

A photograph showing a group of people in a professional setting. In the foreground, a man with a beard and glasses is speaking and gesturing with his hand. Behind him, the back of a woman's head and shoulders are visible. The background is a blurred brick wall.

COMMUNITY-ENGAGED METHODS

Changing Power Dynamics among Researchers, Local Governments, and Community Members

A Community Engagement and Racial Equity Guidebook

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About This Toolkit

Increasingly, local governments seek to partner with research institutions to understand and undo their legacy of racist policymaking and other aspects of structural racism. This legacy includes historical and current policies, programs, and institutional practices that have facilitated white families' social and economic upward mobility and well-being while creating systemic barriers to the mobility and well-being of families of color.

This toolkit highlights community-based approaches that can catalyze equitable public policy, programs, and investments by centering a community's expertise. Our aim is to equip local government agencies and their research partners with the tools needed to transform practices, structures, and systems by joining the highly collaborative processes of racial equity and community engagement. The toolkit is designed for local governments but also for researchers and policy experts who partner with local governments.

In this toolkit, you will find

- approaches to use when considering community engagement as a vehicle for promoting racial equity
- five actionable principles that can guide local governments in using community engagement to drive racial equity in operations, research, and policy—with real-world scenarios and best practices
- a 10-item community engagement inventory with guiding questions for government agencies, researchers, and partners
- strategies for local governments, researchers, and policy experts to collaborate on racial equity using a community-engaged approach

Driving Racial Equity by Engaging Community Members

The persistence of racial inequity—and the long history of excluding communities of color from the table where decisions that affect their lives are made—signals the need to reimagine how local governments engage communities of color in the pursuit of racial equity. [Race Forward defines racial equity](#) as both “a process of eliminating racial disparities and improving outcomes for everyone,” and “the intentional and continual practice of changing policies, practices, systems, and structures by prioritizing measurable change in the lives of people of color.”

To achieve racial equity, decisionmakers in local governments must reset the table. President Biden’s [executive order on racial equity \(EO13985\)](#) calls for the inclusion of communities in an intersectional way, including “Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Arab, and Asian American and Pacific Islander peoples; members of religious minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) persons; persons with disabilities; persons who live in rural areas; and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality.” Agencies seeking to transform their decisionmaking practices should tap the power of community insight and expertise.

[Community-engaged methods \(CEM\)](#) provide a platform for treating community members—intentionally and continually—as valued collaborators, partners, and experts in shaping the future of their own communities. But adopting an inclusive community-engagement approach to racial equity work does not happen with the flip of a switch. It requires the transformational work of disrupting power dynamics and reimagining current top-down relationships between local governments, researchers, and community members.

Community engagement and racial equity are not necessarily synonymous.

A government action guided by racial equity is not necessarily community based:

- A convening with historically excluded Black business leaders to discuss a new workforce development investment might be guided by racial equity. But it may not be a robust community-based process if it does not also engage the individuals with the most at stake in the investment: the Black youth, families, parents, and residents.

A community-based process is not necessarily racially equitable:

- A participatory budgeting town hall discussing how to re-target public safety funds could be community-based, because it reaches 70 percent of residents in the city. Still, it may not be racially equitable if the budgeting process doesn’t proportionally represent residents of color or if white residents’ priorities and concerns overshadow those of residents of color.

Rethinking the Operational Paradigm in Local Governments

At its core, the power of prioritizing racial equity through community engagement comes from shifting agency operations from a transactional to a transformative approach. A transactional approach considers how to address an issue only within the confines of an existing structure, such as how to deliver a resource to community members. Transactions are typically designed to provide short-term solutions for people facing racial inequities and might focus only on a single causal factor. For example, offering financial, health, housing, and justice information through a city's office of minority affairs can be merely transactional if the information is focused primarily on existing government and institutional systems. In this scenario, community members may obtain information, but no community-informed changes are made to the government's practices, structures, or systems. A transactional approach tends to leave racial inequities intact—and can leave community members feeling unheard, undervalued, and excluded from the changemaking processes.

Conversely, a transformational approach recognizes and deploys community members as potential changemakers. It advances the goal of racial equity by improving processes, systems, and outcomes through strategic community engagement. This approach uses community insight and expertise to shift organizational culture and to recalibrate practices, structures, and systems to more effectively address the root causes of racial inequities. A transformational approach brings a cross-cutting perspective to root causes that can inform multimodal solutions for addressing racial inequities. For example, evaluating the city's programs with input from residents of color can inform program directors' understanding of how various government entities, and the stakeholders they regulate, impact people's social and economic well-being. This moves the city away from focusing on individual behavior and closer to altering practices and culture to foster racial equity.

