Building Internal Infrastructure to Advance Racial Equity: Santa Clara County Social Services Agency (SSA) Case Study

Lynn Reis, BA

Communications Manager

Napa County Health and Human Services Agency

Executive Summary

Local governments play a critical role in supporting communities that face disparities in health care, housing, income and access to services. This paper examines how the Santa Clara County Social Services Agency (SSA) has operationalized racial equity through the development of internal infrastructure, organizational alignment, and data-driven strategies grounded in the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE) framework. The paper traces SSA's evolution from early engagement in 2017 to the development of formalized structures, including the Division of Racial Equity and Social Justice (RESJ) and cross-functional Racial Equity Agency Leadership (REAL) Teams. The paper highlights how SSA embedded equity into strategic planning, infrastructure, and systems, and identifies opportunities for Napa County Health and Human Services Agency (HHSA). Findings suggest that sustainable racial equity work requires leadership commitment, intentional internal capacity-building, and continuous systems change.

Introduction

Across the United States, local governments continue to face pressure to address inequities that impact communities of color. Social service agencies are an integral part of this process, helping to provide services related to housing, food assistance, income support, health care access, and overall well-being. At the same time, many government structures were not designed with a conscious focus on racial justice. Even seemingly race neutral measures can generate disproportionate outcomes for different populations.

Over the years, many public agencies have learned that correcting disparities requires more than band-aids and one-off conversations. Instead, it calls on agencies to examine more closely their systems, policies and internal procedures to better understand where barriers remain and why some gaps persist over time.

GARE is a national network of government jurisdictions that seek to advance racial equity by supporting racial equity practitioners in adopting national best practices and embedding equity into institutional processes and decision-making. Their Organizational Change framework focuses on four main areas: visualize, normalize, organize, and operationalize (GARE, n.d.).

Visualize involves clearing defining what racial equity looks like for the organization and establishing outcomes to measure success. *Normaliz*e is about helping staff build a shared understanding of racial equity. That can mean developing a shared vocabulary, building awareness around institutional racism, and providing staff with an opportunity to engage in conversations that support equity work. *Organize* emphasizes establishing internal support mechanisms, such as leadership positions, teams, and resources to assist and continue the effort. *Operationaliz*e is about embedding equity into the regular operations of agencies, such as policies, programs, and decision-making.

The paper focuses on how Santa Clara County Social Services Agency (SSA) uses these principles to operationalize racial equity within their organization. It examines how the agency created internal mechanisms, aligned leadership and leveraged data to promote racial diversity across the agency. The paper also points to suggestions that may serve to inform future work within Napa County HHSA.

It's clear that simply declaring that an organization values equity is not enough. By focusing and grounding its efforts on GARE principles and embedding racial equity in its operations, SSA is making significant progress not only by engaging in communication, and developing trust, but also by taking measurable action, creating structure, and long-term learning.

Santa Clara County Overview

One of the biggest and most diverse counties in California is Santa Clara County, with a population of an estimated 1.9 million people. Racial, ethnic and linguistic diversity has a profound impact on the delivery and access to public services (U.S. Census Bureau, 2025). Over 55% of residents speak a language other than English at home. The most frequent languages spoken are Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese and Tagalog (Census Reporter, 2024). This underscores the importance of culturally responsive services and robust language availability in public systems.

The largest racial group in the county is Asian residents, making up about 39% of the population. This is followed by White residents at 28% and Hispanic or Latino residents at 25% (Data USA, 2024). Demographic information shows a great deal of diversity in the county's Asian population. However, the Latino population represents a much larger portion of people served by social service programs. Despite economic growth in Santa Clara County, gaps remain in areas such as access to services and outcomes. Latino populations in the county show higher levels of being uninsured, delaying medical treatment and experiencing more health problems, for example. These inequities also stress the need for counties to take a closer look at their infrastructure and systems to address the barriers.

Santa Clara County made commitments to advance racial equity. The county developed a Racial Equity Strategic Roadmap to close that gap, improve access to services, expand community engagement and promote data-driven decision making. Their strategy also highlights the impact of historic injustices and institutional racism in government processes. (County of Santa Clara, Division of Equity and Social Justice, Office of Diversity, Equity, and Belonging. 2026).

Evolution of Racial Equity Work in Santa Clara County SSA

SSA's effort on racial equity has been an ongoing process. The agency's initial involvement with GARE began in 2017, to build a deeper awareness of institutional racism and to discover opportunities to enhance equity and social justice throughout the organization. Information on the agency's timeframe and overall efforts was provided by Tamika van den Akker, Racial Equity Manager, and Rafael Maldonado, Racial Equity Management Analyst. Both are key partners within the Racial Equity and Social Justice (RESJ) