

COVID-19 Homeless System Response: Staff Orientation to Racial Equity

Why is Orientation to Racial Equity Important?

Many of those who provide homeless services – and the managers who hire them – are White. This is problematic given that a plurality of homeless service recipients is Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC). Without education, it can be difficult to recognize the obstacles that BIPOC face daily. Without orientation and education, staff members' unconscious biases can lead to poor outcomes, shaming, blaming, and missed communication.

Addressing COVID-19 has brought racial injustice and inequity into focus, making staff orientation to racial equity more important than ever. Disparities show up in reduced access to quality health care, which can lead to higher infection and death rates. Recently, according to an April 2020 survey by the Pew Research Center¹, Black and Hispanic people are more likely than White people to know someone seriously impacted by COVID-19. In New York City, as of April 6, 2020, COVID-19 mortality rates were twice as high among Black and Hispanic people than among White people.² Similar patterns exist in Chicago, Milwaukee, and Louisiana.³

EQUITY [ek-wi-tee]

Noun

The quality of being fair or impartial; fairness; impartiality.

Something that is fair and just.

RACISM [rey-siz-uh m]

Noun

A belief or doctrine that inherent differences among the various human racial groups determine cultural or individual achievement, usually involving the idea that one's own race is superior and has the right to dominate others or that a particular racial group is inferior to the others.

a policy, system of government, etc., based upon or fostering such a doctrine; discrimination.

Hatred or intolerance of another race.

Source: Dictionary.com

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) highlights three reasons for disparities among White, Black, and Hispanic people:

1. **Living conditions:** Black and Hispanic people predominantly live in densely populated communities and multi-generational households, in communities with reduced access to groceries and other necessities. Many rely on public transportation.
2. **Work circumstances:** Many "essential" workers are members of racial and ethnic minorities. Further, many essential positions do not offer paid sick leave.
3. **Underlying health care conditions:** Hispanic or Black people are three and two times more likely, respectively, to be uninsured when compared with their White peers.⁴

What is Racial Equity?

Racial equity is the condition that would be achieved if racial identity no longer statistically predicted how one fares. At a systems level, achieving equity means eliminating policies, practices, attitudes, and cultural messages that reinforce differential outcomes by race. In the homelessness arena, equity would mean that people experiencing homelessness were represented at roughly the same rates reflected in local demographics. Delivering equitable services requires providers to understand cultural inequities and to really hear their clients'

¹ Pew Research Center (April 14, 2020). Health Concerns From COVID-19 Much Higher Among Hispanics and Blacks than Whites. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/04/14/health-concerns-from-covid-19-much-higher-among-hispanics-and-blacks-than-whites/>

² New York City Health Department (April 6, 2020). <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/imm/covid-19-deaths-race-ethnicity-04082020-1.pdf>

³ Wilson, Scot (May 12, 2020). Racial Equity and COVID-19. CLOSE UP Washington DC. <https://www.closeup.org/racial-equity-and-covid-19/>

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/race-ethnicity.html>

stories. Meaningful engagement requires a foundation of understanding upon which to build. Staff orientation can be used to help new staff understand the differences in life circumstances that affect many people experiencing homelessness. Virtually everyone can name unearned privileges and losses in their own lives, which can be used to help people understand inequity. Staff should be encouraged to look inward to address their own biases, as well as outward to address cultural inequities. One of the first steps toward creating racial equity is helping staff understand their implicit biases, then deliberately use an equity lens to guide their work.

What is White Privilege?

The term “white privilege” is used to explain unearned benefits derived from being a member of the mainstream – or White – culture. In 1988, activist Peggy McIntosh used the analogy of “[an unearned backpack or privilege](#)” to explain implicit advantages. These range from the mundane (finding Band Aids and makeup that approximate skin tone) to economic (getting a high-paying job, buying a home, and accessing an excellent public education).

Addressing Root Causes of Inequity

The root causes of injustice stem from deep, complex political, social and economic problems including racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, Islamophobia, antisemitism, ableism and all other forms of bias that threaten lives, freedom and dignity. Policies and practices are the manifestation of root causes of inequity, and include school and housing segregation, sentencing disparities, lending, and hiring discrimination, savings and homeownership gaps, and homelessness. The work of addressing root causes means actively ameliorating the effects of those biases, one step at a time, through advocacy, direct assistance, and importantly, listening to understand, practicing humility and willingness to learn, and planning action on the basis of what is heard. This work is a dual, simultaneous path. Implicit bias must be thought through and identified by each staff member. Understanding homelessness and the populations served in the context of racial equity requires looking at the mechanics of the outer world. To be effective, this two-step process needs to be clearly articulated and delineated.

Equity or Equality?

Equity and equality are not interchangeable terms. With *equality*, each child in a circle would get two cookies. With *equity*, each child would get the calories they need to thrive.

Working toward equity means deliberately seeing existing conditions and then developing targeted solutions to account for structural and historical disparities. Creating conditions that allow everyone to prosper requires examining the root causes of injustice.

Keep Racial Equity on the Table

- **Continue to build awareness and stay grounded in the data.** Before, during, and after orientation, it is important to keep racial equity on the table through a series of large and small forums, by prioritizing a diversity of speakers, and prioritizing staff discussions of life experiences. This can provide a safe space for difficult and honest conversations about inequity when making this topic a norm within the office.
- **At an organizational level,** assess staffing patterns, hiring practices and performance evaluation criteria. If staffing patterns are significantly different than the demographic makeup of the population served, make deliberate changes to incorporate the target populations as staff.
- **Be careful not to practice tokenism.** One or two members of a large staff do not point to equity. One person cannot be expected to carry the burden of expressing the truth for a whole race.
- **Hold one another accountable.** Create a safe space that encourages open dialogue, difficult questions and conversations, and honest and timely feedback. Establish a culture that promotes kindness, equity, honest reflection, and curiosity.
- **Prioritize the inclusion of voices of those most impacted.** As author Brené Brown has said, “In order to empathize with someone’s experience, you must be willing to believe them as they see it and not how you image their experience to be.”
- **Ensure that People of Color are owners, planners and decision-makers in the systems that govern their lives.** Build infrastructure that rests on inclusivity and partnerships with individuals, agencies, communities, and institutions.

For more information

- Visit [race forward](#), formerly the Center for Social Inclusion to view research and practices, and to learn strategies for choosing racial justice.
- View resources on social responsibility and racial equity at the [YMCA of Western North Carolina](#).
- See the Michigan League for Public Policy's [21-Day Racial Equity Challenge](#).
- JUSTLEAD WASHINGTON published the [Washington Race Equity and Justice Initiative \(REJI\) Toolkit](#) to help organizations understand and incorporate racial equity into their work. The toolkit provides an assessment that organizations can use to evaluate and advance their practices, policies, and culture.
- See a range of [Racial Equity Tools](#) designed to help individuals and groups work toward racial equity. The site offers tools, research, tips, curricula, and ideas designed to increase understanding.