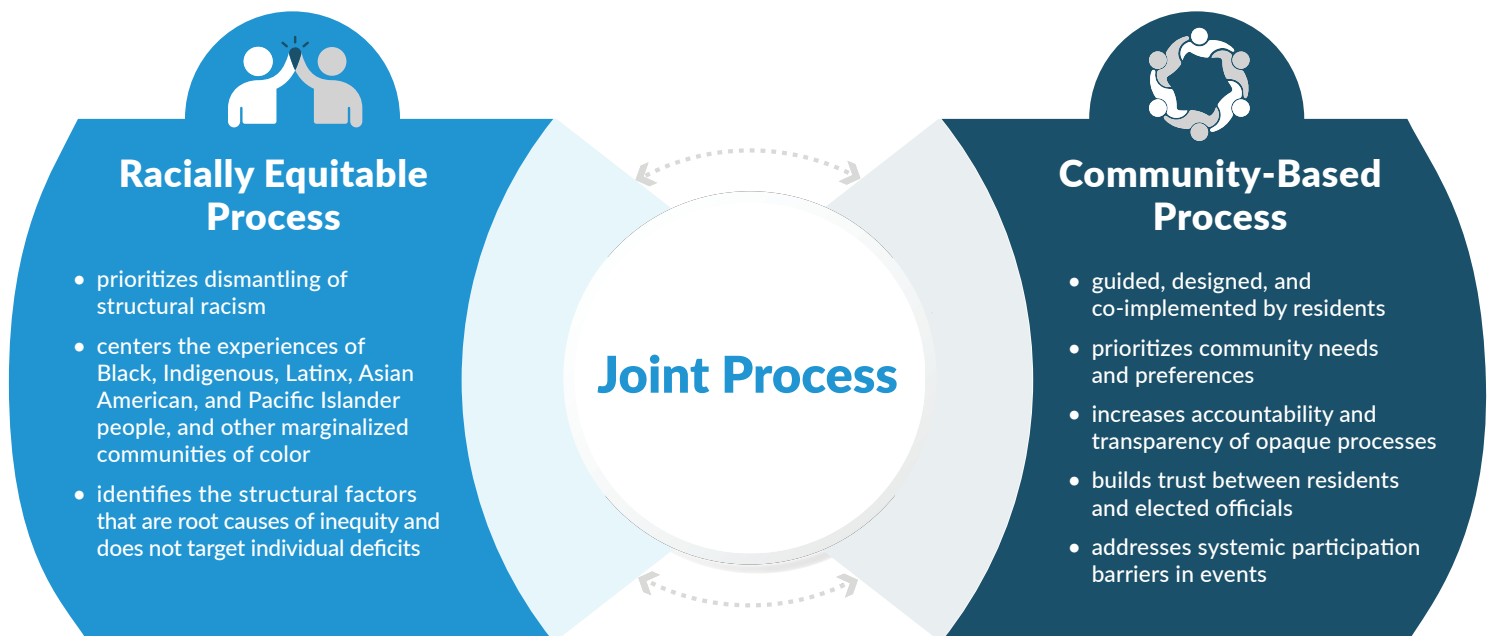
A transformational approach is continual, requiring local governments to constantly assess, question, implement, and normalize new equitable practices. This approach involves engaging multiple departments to develop a cross-departmental plan and/or using a whole-person care approach to services. Transformational processes can lead to community members feeling heard, valued, and empowered. When community members help shape the resources needed to change outcomes in their communities, local governments and researchers achieve longer-term solutions that employ system-level change.

Putting Racial Equity and Community Engagement into Practice to Achieve Joint Outcomes

Local governments have a better chance of achieving equitable outcomes for all residents when they embed the joint processes of racial equity and community engagement into operations, including service delivery, research, and policymaking. Incorporating both processes into operations is essential to ensuring government organizations adopt racial equity in vision, culture, and practice. Figure 1 describes the benefits of both processes for agencies.

FIGURE 1

Joint Racial Equity and Community Engagement Processes



As mentioned, racial equity is the process of eliminating racial disparities. Adopting this process brings the benefits of operating an organization that intentionally centers the lived experiences of communities of color and roots out the structural factors that drive racial inequities. Racial equity can result in, among other outcomes, stronger social cohesion, increases in resident-driven action, and positive narrative change. These benefits are derived from an organizational vision and culture that replaces transactions with transformation.

