

Equity Action Plan Digest: Social Security Administration

Summarized by Travis Reginal

This is one in a series of Urban Institute digests summarizing federal agencies', subagencies', and commissions' 2022 equity action plans, which were released in response to the Biden administration's January 2021 executive order, Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government. The Social Security Administration's equity action plan is available at <https://www.ssa.gov/open/materials/SSA-EO-13985-Equity-Action-Plan.pdf> (PDF).

Overview

What <i>problem</i> is the agency trying to solve?	The SSA intends to reduce barriers to access, particularly for people who “have few resources and may need [their] programs the most” (p. 2)
Priority groups	Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and Black, Hispanic, and Native American people; elderly people; people in rural areas; and women
Historic harm mentioned?	Yes
Partners in implementation	Community- and faith-based organizations, Department of Labor, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, National Association of Disability Representatives, National Organization of Social Security Claimants Representatives
Equity defined as	Not defined beyond executive order

Pillars and Principles of Equity

Acknowledgement of past harm and present barriers	“Many of our customers...cannot conduct business with us online. Often, this is due to limited access to technology, housing insecurity, lack of credit history, difficulty understanding the procedures to establish online accounts, or reliance on third parties for assistance” (p. 12)
Impact goals	Increase the share of research contracts to historically Black colleges and universities and minority-serving institutions (p. 3); identify disparities in customer experience (p. 10); provide equitable service for disability applicants (p. 14); increase gender equity in programs (p. 17)
Actions and activities	Increase collection of race and ethnicity data (p. 4); improve readability of Supplemental Security Income application (p. 4); review research on employment discrimination (p. 4); all agency employees complete mandatory training on unconscious bias (p. 16)
Accountability measures and approaches	Report progress to Congress, the Executive Office of the President, and external stakeholders (p. 3); evaluation of internal policies; publishing race and ethnicity data (p. 9); continue engagement with executive-branch partners (p. 17)

Note: For the rubric we used to evaluate these components of the equity action plans, see the appendix to the Urban Institute's 2023 brief “Pathways to Equity at Scale: An Analysis of the 2022 Federal Equity Action Plans and Recommendations for 2023 Plans,” available at https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/Pathways%20to%20Equity%20at%20Scale%20Appendix_0.pdf.

Types of Equity and Related Activities

Procedural (example: expanding language and translation services; simplifying the vendor application process)	Expansion of online/telephone services as alternative to in-person visits (p. 2); develop online version of the Continuing Disability Review form (p. 4); simplify the Supplemental Security Income application process (p. 4); strengthen tribal consultation (p. 5); decrease the burdens for people who identify as gender diverse/transgender who are seeking an updated Social Security number card (p. 17)
Distributional (example: creating new procurement program)	Increased the amount of individual grant funding for graduate students (p. 7); encouraging research partnerships between predominantly white research institutions, historically Black colleges and universities, and minority-serving institutions (p. 7)
Structural (example: policy change via proposing legislation related to an equity goal; changing organizational functions)	Advocate stakeholder workgroups (p. 5); issuing a temporary final rule for the musculoskeletal disorder listings (p. 5); reviewing medial evidence rules (p. 5); expand offices that work with tribal nations (p.12); unconscious bias trainings (p. 15)

Key Metrics to Measure Progress on Equity

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ earnings, benefit amounts, income, poverty, health, and wealth of each racial/ethnic group (p. 9) ■ increase in participant information gathered, such as race and ethnicity for Social Security number card applications (p. 10) ■ percentage of claimants obtaining representation at all stages of the disability process and their claim outcomes (p. 16) ■ percentage of represented claimants at all stages of the disability application process (p. 16) ■ percentage of research grants and procurement opportunities awarded to historically Black colleges and universities, minority-serving institutions, and small and disadvantaged businesses (p. 20)
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Looking Ahead: Key Reflections for Plan Implementation

Where is the agency set up for success?	Expanding its data collection on race and ethnicity; strong history of working with populations with disabilities and/or medical needs
Areas for future investment and growth	Adequate funding of the Social Security Fund; highlight additional overlooked groups, such as survivors of insured workers; inclusion of survivors of insured workers in priority setting; set goals for increases in staff diversity; continuing to collect data on race and ethnicity of applicants; potential development of Social Security tax cap to promote equitable practices