



The Framework for
an Equitable COVID-19
Homelessness Response
#HousingEquity

Reflections and Learning: The Experience of Advancing Racial Equity in Community

- ① Language
- ② Action
- ③ Power
- ④ Joy

The Framework for an Equitable COVID-19 Homelessness Response project is being collaboratively guided by the following partners:

Center on Budget and Policy Priorities • National Alliance to End Homelessness
National Innovation Service • National Healthcare for the Homeless Council
National Low Income Housing Coalition • Urban Institute
Barbara Poppe and associates • Matthew Doherty Consulting

About this Project

The [Framework for an Equitable COVID-19 Homelessness Response](#) provides guidance to communities on housing and homelessness priorities in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, new federal funding, and opportunities to shift toward racial equity and justice. As a part of the effort, NIS has been producing a [set of tools](#) that will work in alignment with one another to provide access for cities and agencies to best practices and spending recommendations in an equity-centered response to COVID-19.

NIS held a focus group of leaders from the Twin Cities Region, MN, from San Francisco, CA and from Fort Collins, CO to inform this document. Our objective is to reflect on and situate the [equity-based decision making framework](#), promote partnership with people with lived expertise, and identify plans that move community processes from system reform to housing justice. The resulting product is intended to serve as a widely available resource to community and organizational leaders, policymakers, technical assistance providers, philanthropic partners and any individual leading and/or engaged in system change and transformation. This product is not intended to provide tips or best practices regarding changing homelessness response systems' practices to decrease racial inequities, but instead is meant to offer reflections on the experience of leading systems change with the explicit commitment to advancing equity and justice. Our hope is that these reflections can help spur discussion, and help prompt a next set of practices, tactics and opportunities to promote system transformation toward racial equity and housing justice.

NIS would specifically like to thank our partners in the Twin Cities, San Francisco and Fort Collins for engaging in a conversation about the connective tissue that connects our individual experiences advancing racial equity and justice.

Background

The last decade has ushered in significant reform of what a collective “we” have called the homelessness and housing field. The introduction of a [system modeling tool](#) (around 2018) offered Continuums of Care a community-based, participatory process to visualize an optimal response system based on priorities and intervention design values determined by their community. In early 2020 [Direct Cash Transfers](#) was elevated as a more radical alternative to the status quo administrative policies and practices of providing cash assistance to youth experiencing housing instability and homelessness.

Over the course of the last year alone, COVID-19 has exacerbated existing inequalities for people of color and compounded the impact of structural racism. The virus has had an elevated and disproportionate impact on communities of color, particularly Black, Latinx and Asian communities. Racism essentially shapes COVID-19 disease-related inequities as it affects “disease outcomes through increasing multiple risk factors for poor people of color, including racial residential segregation, homelessness, and medical bias.”¹ Black people account for 34% of the total COVID-19 deaths in the United States, despite comprising only 13% of the U.S. population.² For American Indians and Alaska Natives COVID-19 incidence rates were 3.5 times higher compared to White Americans during the first 7 months of the pandemic.³ Hispanics and Latinos are 1.7 times more likely to contract COVID-19 than their non-Hispanic white counterparts, as well as 4.1 times more likely to be hospitalized from COVID-19 and 2.8 times more likely to die from COVID-19.⁴

We have witnessed multiple Black men and women being killed at the hands of police, a coup attempt at the Nation’s capital, and mounting anti-Asian sentiment, violence and killing. It has been a year where racism and white supremacy have become prominent in mainstream discourse.

Yet Black and Brown leaders have ushered in nation-wide and longstanding protests against the systems that perpetuate this violence, fights for abolition of policing and systems whose very foundations are linked to the perpetuation of white supremacy. And it is here, in these conditions, that we turn to take a closer look at the housing and homelessness systems we have erected- at both the roots of racist policy, systems and structures, and at what is possible to construct instead. In response, progress can be pointed to from within the homelessness and housing field, as evidenced by the increased use of data to address racial

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- 1 Laster Pirtle, W. (2020). Racial Capitalism: A Fundamental Cause of Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic Inequities in the United States. Health Education & Behavior: The Official Publication of the Society for Public Health Education, 1090198120922942.
 - 2 Johns Hopkins University and Medicine (2020) Maps and Trends: Racial Data Transparency States that have Released Breakdowns of COVID-19 data by race. Johns Hopkins University and Medicine Coronavirus Resource Center. Retrieved 05/26/2020, from <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data/racial-data-transparency>.
 - 3 <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/how-we-rise/2021/04/02/indigenous-communities-demonstrate-innovation-and-strength-despite-unequal-losses-during-covid-19/>
 - 4 <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/reports/2021/03/05/496733/latinos-face-disproportionate-health-economic-impacts-covid-19/>

disparities and equitable outcomes, the call for centering equity in philanthropic-funded priorities, and an increase in advocacy for national policy addressing structural racism in the current system alongside historic demands for access to housing as a human right.