In concert with the process of shifting organizational culture, the community engagement process, in turn, provides the concrete benefits of recalibrating operations with community insight and expertise. Programs, services, and policies will more effectively address systemic barriers and meet the actual needs and preferences of community members.

By including voices of color at the table, local government agencies and their partners are able to build trust with community members, strengthen accountability to the public, and improve operational transparency for all stakeholders.

Five Principles for Using Community Engagement to Drive Racial Equity in Local Government Operations

Establishing common values and language is the gateway to centering communities of color in decisionmaking and other processes. Shared values and language empower communities and are foundational to improving the transparency, accountability, and effectiveness of partnerships among community members, researchers, and the government officials who are responsible for setting policies and delivering services. Five principles can guide efforts to establish common ground:

- **Principle 1:** Empower historically excluded voices.
- **Principle 2:** Recognize people's intersectional identities.
- **Principle 3:** Understand historical context and challenge pervasive stereotypes.
- **Principle 4:** Compensate expertise and efforts.
- **Principle 5:** Develop accountability measures for sustainable systems change.

Principle 1: Empower Historically Excluded Voices

People of color have often been excluded from policy decisionmaking. Centering the experiences of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Arab, Asian American, and Pacific Islander people is necessary to transform the decision space. Power plays a significant role in how and by whom policy decisions are made. In part, inequities exist because of the power imbalance in public decisionmaking. Acknowledging power structures upfront in any activity, development, or program can set the tone for a more inclusive process.

Putting this principle into action requires collaborating and co-creating with community residents by putting them in positions of power as decisionmakers and allowing them to elevate their policy priorities and solutions. Sharing power requires ceding power—in the form of financial resources, decisionmaking, and/or training—so that priorities and initiatives already being led at the community level can thrive independently.

Principle 2: Recognize People's Intersectional Identities

People of color do not all share identical human experiences. Examining how people's intersectional identities and experiences play a role in shaping opportunity can advance policy solutions. The process of assessing inequities and solutions requires being attentive to how different characteristics like class, disability, gender, sexuality, family structure, immigration status, and justice involvement intersect to give rise to inequities and patterns of exclusion. Understanding intersectionality is critical to rethinking the process of policy formation.

Long-standing practices that deprioritize or prevent intersectional inclusion can be transformed. For example, local governments can facilitate broader inclusion by making convenings, such as town halls and public hearings, more accessible (e.g., by holding virtual events), more culturally specific (e.g., by holding events in a location the community trusts), and more flexible (e.g., by hosting at different times of day so daytime and nighttime workers can participate). Data analysts and quantitative researchers can disaggregate data by race, ethnicity, gender, or other identity categories. Reporting data across varied dimensions creates the administrative, programmatic, or national datasets needed to capture important intersections in human experiences and outcomes.

Principle 3: Understand Historical Context and Challenge Pervasive Stereotypes

Conducting thorough contextual analyses can help identify the policy patterns that generate and perpetuate disparities. This is a reflective process that both policymakers and researchers should be doing to better understand the root causes of these disparities. Racial segregation, for example, is the result of the intentional application—or lingering effects—of federal, state, and local policies designed to racialize people and spaces. Learning about the legal, economic, and socio-cultural factors behind the [historic disinvestment](#) and many forms of violence enacted upon residents of color is critical to dispelling stereotypes and changing the paradigm to be more equitable. A thorough contextual analysis can help decisionmakers pinpoint the root cause of specific disparities.

Also, researchers need to understand the historical context behind their disciplines. In the context of systems of domination in the United States (racism, classism, capitalism, etc.), social researchers have perpetuated extractive practices that:

- undermine the expertise of people of color (see [Roger Arliner Young](#) and [W.E.B. Du Bois](#)),
- pathologize Black communities (see the [Moynihan Report](#))
- directly harm communities (see the [Tuskegee syphilis experiment](#)),
- exclude people of color from the profits and findings gained by extractive research (see [Henrietta Lacks](#))

As evidenced, residents of color have reason to mistrust research organizations and local governments because of past and present unethical processes, and it is important to address this reality when engaging community members and other stakeholders. Recognizing the community impact of this historical context creates the opportunity for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to dispel the harmful stereotype of “[researchers as brains](#)” and “[community as brawn](#)” and create community engagement processes that value community members as equals.

