appeal of the agency's racial equity plan and the expectation for staff to participate in the plan. These communications also serve to legitimize the work and validate those leading it.

- **Design or redesign accountability mechanisms to focus attention and grow awareness of agencies' racial equity work within and outside of the agencies.** Agency-specific mechanisms are important because they reflect the unique mission of the agency and give equity practitioners within the agency something relevant to organize around. Accountability mechanisms should also be designed across the whole of government, as discussed later.

Traditionally, internal mechanisms should be installed up and down the hierarchy. Upward accountability can look like presenting racial equity plans to legislative committees and briefing members of the executive branch. Downward accountability mechanisms include staff work plans and performance evaluations prioritizing racial equity and rewarding skills and competencies.¹¹

Externally facing accountability mechanisms should measure and communicate an agency's progress in improving results in communities experiencing systemic racism.¹² They should be designed with community engagement and formatted to be easily accessible to the public. Mechanisms will have little impact on an agency's behavior unless they are tied to meaningful budget, policy, and/or legal levers. They should be designed with these levers in mind. Another effective technique enhancing the relevance of these mechanisms is to work with communities of color impacted by an agency's actions to evaluate progress made on racial equity plans.

Some useful public-facing formats include: online dashboards, fact sheets, written or video testimonials from community members, and FAQs. Again, these should be designed for use by communities working to advance racial equity.



Brion Oask, Chief Equity Officer, City of Austin

Federal Example

In response to advocacy by environmental justice advocates, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) built out organizational capacity to advance an environmental justice (EJ) agenda¹³ throughout the 1990's. In 1992, it established the Office of Environmental Equity (later to be named the Office of Environmental Justice). It soon launched a grant and technical assistance program to help local communities work on EJ issues. The office's first director used innovative strategies to overcome internal resistance and enhance staff capacity when the office's budget was insufficient to meet its mandate¹⁴.

In 1993, the EPA established the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council. The council is composed of stakeholders throughout the environmental justice field. It provides independent advice and recommendations to the EPA Administrator to integrate environmental justice with all EPA priorities and initiatives.



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¹¹GARE's resource, *Public Sector Jobs: Opportunities for Advancing Racial Equity*, provides guidance on workforce equity practices.

¹²GARE's resource, *Racial Equity: Getting to Results*, can assist agencies in using a racial equity lens to identify a set of metrics and implement a community process to have greater impact in their work.

¹³Office of Environmental Justice, *Office of Environmental Justice in Action*, 2017

¹⁴Mock, Brentin. "Lady justice: Clarice Gaylord led the EPA's fight for communities of color." Grist, February 25, 2014, grist.org/cities/lady-justice-clarice-gaylord-led-the-epas-fight-for-communities-of-color.

In 1994, President Clinton's Executive Order 12898 directed all agencies to "make achieving environmental justice part of its mission by identifying and addressing, as appropriate, disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of its programs, policies, and activities on minority populations and low-income populations," including tribal populations. It established an Interagency Working Group for Environmental Justice to help implement the EO's directives, such as:

- Creating Environmental Justice Strategic Plans for each agency; and
- Using the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process to analyze and mitigate the environmental effects—including human health, economic, and social effects—of proposed actions on communities of color and low-income communities.

Since the 1990s, the EPA's Office of Environmental Justice has worked on numerous capacity-building efforts, creating technical and legal tools and resources, hosting EJ events, and bringing more federal agencies and community partners into the work.

Training to normalize use of a racial equity framework in the agency and operationalizing the use of equity tools to change an agency's day-to-day practices for all staff are also important capacity-building activities. Eventually, all staff must have the skills and resources to be successful in their racial equity work, whether that be administering requests for proposals, forming inclusive advisory committees, or establishing equitable hiring criteria. Other GARE guides provide details on training curriculum and using equity tools.