The convergence of these external forces, along with the significant investments in emergency housing and homelessness assistance since the start of the pandemic through the CARES Act, the Coronavirus Response and Consolidated Appropriations Act, and the American Rescue Plan Act,⁵ new and increased federal and local investments offer new catalytic opportunities for continued advancements in the field. Any system transformation in the sector requires us to design toward a future where Black and Brown people, who have been historically marginalized, are leading and thriving, and where policies, programs and practices have an eye towards transformation and justice.

5 <https://home.treasury.gov/news/featured-stories/fact-sheet-the-american-rescue-plan-will-deliver-immediate-economic-relief-to-families>

Identifying Themes for Advancing Racial Equity and Justice

Over a series of reflective/evaluative conversations, the NIS Center for Housing Justice team identified the following themes, capturing our individual and collective experience facilitating efforts to advance racial equity in select communities during the pandemic. One thing we have noticed as we have been working alongside these communities, is the tension between reform and transformation in racial equity and housing justice work. We sought to investigate the relationship between these concepts more deeply in conversation with members of these communities. Readers will therefore likely see this reflection recurring in the themes below, as it has been part of our growth in understanding the work alongside the community members with whom we have been in conversation. We hope that this document can guide other communities as they are progressing racial equity and housing justice; and provide themes to consider as we keep building the world we want. And in the words of Mariame Kaba, “None of us has all of the answers, or we would have ended oppression already. But if we keep building the world we want, trying new things, and learning from our mistakes, new possibilities emerge.”¹

Here are the themes we uncovered in conversation with colleagues from the the Twin Cities Region, MN, San Francisco, CA and Fort Collins, CO:

① Shared language matters. Use more intentional and explicit language.

Establishing clear definitions brings into focus what a community means and intends to impact when engaged in efforts to advance racial equity and housing justice. One can expect to find proposed terminology in existing tools and resources that include terms like racial justice, equity, transformation, accountability and power. These foundational terms help to draw up boundaries on the collective work and offer up a way to guide continued focus and intent along the way; especially when the convened stakeholders change over time and/or the broad aims of the work together shift. In reflecting on the power of shared language in this work, focus group members expanded on not just the value of shared language but the use of shared language in the following ways:

- The use of existing shared language can offer a helpful evaluation of where progress has been made in a community based on a collective understanding AND the way in which terminology has been operationalized. For example, If the shared understanding of equity stops at increased representation of Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) at a decision-making table then

1 Mariame Kaba. “We Do This ‘Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice.”

you can assume a community may consider this progress as the end/the aim. Meanwhile, BIPOC who are sitting at the table continue to be tokenized and made invisible as they experience system and program leaders receiving their expertise but not taking action until it is vetted and affirmed by others system and program leaders at the table.

- Decision-makers (i.e., funders, system planners) tend to work with definitions that are different from those used by people who are most impacted by the policies and practices that the collective intends to impact. The difference in definition ranges from working definitions of terms to defining what change and success looks and feels like. For example, a funder may be operationalizing equity related to procurement and pay equity for BIPOC providers (which is great) while the BIPOC providers are calling for fairness and equity in access to thought partnership, influence in determining priorities and valuing their expertise compared to white led organizations.
- Lastly, system leaders tend to push back on the desire to be more explicit in operationalizing racial equity strategies in fear of violating policies and regulations tied to government funding. Instead of creating an action plan toward change, leaders discuss feasibility in endless cycles. Not being explicit on targeting resources and strategy after the data calls for it, after people with lived experience have called for action, becomes continued lip service without change.

② Increased awareness and acknowledgement of the need for racial equity must be in service of action.

In response to the impact of COVID-19 and call for action after George Floyd's murder, individuals and groups interested in advancing racial equity and housing justice have been able to find numerous resources to deepen learning and competency while getting organized and collaborative on what to do next. This plethora of resources has provided growing opportunities for individuals and collective movements to learn, grow, and expand their personal and positional power to shift from reform efforts to transformational efforts. For many white leaders, especially those holding positional power, the past year has ushered in new learning and the ability to name and speak of changes that are needed, or to say equity is a priority. But action has not yet followed. The ideas that are captured in this theme are both reflections of cultural dynamics in a given environment that are exacerbating the distance between intentions and actions, especially in this current moment in history:

- Over the course of the last year, given the urgency created by both COVID-19 and the social justice uprisings, the reactive nature of decision-making has come into clear view. The time, energy, and resources needed to get new and significant resources out the door to respond to the pandemic has amplified the need to shift to more proactive responses to longstanding, decades-long and

even generational challenges in housing and homelessness response systems. In the past year, leadership has been much more willing to name a commitment to equity, and yet this commitment also feels reactive, and can be experienced as hollow. A proactive, action-oriented commitment means a deeper engagement across system players; and being engaged means seeing the change needed as a journey- not a short-term initiative. It is in this context that communities are wrestling with questions like: as structural changes are being made, how are those changes helping the system pivot away from a reactive nature?, and how are decision making processes prioritizing equity as a necessary practice and not a stand-alone program?

- The following guiding principles are likely to help serve as setting foundations necessary for being proactive, where communities are able to name this reactive phenomenon and set intentions to lean into something different:
 - Committing to learning about, understanding and acknowledging the origin and historical patterns of existing policies, practices and resources provides opportunity for a more rooted and transformational approach. This practice can and should be conducted alongside an explicit commitment and readiness to take action immediately too, on low-hanging fruit, understanding that lack of action perpetuates setting performative priorities.
 - Move at the speed of trust, which always seems in juxtaposition to political pressures, funding timelines and the existing timetables of grant making, government and non-profit structures. These demands on the system, and the imposed sense of urgency, can cause seemingly good actors to not have the time needed to recenter or reorient systems.
 - Establish collective learning goals, in addition to performance/outcome measures and metrics. The spirit here is about valuing the practice of reflection, being a learner, and valuing the lessons that failure can teach. This can orient all invested parties in being accountable together as a collective, and in planning for transformation together.
 - Make space to acknowledge, grieve and be in solidarity with the continuous impact of racism and oppression. This practice acknowledges that the collective is still in the struggle and efforts to advance equity within a particular system are happening in the context of the broader historical and community experience.

③ There are complex political and philanthropic roles in shifting power.

The role of politics and philanthropy in shifting power is complex and can be the defining element in a community's ability to advance equity and justice. When one considers the definition of power as "the capacity or ability to direct or influence the behavior of others or the course of events" compounded with access and/or proximity to resources; it is important to be transparent about the relationship to power for political and philanthropic interests in considering the expected outcomes for the work as communities prepare, organize and invest in strategies at the beginning. And yet, the initial and ongoing investments are necessary, and political barriers are not going away. As the group reflected on the nature of politics and funding as both a driver and barrier- the following thoughts and questions emerged:

- Use these questions to interrogate potential impact at the beginning of an engagement: Who asked for this work? For this change? Where did it originate? With whom? Does it always start with system stakeholders? How did activism after George Floyd's murder play a role? Who is centered when it starts, and how does this center change over time? What catalyzes action and how does power need to shift?
- When philanthropy and government entry fund equity efforts; they have to be willing and ready to shift and share their power as a result of the effort. What does this dynamic mean for what is possible from reform to transformation?
- Justice is about transforming power. It's not a program. It's a structural investment in the way we conduct people-serving work. It involves changing the status quo, the vehicles for convening, the way decision-making happens (i.e., approaching the work as a boardroom table vs kitchen table) and the kind of things you intend to do together (the relational part of it). A primary value needs to be to minimize harm.

④ Prioritizing joy is essential.

Transformative change happens because of the real people, the actors involved in the change process. And real people share in a common humanity in the moment and process that they are seeking to change. Humans live in relationship to one another, not just to ideas. And systems are only changed by people. So transformative efforts need to lean into transforming both people and systems. Joy is an essential part of living full human lives, surviving in the midst of struggle. The following emerged as ways to think about joy:

- To experience joy with others, you have to build trusting relationships with each other. Building relationships takes time and has to be done both one-on-one and in group settings. A collective process has to include time to learn how

people come to the work, including how individuals experience seeking equity and justice through their family history, personal lives and in their communities.

- There likely has to be intentional communion amongst local actors; this is where care happens, an essential ingredient in justice efforts. This is often in direct opposition to professionalism and whiteness. It can feel like you are speaking a different language and we see communion show up most easily in spaces that are not typically professionalized: advisory groups, equity work groups, DEI committees - groups that have constructed their relationships with purpose-accounting for safety, trust- shows up primarily in Black led spaces. This is not coincidental. Whose role is it to lead that communion?
- White leaders need to do their work on an individual and interpersonal level and should do so separate from leading development of recommendations or proposed change. Focus group members experienced this type of accountability specific to the role of white leadership calling in other white folks. Additionally, white leaders should be transparent and show vulnerability in exploring the right way to do this work.