Principle 4: Compensate Expertise and Efforts

People of color and people with low incomes often carry out the work to advance racial equity in community-first approaches with little attribution or compensation. In the beginning of this work, researchers and policy translators are responsible for recognizing the costs (not only monetary) of the research and engagement—and finding ways to compensate community members for their time, expertise, and emotional energy, as well as their logistical costs such as transportation, child care, and food.

Ensuring that community engagement is feasible and inclusive while minimizing barriers is essential to inviting community members and facilitating their presence at the table. Minimizing barriers could include providing language translation, addressing negative perceptions and past research experiences, enlarging the venue, and taking other actions that could strengthen community participation. Addressing potential challenges at the start of any engagement creates a more inclusive process and result.

Principle 5: Develop Accountability Measures for Sustainable Systems Change

Transparency around methods, resources, timelines, opportunities, and limitations is essential to building authentic partnerships and engagement with communities. Local governments should be clear about what can and cannot be achieved given the timeline, budget, and other constraints, as well as establish a long-term feedback loop whereby community members can measure progress (or lack thereof). Accountability measures signal a commitment to policy impact and to dismantling structural racism in practices and programs. Researchers can use data-driven reporting to follow up on the progress of these efforts.

There are no standard metrics for measuring racial equity or community engagement. Yet, researchers and policymakers can collaborate to define and create local metrics to meaningfully demonstrate change. This can be an added part of relationship- and consensus-building. The [StriveTogether Guide](#) is a great resource about system-level metrics and indicators.

Ten Focus Areas for Local Government Partners and Researchers Seeking to Collaborate on Racial Equity and Community Engagement

Before launching any new work aimed at jointly centering racial equity and community engagement, local governments and researchers should first take inventory of their knowledge base; their preliminary racial equity goals; and their ideas for centering community engagement, measuring impact, and sustaining positive outcomes. The set of questions below can be used when kicking off a new racial equity and community engagement project as well as during the collaboration process. Practitioners should be mindful that the answers to these questions can change as community members inform and shape the project.

What do you already know?

- 1. Historical context.** What past policies have created or exacerbated racial disparities within this issue area in your neighborhoods? (Consider national, state, and local policies.)
- 2. Existing data.** What data or stories have you collected that indicate the local government's need for a policy change? Are the data disaggregated by race, ethnicity, and other intersectional experiences and identities?

How can your proposed policy decision, program, or investment drive racial equity?

- 3. Community impact.** How might your new policy decision, program, or investment affect communities of color, either positively or negatively? Which communities of color will be impacted the most? Acknowledging people's intersections, how might impacts differ across various groups?
- 4. Policy consequences.** What harms or unintended consequences might be triggered by your new policy decision? How will you mitigate these?

How can engaging community members support racial equity?

- 5. Form of engagement.** What form of engagement (e.g., virtual convenings, one-on-one interviews, focus groups) will best solicit the input needed from the communities you hope to serve? When would it be most appropriate to engage community members and how frequently?

- 6. Previous engagement efforts.** How and with which community members have you built trust and relationships in the past? How has this been challenging? How do you aim to be transparent and own your past actions? How do you intend to address power imbalances?
- 7. Community participation.** What practices or resources will ensure that residents are able to meaningfully participate in your engagement? What are the potential barriers to participation, and how might they be addressed? How do you intend to compensate community members for their expertise and participation?

How can you measure impact and sustain the work?

- 8. Systems-level impact.** What systems-level impact do you hope your new policy decision will have? Assessing your new potential policy honestly, which impacts will it not have?
- 9. Data and metrics.** What data, metrics, and evaluation strategies will you implement to measure progress toward short- and long-term goals? How can these metrics be co-created with community members?
- 10. Ongoing relationships.** How will the local government aim to preserve the relationship with community members beyond the end of the proposed project?

For more resources like this one, explore [Seattle's Race and Social Justice Initiative](#)

Seven Operational Areas Where Local Governments Can Reimagine Their Processes

Joining the processes of racial equity and community engagement in local government work is a highly collaborative undertaking. Local government partners, through their specific roles and functions, have a powerful and unique set of opportunities to disrupt historic and ongoing systemic inequities. Because of local governments' proximity to the daily lives of communities of color, it is much more feasible to integrate residents into planning and decisionmaking processes at the local level than it is at the federal level. Thus, reimagining local government functions with community-engaged methods and racial equity as priorities has a significant potential scale of impact.