In 2015, EPA's Office of Environmental Justice organized an equitable development workshop in Baltimore, MD



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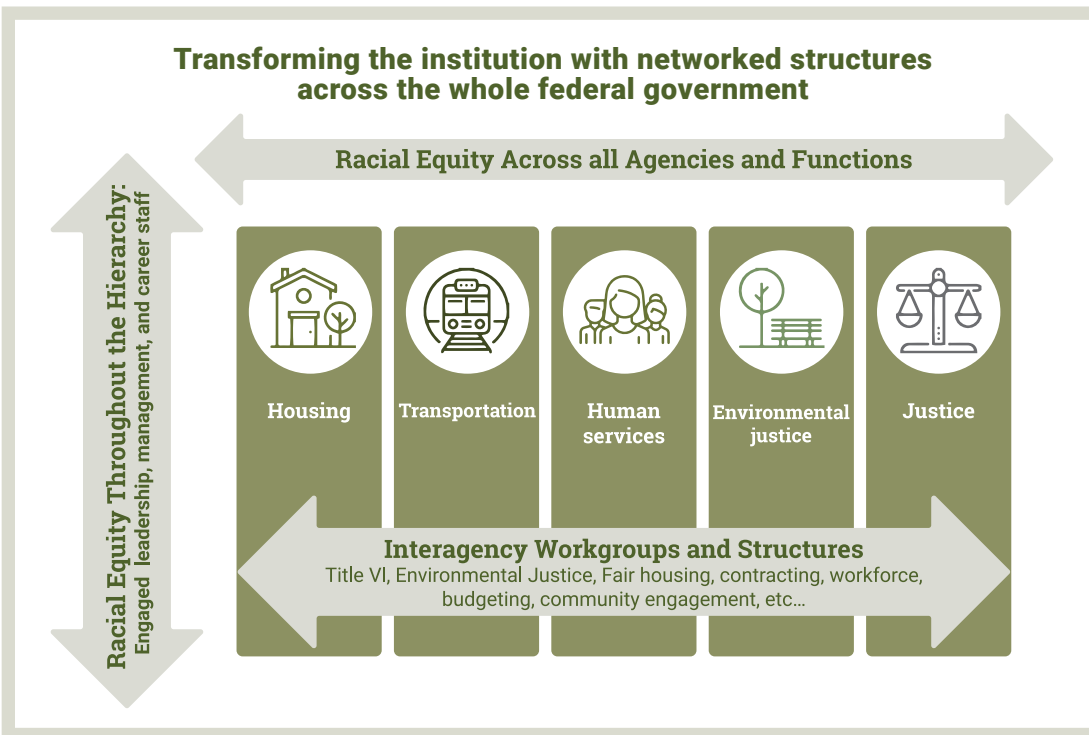
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3. Build networked structures across the whole of the federal government for long-term institutional change

A centralized office—such as the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) or the Domestic Policy Council—that is responsible for racial equity can support a network of structures across agencies advancing racial equity; this can build institutional capacity across the federal government as a whole. Jurisdictions with lasting racial equity initiatives have cultivated political support for the work of the network undergirding the initiative. Many of their techniques are relevant to a federal context and should be deployed to ensure the federal racial equity initiative lives beyond President Biden’s administration.

Far too many processes and the structures used for cross-cutting government functions like budgeting, human resources, procurement, developing legislation, deploying program funds, legal counsel, and even community engagement are ripe with incentives for choices that lead to inequitable outcomes just because “this is how it has always been done.”

However, networked infrastructure designed or redesigned to advance a racial equity initiative by bringing racial equity practitioners and leaders together across the institution can be a catalyst for change. This section provides guidance on where to start building a network and strategies for leveraging the network to affect change.



Early Recommendation for Federal Leadership

Hone a legislative strategy to cultivate political champions for the racial equity initiative and secure resources for the network undergirding the initiative. It is never too early to start cultivating a pipeline of political champions in Congress to ensure political support across administrations. And it is prudent for value-aligned members of Congress to be asked to use their political capital to increase the visibility, legitimacy, and budgets of the federal racial equity initiative.



