

Working for Racial Equity in Human Services: Sonoma County Case Study

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Human Services Department of Sonoma County has embodied the racial equity commitment statement that was adopted in 2020. The commitment statement acknowledges that addressing disparate outcomes that have resulted from centuries of systemic racism requires a long-term commitment. Alameda County leadership can review the actions that Sonoma County has taken and work to implement aspects into their county practices.

“Race and racism is a reality that so many of us grow up learning to just deal with. But if we ever hope to move past it, it can't just be on people of color to deal with it. It's up to all of us -- Black, white, everyone -- no matter how well-meaning we think we might be, to do the honest, uncomfortable work of rooting it out.” - Michelle Obama

Introduction

Dominant culture systems have been cemented in place as far back as 1776 when the United States Founding Fathers wrote the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. The Bill of Rights signed in 1791 did not acknowledge the rights of indigenous people inhabiting the land. The Emancipation Proclamation signed January 1, 1863, freed slaves into a nation bound by Jim Crow laws. Black leaders and allies continued to galvanize pressing forward through adversity during the Civil Rights Movement. Our nation's 34th President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the Civil Rights Act of 1957. To date, the call to action continues to sound, requiring racial equity through systemic change.

In May 2020, the world watched the murder of an American whose life was devalued because of the color of his skin. George Floyd's murder was televised. Technology required that history could not be rewritten. Racial injustice and inequality would no longer be tolerated. A resurgence in the demand for racial equity and accountability erupted.

Private and public organizations responded with equity work and social justice initiatives. Sonoma County Human Services Department (HSD) initiated an intentional equity practice inviting various levels of

staff to the decision-making table in an effort to expand representation and perspectives. HSD was transparent in acknowledging where power and influence lay as they embarked on equity work. Ibram X Kendi states, “One either believes problems are rooted in groups of people, as a racist or locates the roots of problems in power and policies, as an anti-racist” (Kendi, 2019). The Sonoma County HSD 2023 Executive Team Alignment Retreat, supported by “Be The Change” Consulting, embodied Kendi's quote. HSD identified structures and policies at the root as part of the problem creating inequity and persistent equity work.

Sonoma County

Racial disparities in Sonoma County mirror those of black and marginalized communities nationwide. Disparities continue to have a negative impact on the quality and longevity of life. “Black people live 10 fewer years than any other racial and ethnic group in the county; Black and Latinx children are about 2.5 times more likely to live in poverty than their white counterparts. By a unanimous 5-0 vote, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors Tuesday approved a resolution proposed by the Department of Health Services declaring racism to be a public health crisis” (Sonoma County, 2024). During the Board of Supervisors meeting, County Supervisors listened to accounts of racial trauma as the community stood shoulder to shoulder demanding that government serve and protect all members of the community.

Significant Countywide Efforts to Advance Racial Equity

In 2016, an Adult and Aging workgroup was formed with the goal of advancing racial equity. To date, additional workgroups have been formed in various county divisions. The collective focus of the workgroups has been on the following areas: supporting staff, providing learning opportunities/communities, training, and surveying staff. Workgroups have also focused on identifying opportunities for changing internal policies/practices. An example of changing internal practices and policies was the revamping of interview processes as well as the selection process for a request for proposals (RFPs) and contracts.

In 2017, Sonoma County joined the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE). An initial cohort of staff participated in the GARE program. In 2019, a second GARE cohort expanded county-wide. The two GARE cohorts merged to create the Sonoma County Racial Equity Alliance Leadership (called “So Co REAL”). The organized group advocated for the Board of Supervisors to adopt racial equity as a strategic pillar in the county’s strategic plan, create an Office of Equity, and appoint an Equity Officer, amongst other actions.

The Sonoma County Office of Equity was established by the Board of Supervisors in 2020. “The purpose of the Office of Equity is to propel the County’s efforts to evaluate its internal and external policies, programs, and services utilizing a racial equity lens” (Background Summary for EDI, 2024). In January 2020, a Five-Year Strategic Plan was adopted by the County Board of Supervisors with Social Justice and Racial Equity as a pillar.

The 2021 Equity Core Team was created by the Office of Equity consisting of seventy-five employees across twenty-four departments. The Core Team was created to aid in the implementation of equitable

practices across all levels of county employment and services.

March 2021: The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA) was signed. ARPA provided \$96 million to Sonoma County with approximately \$40 million targeted to community-based programs.

In 2023, the Sonoma County Executive Team Alignment Retreat took place. The retreat was a pivotal opportunity to build trust. During the retreat, the Executive Team, “members of the HSD Racial Equity Committees, HSD members of the County’s Office of Equity Steering Committee, and leadership from the Office of Equity came together to explore ways to clarify decision-making” (Sonoma County Strategic Plan, 2021). Anti-racist system design began to take shape and silos opened, expanding opportunities for cross-departmental and positional communication.

Figure 1 in the Appendix depicts a chart of the Sonoma County Office of Equity Core Team and HSD Racial Equity Committees. HSD is one of many departments within Sonoma County. HSD Racial Equity committees consist of the Admin Equity Group, EA Equity Group, FY&C Racial Equity Steering Committee, E&T Racial Equity Work Group, and A&A Cultural Inclusivity Workgroup.