As partners to local governments, policy experts and researchers can play important support roles in reconceptualizing local government operations to better embed racial equity and community-engaged methods. Through collaborating on needs assessments, sharing evidence-based practices, providing technical assistance, and evaluating programs, new opportunities arise for policy experts and researchers to help make local government processes work more equitably for all.

The seven government operational areas listed to the right and described in detail below demonstrate a sampling of areas where some localities have begun re-tooling their processes to act on their racial equity and community engagement goals.

Operational Areas Where Local Governments Have Incorporated Racial Equity and Community Engagement

- audits
- budgets
- cross-departmental and intergovernmental coordination
- fines and fees
- procurement
- public employment
- public services

Audits

According to the [Generally Accepted Government Auditing Standards \(GAGAS\)](#), auditing holds public agencies and leaders accountable by maintaining a high set of reportability standards on state and local budgets. Auditing evaluates government entities' compliance, oversight, execution, and finances in an independent, objective, and nonpartisan manner. Although these functions are important, they do not represent the full potential of audits.

Racial equity audits and assessment tools are on the rise as policy-makers seek to examine diversity, equity, and inclusion in their local government operations. Beyond reporting expenditures, racial equity audits can maintain the independent and unbiased standards upheld by GAGAS while matching racial equity goals to auditable funds using results-based and data-oriented methods. [Participatory auditing](#) can also make racial equity plans more effective by involving direct beneficiaries and local governments in public oversight activities.

PROMISING PRACTICE

Conduct and assess government audits in ways that better meet the needs and reflect the interests of residents of color.

- **Local governments** can engage communities when conducting audits and issuing final findings.
- **Researchers and policy experts** can create and strategize with [data visualization tools](#) that make audit findings accessible and transparent to local residents.

EXAMPLE

Expanding the use of audits to achieve racial equity goals

- **Principle 1:** Empower historically excluded voices.
 - **Principle 3:** Understand historical context and challenge pervasive stereotypes.
 - **Principle 4:** Compensate expertise and efforts.
 - **Principle 5:** Develop accountability measures for sustainable systems change.
1. The Seattle Office of City Auditor uses a [Racial and Social Justice Initiative Toolkit](#) form to assess racial equity issues within city agencies. Among many questions, the form asks: “whether the topic proposed for review involves certain racial/ethnic groups that are significantly or disproportionately affected” and “whether the entity conducts outreach to the community.” These questions help assess the extent to which an audit’s design values the voices of communities of color and whether it can lead to more equitable outcomes.
 2. The Los Angeles City Council directs its [Civil + Human Rights and Equity Department](#) to conduct audits on the “[sufficiency of institutional resources that city departments, businesses and commissions need to successfully advance equity and enhance investments](#)” for residents of color. Other local governments have adopted similar approaches to mandating local equity audits.
 3. The Auditor’s Office in the City of Portland, Oregon, uses a [racial equity plan](#) that assesses public-facing divisions (e.g., law enforcement) and internal divisions (e.g., the city clerk).

Budgets

Budgets, which are approved annually by cities and counties, establish spending priorities, dictate how local government entities can spend money, and invest in tools that can lead to racial equity. It is often said that budgets are “value statements,” because they reflect the priorities of a given group. The budgeting process in local governments is vital to racial equity because planning efforts around programming, staffing, community outreach and engagement, data collection, systems evaluation, infrastructure, and other essential components of dismantling structural racism require adequate funding. When budgeting does not adequately invest in racially equitable policies and programs to support communities of color, it can cause further harm and widen gaps in social and economic investment in neighborhoods, poverty, health outcomes, and environmental safety.

When local governments design a community engagement structure within the budget-making process for communities of color, residents can voice their concerns about how money was spent in the past, what did and didn’t work, and how they would like to see funding dedicated in the future. Experts can work with local governments to ensure communities of color that have been marginalized are better represented in future investments in their neighborhoods.

PROMISING PRACTICE

Revisit how governments spend funds and allocate resources based on evidence about communities of color.

- **Local governments** can explore [participatory budgeting](#) as a method to design and fund new programs that better incorporate the interests and needs of communities of color.
- **Researchers and policy experts** can review literature or compile case studies to show best practices in racially equitable budgeting, especially for pilot programs. Additionally, the provision of racially disaggregated and small-geography data can help inform participatory budgeting processes.