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Below are guidelines for creating networked structures across the whole of government:

- **Ensure deep coordination from the centralized office stewarding the federal racial equity initiative.** Agencies' racial equity work can only create lasting solutions at a large scale if they coordinate their efforts and work toward a clear and shared vision of racial equity. A centralized office is most effective when:

1) *Using a collective impact model¹⁵ with racially equitable processes and structures.*¹⁶

To achieve more institutional change together than any agency could alone requires that the backbone organization for the initiative convene agencies around a common agenda (e.g., a vision for racial equity), host a shared measurement system (e.g., using racially disaggregated data), coordinate mutually reinforcing activities (e.g., racial equity plans and tools), and nurture continuous communication and relationships inside and outside of government.

2) *Serving a broader network of equity practitioners.* GARE members have found a centralized office for racial equity is most effective when it is coordinating infrastructure that is “network-centric” and creates many points of connections across the institution, with an emphasis on peer-to-peer learning and support. This ensures richly resourced equity practitioners are able to support one another across the government, and accelerates change through cross-pollination and the diffusion of ideas and approaches. Here are a few examples of “network-centric” convenings:

- » Interagency working group of liaisons from agencies' Racial Equity Core Teams;
- » Cohorts of practitioners developing racial equity toolkits or accountability measures;
- » Training cohorts of agency senior leaders or specialists, such as legal counsel or communications; and
- » Interagency working groups of staff serving in key roles of government to advance racial equity¹⁷ on a range of issues, such as equitable community partnerships, human resources, procurement, or data collection and analysis.¹⁸

- **Bring together and strengthen leading agencies and innovators.** Many agencies oversee implementation of equity-focused legislation or other executive orders to advance justice (e.g., Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, NEPA's social impact assessment requirements, the Fair Housing Act's AFFH rule, and Executive Order 12898 to advance environmental justice).

The staff and structures implementing this work offer substantial organizational capacity for the federal racial equity initiative to tap into and build from. This work is often led by career staff with deep experience and expertise in navigating barriers to equity and implementing change. Lifting up their work in racial equity plans and recruiting staff to be early participants in a broader network of racial equity practitioners could build early capacity for the long haul.

Importantly, legislation and executive orders provide a strategic opportunity to take full advantage of legal mandates that have not been adequately utilized.



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¹⁵Kania, John and Mark Kramer. "Collective Impact." *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 2011, ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact.

¹⁶Kania, John, et al. "Centering Equity in Collective Impact." *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 2022, ssir.org/articles/entry/centering_equity_in_collective_impact.

¹⁷See PolicyLink's *For Love of Country: A Path for the Federal Government to Advance Racial Equity* for a complete list of government roles to advance racial equity.

¹⁸Executive Order 13985 created an Equitable Data Working Group.

- **Lift up the work of high achieving agencies to raise standards for all agencies.** A racial equity initiative involves uncertainty for agencies that do not know what actions will be highly regarded and rewarding. Replicating behaviors of similar agencies is one effective strategy for mitigating this uncertainty. While no one agency can go it alone, agencies that are further along in their process of transformation can serve as models and inspirations for agencies with lower capacity or that are further behind.

A centralized office can create visible and rewarding moments when early adopters' successes raise the ceiling of what is possible; it can then disseminate those promising practices across the networked structures to help raise the floor of what will become standard operating procedure. This “keeping up with the neighbors” dynamic can be enhanced by encouraging and resourcing agencies in similar stages of their journey to partner with one another and by encouraging more advanced agencies to be in relationship with those that are further behind. Racial Equity Core Teams are excellent vehicles for this type of cross-pollination.

- **Hone an organizing strategy to cultivate political champions for the racial equity initiative as part of the networking strategy.** Equity leaders at the local level have learned the importance of political support across administrations to sustain and manage change. Cultivating a consistent pipeline of political champions requires strategic thinking and operations within the political context. With each election, there is a possibility that a champion for racial equity will be replaced by someone who must be brought up to speed and convinced that such initiatives should be supported. When this opportunity is missed, leaders of local initiatives have seen their visibility, legitimacy, and budgets diminished, and their role in decision-making marginalized.