Depicted in Figure 1 is the relationship between the Sonoma County Office of Equity and HSD Racial Equity groups. Staff at all levels are involved in development. Series of trainings, team building, and courageous conversations have empowered those in attendance and beyond. Maya Angelou reminds us that “Prejudice is a burden that confuses the past, threatens the future, and renders the present inaccessible.” Within the HSD department, a “coalition of the willing” make up the group of various staff members. Educational opportunities to

build skills with a focus on application were facilitated by internal and contracted trainers. The utilization of an anti-prejudice lens to address trauma and inequality is taking shape with the support of Sonoma County Leadership.

Racial Equity and Inclusion within Alameda County Social Services:

- Alameda County Social Services Agency adopted a Strategic Plan. Goal E of the Strategic Plan provides a framework and commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- Alameda County Board of Supervisors hired Director of Race Equity & Inclusion Victor O. Obaseki, JD in May 2024.
- Alameda County's Program Development Manager Julie Hadnot is a member of BASSC/ Racial Equity workgroup and champions racial equity programs and policies.
- Alameda County Social Services is a GARE participant and continues to partner with consultants around race equity and inclusion.
- Alameda County & The Bay Area Academy facilitate The Equity & Inclusion Fellowship.
- Alameda County Social Services Staff Development Department has an active workgroup focused on Race Equity Diversity and Inclusion (REDI). REDI continues to support the facilitation and coordination of an agency-wide training.
- Alameda County Social Services' current hiring practices incorporate pathways to employment and advancement that consider skills gained outside of degrees and certification. i.e. work experience and out-of-class positions that aid in skill-building.

Recommendations:

- Create an office within the Social Services Administration with functions specific to racial equity and inclusion duties (see Appendix Figure 2). Office of Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) functions will support policies that will eradicate the impacts of racial disparities in the community and workplace. The Office will address structural and institutional racism in the services we deliver. The DEI office will continue to promote an equitable workplace by building a culture of belonging and inclusion within the agency and the community we serve.
- A Racial Equity Diversity and Inclusion survey will be sent out to all staff for completion to learn about employee perspectives and experiences as they relate to racial equity. The information received will inform policy, training, and employee engagement opportunities.
- Quarterly Meeting with Alameda County Board-appointed Diversity and Inclusion Director to align goals, resources, and collaboration with ongoing training.
- Monthly meetings with representatives from across departments to discuss actionable ways to support the department's efforts toward skill-building and training needs.
- Continue to develop training based on departmental needs with the assistance of consultants.
- Staff Development will proceed with rolling out Racial Equity and Inclusion building blocks training. Attendance will be recorded.

- Ongoing Racial Equity and Inclusion training will be mandatory through the Labor / SEIU / union process.
- Evaluation feedback will measure meaningful race data on program and training efficacy.
- Quarterly restorative justice skill-building sessions will be made available to staff.
- Self-paced training and resource links will be available to support individuals who aspire to gain additional knowledge and tools that go beyond the initial training series.
- Revitalizing Racial Equity Diversity and Inclusion training (REDI) with the support of consultants will empower staff and build morale.
- Continuing to support hiring practices that incorporate pathways to employment and advancement that consider skills gained outside of degrees and certification. (i.e. work experience and out-of-class positions). This practice will aid in skill building. Exceptional candidates previously excluded will have the opportunity to actualize their potential.

Potential Challenges:

- Consulting costs and training facilitation through the Bay Area Training Academy and outside organizations can be cost-prohibitive.
 - Virtual training may be more cost-effective yet may have less of an impact on those who attend.
- Creating a specified unit to address racial equity, inclusion, and diversity will provide additional financial challenges to the county's budget.
- Interest in participating in Race Equity and Inclusion work is not welcomed by all.
 - Promoting agency-wide support and buy-in may be a hurdle.

Benefits to Recommendations:

- Alameda County will be able to actualize the strategic plan drafted in 2019.

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Appendix

Figure 1.

Sonoma County Office of Equity Core Team and HSD Racial Equity Committees

CORE TEAM, COMMITTEES AND WORKGROUPS

RACIAL EQUITY GROUP INTERSECTION & ALIGNMENT

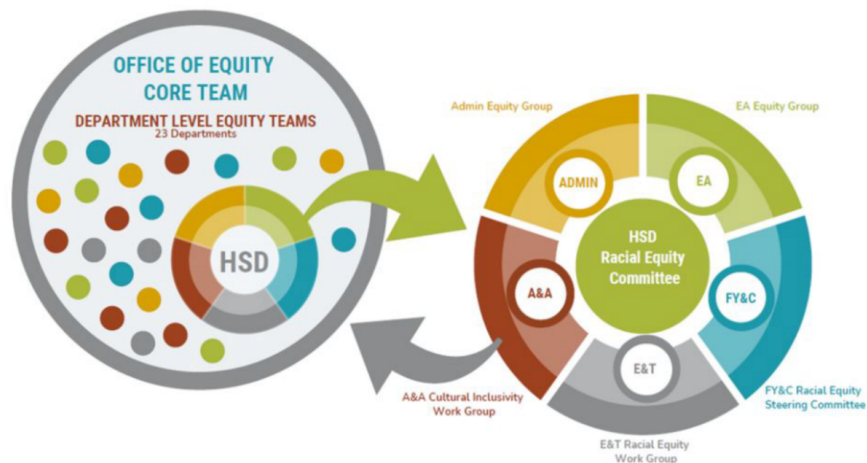


Figure 2.

Office of Diversity Equity And Inclusion (DEI)