EXAMPLE

Incorporating the need and interests of communities of color in the budgeting process

- **Principle 1:** Empower historically excluded voices.
 - **Principle 2:** Recognize people’s intersectional identities.
 - **Principle 5:** Develop accountability measures for sustainable systems change.
1. [Mecklenburg County, North Carolina](#), advanced five steps around participatory budgeting: inform, consult, involve, collaborate, and empower. The county also authorized additional public meetings, used social media to keep the public informed, hosted community budgeting workshops, developed a survey with results disaggregated by race, and created multi-lingual surveys for their Public Engagement in the Budget Process initiative to reach diverse audiences.
 2. In Washington, DC, the [Racial Equity Achieves Results \(REACH\) Amendment Act of 2020](#) requires that the mayor’s annual budget package to the DC Council include a summary of how the proposed budget “advances racial equity in the district, reduces disparate outcomes, and allocates resources to support equitable outcomes.”
 3. Departments in the City of San Antonio, Texas, use an [equity atlas and a budget equity tool](#) to ensure budgets do not exacerbate inequities and further marginalize communities.

Cross-Departmental and Intergovernmental Coordination

An all-too-common barrier to improving the relationships between local governments and residents, especially residents of color, is the siloed nature of local government processes. Because governments are not always required to share data, practices, and programs with other departments in their city or county—and are sometimes prohibited from doing so—it can make it difficult for a community member to fully understand how different programs interact to achieve a common racial equity or community-engaged mission.

The reality is that residents don't experience siloed, or singular, inequities; they experience inequities across multiple areas at the same time, including housing, transportation, education, criminal justice, and employment. This intersectionality can further affect how residents experience the crisscross of inequities. When public employees can break down these silos to facilitate cross-departmental initiatives and intergovernmental partnerships, it becomes easier to target racial equity goals across issues in a coordinated way. For example, with coordination and consensus-building in multi-department planning processes, agencies can prevent duplicate efforts, save time and money, and use public resources more strategically. Ultimately, more effective collaboration across departments and municipalities is a systems-level change that can better serve residents of color.

PROMISING PRACTICE

Sequence and coordinate community engagement in racial equity plans.

- **Local governments** can avoid duplicating efforts to survey and engage the community by centralizing and coordinating on programs that have likeminded goals and processes. This increases the likelihood that residents, who have limited time and financial resources to participate in meetings, are able to collaborate with local governments in planning processes.
- **Researchers and policy experts** can identify redundancies and opportunities for collaboration. One way to do this is to invest in building strong research, non-profit, philanthropic, and governmental coalitions, enabling local governments to more easily coordinate across issue areas.

EXAMPLE

Working across departments to reduce survey burden on residents

- **Principle 1:** Empower historically excluded voices.
- **Principle 5:** Develop accountability measures for sustainable systems change.

Buncombe County, North Carolina's [Equity and Inclusion Workgroup](#) has a diverse membership, including leadership from the Buncombe County Superior Court, District Attorney's Office, Public Defender's Office, County Manager's Office, Health and Human Services, Justice Services, and Asheville Housing Authority. The workgroup also includes reentry and jail-diversion community members. While working to address racial and ethnic disparities and increase community engagement, the county Justice Services Division collaborated with its Health Services Division to develop similar processes for outreach to avoid inundating their community. Similarly, Buncombe has worked to make their efforts accessible, such as making their community survey available in [numerous languages and platforms](#). The Workgroup has also established clear goals and timelines in their action plan, to foster accountability.

Fines and Fees

Local government services often are funded by fines and fees. In some cases, enforcement costs may be associated with implementing and delivering a program. At other times, it may be unclear whether a fee correlates directly to an agency's operating budget.

Regardless of their stated purpose, these fines and fees coexist within the context of persistent structural racism, which has generated and maintained a pernicious racial wealth gap between whites and many communities of color. [Recent research](#) has exposed that fines and fees not only perpetuate income and wealth disparities, but also aggravate this gap with discriminatory municipal practices that disproportionately impact communities of color, particularly in areas where there are high concentrations of Black people.

Acknowledging that regressive government fines and fees can place an additional financial burden on people of color with lower incomes is an important step toward eliminating racial disparities in income and wealth. To address the disparate impact on communities of color, local governments can consider eliminating, reducing, waiving, or income-tiering fines and fees, as well as finding alternative funding sources for implementing and delivering services.

PROMISING PRACTICE

Identify sources of racial injustice in the administration of fines and fees.