While staff can and should educate and brief elected officials regularly, political appointees have more leeway to make direct asks of potential champions in the legislative branch. Champions can often remove barriers within the bureaucracy, dedicate funding, leverage relationships inside and outside of government, and become a visible spokesperson for the work of government to advance racial equity.

Government relations staff and others responsible for political communications should be engaged, in consultation with those leading the racial equity initiative, to maintain communication between the executive and legislative branches. A similar bridge-building role is critical for strengthening communication between elected officials and movement-building organizations.

Federal Example

The White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships (OFBNP) exemplifies a networked approach to building institutional capacity across the whole of government, all toward the goal of being in better relationship with local communities experiencing economic and racial inequities. It was established in the early 2000s to form partnerships between the federal government and nonprofit organizations, both secular and faith-based.

The Trump administration eliminated the central office but not the network of suboffices located in agencies, or centers. President Biden has reestablished the office within the White House, with support from the Domestic Policy Council and the Office of Public Engagement. The office has a new and expanded mandate to “combat systemic racism and increase opportunity and mobility for historically disadvantaged communities.”



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OFBNP is uniquely designed to influence the whole federal structure by serving as a hub for agencies' suboffices. These centers' primary function is forming partnerships between agencies and nonprofit organizations to advance specific goals that align with the needs of the organizations' constituents, such as job training and workforce development programs for communities experiencing disproportionate rates of unemployment.

The office has a history of engaging racial equity practitioners through its President's Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, a group of leaders from both faith-based and secular organizations. In the past, they have chosen specific issue areas to focus on over a one-to-two-year period, as well as advised the president on topics such as poverty reduction, and human trafficking and modern-day slavery.

4. Prepare for and learn from internal and external backlash

We expect to see resistance to change that advances racial equity in all institutions, including government. Resistance can slow momentum and distract attention away from the work of growing a critical mass of equity practitioners and leaders. It can be disruptive— unless you are prepared to address it and learn from it.

However, on balance it is more effective to prioritize resources and attention on cultivating willing staff to be champions for the work over responding to every act by resisters. Not everyone has to be on board to establish critical mass and momentum for organizational change.

Early, proactive communication describing the initiative is the best prophylactic for resistance. Equity practitioners can help an agency's communications team craft simple, explanatory materials for internal and external audiences. Race Forward's communications guide is available to help frame a racial equity narrative in ways proven to bring more people along.¹⁹ Materials should describe the initiative holistically and simply, and include details on how it is organized as well as opportunities to engage. Some key messages to emphasize include:

- » Racial equity is a part of good public service;
- » Fulfilling the agency's mission requires addressing long-standing racial inequities built into government policy and practice;
- » Racial equity creates solutions for those experiencing the worst racial inequities which leads to better outcomes for all people; and
- » The President and his cabinet authorized this initiative.

Resistance is a stress test for leadership, and can challenge both their commitment to racial equity and their effectiveness in managing change. As described in the earlier section on leadership, equity practitioners can prepare leaders to face resistance with clear messaging about the value of racial equity to the agency's mission, the urgency to do this work, and the expectations of staff and managers.



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¹⁹See GARE's [Communications Guide Commit to Action](#) for a recommended messaging framework, communications strategies, audience analysis, and responses to common myths about racism.

Below is guidance for addressing resistance within and outside the government:

- **Internal resistance.** Equity practitioners should be actively engaging staff in conversations about systemic racism and the agency's role in dismantling systemic racism. This is an opportunity for equity practitioners to collectively document concerns and craft FAQs or other communications materials for leadership and staff. Local jurisdictions have found that in initial conversations with staff, there are many commonly asked questions, such as, "Isn't this just about income, why are we talking about race?" or, "I just treat people like people, why are you bringing up race?" These questions are often asked with good intentions, and it is important to listen to concerns. Questions can also alert equity practitioners to those concerns, so that they can be addressed before they develop into full-blown problems.

Institutions mirror broader society; thus, resistance to racial equity within government can manifest in all the ways it does in society. Determining whether resistance is coming from a place of active opposition to the initiative or just uncertainty will help refine your organizing strategy and response.