- **Local governments** can evaluate the racially inequitable impact of fines and fees by centering the leadership of communities of color, who are the people most affected by fines, fees, and collections, and who can most readily identify discriminatory practices.
- **Researchers and policy experts** can develop the evidence base on existing income and wealth disparities, as well as project how adjusting current fine and fee structures can financially alleviate communities of color.

EXAMPLE

Changing Course on Income and Wealth Disparities by Expunging Owed Fines and Fees

- **Principle 1:** Empower historically excluded voices.
- **Principle 3:** Understand historical context and challenge pervasive stereotypes.

[Durham, North Carolina](#), implemented an expunction and restoration program with the Durham District Attorney and the court to waive old traffic fines and fees, helping restore 35,000 suspended driver's licenses. The Durham Innovation Team used a community outreach coordinator for the program to determine why people did not have driver's licenses. Eighty percent of Durham residents with suspended licenses were people of color, mostly Black people. When asked about the program's successes, [the coordinator said](#), "It's all about community engagement. Go out and hear from the people."

Procurement

Procurement is the process by which local governments obtain needed resources to perform key functions, including contracting with businesses to obtain those resources. Increasingly, local governments are finding opportunities to evaluate whether they are advancing racially equitable procurement and contracting processes. Racially equitable procurement can include diversifying the entrepreneurs and businesses that a city contracts with for services, but it can also include collaborating with communities of color to establish eligibility, outcome, and metric standards for the selection of government contractors.

One way localities are advancing racially equitable procurement is by [conducting disparity studies](#) to determine if their spending is equitably distributed through contracts and use their findings to institute programs that can remedy racial disparities in their third-party agreements. Given that governments will rely on private contractors to support these functions, the contracting space provides a promising window of opportunity to model racial equity and community engagement commitments.

PROMISING PRACTICE

Adopt and implement [Community Benefits Agreements \(CBA\)](#) to deliver economic and social benefits to communities of color.

- **Local governments** can legally conduct disparity studies before going forward with new procurement efforts. Study results can inform potential community benefit agreements between private businesses and the public, making these agreements more evidence-based and actionable.
- **Researchers and policy experts** can document the racial diversity of existing contractors, how contracting policies and regulations might be more burdensome for communities of color, the extent to which long-standing vendors are responsible and accountable to communities of color, and whether new contract requirements can ensure equitable service delivery.

EXAMPLE

Codifying Equity and Inclusion Commitments in Hiring by Adopting Community Benefits Agreements

- **Principle 1:** Empower historically excluded voices.
- **Principle 2:** Recognize people's intersectional identities.
- **Principle 5:** Develop accountability measures for sustainable systems change.

[South Bend, Indiana](#), passed an ordinance to address the racial wealth divide. The city set out to be more race-conscious and inclusive in its contracting processes. In addition to developing training and outreach for minority and women-owned businesses and entrepreneurs, the city created community benefits agreements (CBA). These CBAs created opportunities for residents of color to legally hold companies accountable to supporting the community benefit interests stipulated in the government contract. With residents' active participation, the CBA becomes a powerful economic empowerment mechanism, as it provides a formalized and enforceable structure to reshape community investment initiatives.

Public Employment

While following federal and state guidelines, local governments exercise autonomy over the hiring of public employees. Just as in the private and non-profit world, the hiring and retention of talented and racially diverse staff is an important way to improve public services. However, diversity efforts alone cannot dismantle the structures that created and sustained racial inequities. It's important that local governments also create more inclusive and equitable spaces for public employees, as well as for the residents who engage with them. Increasingly, employers are adopting a more comprehensive human resources approach that entails diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

However, DEI efforts can be strengthened by adopting racial equity and community-engaged methods. For example, in addition to diversity in hiring, some local governments have sought to ensure their employees are familiar with the concepts of racial equity and community-engaged methods by creating codes of conduct or procedure manuals. These resources are an opportunity to provide appropriate awareness and training, especially during onboarding and before an employee begins managing services or programs. Racial equity and community engagement training for public employees moves beyond diversity hiring and equips employees with the knowledge and confidence to challenge inequitable policies, programs, and practices. It also equips them with the ability and emphasizes their responsibility to engage with communities of color ethically, respectfully, and meaningfully. This way, employees can acquire the basic knowledge and insights needed to understand how historically discriminatory services and programs can be addressed in services, programs, and policy to achieve racial equity and community engagement goals.

PROMISING PRACTICE

Translate the available literature on racial equity and community engagement into actionable trainings, codes of conduct, and employee manuals.

- **Local governments** can hire and collaborate with researchers and trainers who have expertise in racial equity and community-engaged methods to produce trainings and materials that provide public employees with functional knowledge around key concepts. It's a bonus if those hired meet equitable procurement guidelines.
- **Researchers and policy experts** can create actionable, real-world, and timely materials to translate complex academic concepts and data into

EXAMPLE

Upskilling staff to center racial equity in implementing services

- **Principle 1:** Empower historically excluded voices.
- **Principle 5:** Develop accountability measures for sustainable systems change.

Minneapolis, Minnesota, provides [racial equity training](#) to staff to ensure that employees representing the city and providing city services understand how to positively engage with one another as well as constituents. One program trained staff on what it means to be an antiracist: "believing and acting in a way that repairs racist policies and practices rather than simply refuting them." The training further defined antiracism as "the practice of being aware of how our bodies move and speak in ways that reinforce racist beliefs despite what we think." Having a good working understanding of concepts related to racial equity and community engagement, which are sometimes new to staff, can strengthen staff approaches to centering racial equity in the implementation of pilot programs.

Public Services

Local governments run a wide and complex array of public services, including those designed to protect health, manage public transportation, deliver water and sanitation services, and provide job retraining. Historically, the quality and quantity of local public services has not adequately addressed the needs of communities of color, in part because of racially discriminatory public spending and lack of investment in redlined or segregated communities. Additionally, racist views about people of color, particularly of Black and immigrant communities, have helped stigmatize the usage of government services, as witnessed in the racially coded term “welfare queen.” Stigma can result in avoidance or underuse of local government services by families facing hardships that could be ameliorated by these needed services. Intentional efforts to affirm human dignity and build community trust could disrupt the role of stigma in public service delivery.

To remedy these inequities resultant from structural racism, local governments need to meaningfully engage people of color to ensure that public service programs operate successfully without perpetuating harmful practices. The perspectives and ideas of people of color are integral to improving existing public services and identifying new ones.

PROMISING PRACTICE

Gather and analyze data on the historical and present-day effects of racial inequity on public services to improve local governments’ services in partnership with local residents.

- **Local governments** can document the origins and evolution of racially inequitable public services. They can use this evidence in service-improvement discussions with community members to better meet their needs.
- **Researchers and policy experts** can work with local governments to help them better evaluate what they can do to improve public service quality and delivery. Research can include both quantitative and qualitative evaluations of past and present racial gaps in services.

EXAMPLE

Authentically engaging communities of color to improve public services

- **Principle 1:** Empower historically excluded voices.
- **Principle 2:** Recognize people’s intersectional identities.
- **Principle 3:** Understand historical context and challenge pervasive stereotypes.

The [Minneapolis Health Department](#) provides a diverse range of services to improve the quality of life for all residents. And the department staff took a targeted approach to understanding what health means to the community. They hosted luncheons with Somali, Hmong, American Indian, and African American members of the community to learn more about how these community members define “health.” Through sharing meals, the Minneapolis Health Commissioner gained valuable insight into how to change the agency’s principles and engage the community about health. By sharing a meal with community members, government leaders connected with the community, learned more about the community’s values, and received advice around how they could help the community overcome challenges. With this community input, the health department can help ensure its mission and language reflects the experiences, knowledge, and communication modes of people of color in Minneapolis.

These luncheons put a creative spin on the typical town halls and meetings that governments host to discuss problem points with community members. They demonstrate how new strategies around authentic engagement can be effective and bring about changes to service delivery for communities of color.

Conclusion

The systemic challenge of achieving racial equity in public policies, programs, and services is long-standing and multifaceted. Joining racial equity and community engagement processes can equip local governments to become intentional partners in reimagining public services for communities that have been historically underserved. By drawing on insight and expertise from community members—at the table where decisions are made—local governments can retool policies and practices and transform programs and services to ensure government accountability to all residents.

This toolkit can be used at the beginning of a program or policy implementation, in legislative discussions, at the delivery of services, and/or during strategic planning efforts. Local governments can equip themselves for the mission of racial equity by adopting the five guiding principles for engaging communities of color in order to drive racial equity. Local governments, researchers, and policy experts can focus on the seven operational areas identified in this toolkit, which are actionable and potentially impactful target areas for highly collaborative racial equity work. But this is just a starting point: there are many other areas that local governments might also consider as they work closely with communities of color to create programs and services that work for everyone.

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