Actively resistant staff are unlikely to ever join the critical mass of staff the racial equity initiative is building toward. Addressing actively resistant staff should not be the job of equity practitioners. Agency leadership and human resources staff have the appropriate tools. Some effective techniques are: establishing new equity-focused agency codes of conduct; including racial equity competencies in job descriptions; and integrating racial equity criteria into work plan expectations, and performance evaluations that are tied to promotions and merit pay increases or additional paid time off. Equity practitioners can advise on equity criteria for these tools but should not become default human resources officers.

Skeptical staff also need to be engaged, and can become champions if they understand both why the change is needed and the potential for new racial equity practices to improve their work. GARE members have found that institutional practices dictate staff behavior, and that the process of changing behaviors results in changing beliefs (rather than the other way around). For example, policy staff may have never understood the depth of racial disparities or the history that produced them until they used a racial equity toolkit that required disaggregating data and researching the historical injustices related to a policy. Similarly, procurement staff may have never observed the structural barriers faced by Black- owned firms until they were required to conduct an inclusive procurement process that put them in direct relationship with those firms.

Career staff have seen initiatives come and go with the political winds. Skeptical career staff may be inclined to "wait it out" unless mandated changes are made that affect their day-to-day work, and they have the guidance, tools, and new skills to be successful. Implementing and providing training on the use of racial equity analytical and decision-making tools, determining new criteria for procurement and hiring, and forming and managing inclusive advisory committees are some ways to change the daily behavior of staff.

- **External backlash.** Structural changes that disrupt the status quo will certainly result in backlash, whether from recipients of government funding who have never been held accountable to spend funds equitably, or private interests who have not been required to internalize the burdens and costs they pass on to communities of color. In fact, an indicator of whether a proposed solution addresses a root cause of inequities might be the degree of backlash it generates.



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Proactively addressing external resistance is a delicate role for the government. Political actors within government have more leeway to respond. However, there are tools available for staff to navigate external resistance, many of which can be used for external strategies and improved by using external resources. Examples include:

- » Legal staff can conduct research and due diligence to design legally sound race-conscious solutions. This research can be made publicly available for advocates to use in their own legal and political strategies.
- » Philanthropic and racial justice organizations can conduct communications research to craft effective and clear messages and narratives about the benefits of racial equity work. This research can provide insight for government communications and briefings of elected officials.
- » Government communications materials can be written and formatted for ease of use or adaptation by external actors.

Federal Example

Solutions that address the root causes of systemic racism can trigger: more severe forms of backlash to maintain the status quo; structural changes to the bureaucracy; and political repercussions.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in 1968 prompted Congress to pass the final piece of civil rights legislation, which included the Fair Housing Act (FHA), after years of delay. HUD was then charged with enforcing the FHA's intent to desegregate U.S. communities. At the time the FHA passed, HUD possessed many grant programs that seem unusual today—centralized planning, transportation infrastructure, and even utility infrastructure. Architects of the FHA envisioned HUD using all of its resources to incentivize cities to desegregate. However, just a few months after the FHA passed Congress, HUD's Urban Mass Transportation Assistance Administration (the precursor to the Federal Transit Administration) was moved to the Department of Transportation (DOT). Positioned in the DOT, its funding was decoupled from affordable housing investments and policies.

HUD did deny some of its other grants to cities found to be out of compliance with fair housing standards, but this practice became less common over time. The practice of withholding funds was most aggressively tested by HUD Secretary George Romney's 1970 Open Communities Program, which withheld federal housing subsidies, urban renewal funding, and suburban water and sewer grants. Mayor's across the nation—and especially in the South—lobbied the White House to end this program. President Nixon's response was to remove Secretary Romney from his cabinet. Nixon then began to vocally oppose "forced integration," a term he coined, as he prepared to run for reelection.²⁰



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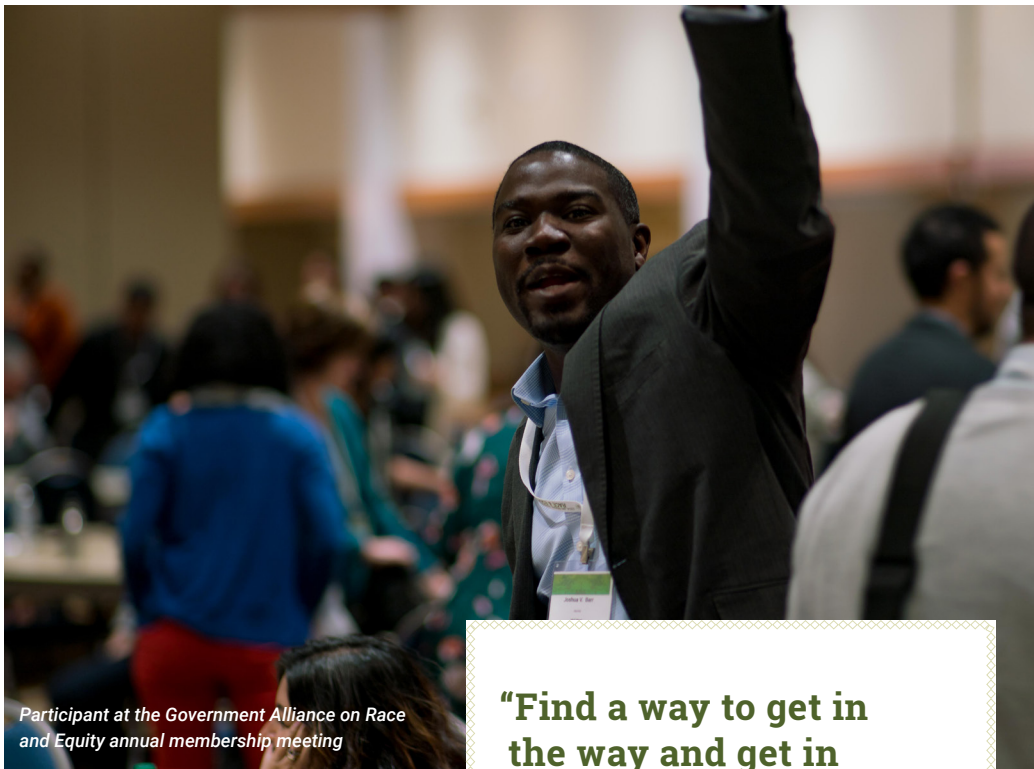
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²⁰Hannah-Jones, Nikole. "Living Apart: How the Government Betrayed a Landmark Civil Rights Law." ProPublica, June 25, 2015, www.propublica.org/article/living-apart-how-the-government-betrayed-a-landmark-civil-rights-law.

CONCLUSION

Thank you for your commitment to racial equity and taking the essential steps toward bringing more people in the federal government together to proactively advance racial equity. Equity practitioners and leaders in government are not alone on this long-term journey to transform agencies and the whole of the federal government. Race Forward is here to help. Please do not hesitate to reach out and tap into the collective resources of FIRE (the Federal Initiative on Race and Equity) at Race Forward, as well as the Government Alliance on Race and Equity. Our trainings and technical assistance are always available.

Please email comments or requests for support to FIRE@raceforward.org.



Participant at the Government Alliance on Race and Equity annual membership meeting

“Find a way to get in the way and get in good trouble, necessary trouble when you see something is not fair, not right, or not just.”

- Congressman
John Lewis



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In 2017, Race Forward united with the Center for Social Inclusion. Founded in 1981, Race Forward brings systemic analysis and an innovative approach to complex race issues to help people take effective action toward racial equity. Founded in 2002, the Center for Social Inclusion catalyzed community, government, and other institutions to dismantle structural racial inequity and create equitable outcomes for all.

Race Forward is home to the **Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE)**, a national network of local government working to achieve racial equity and advance opportunities for all. Race Forward publishes the daily news site **Colorlines** and presents **Facing Race**, the country's largest multiracial conference on racial justice.

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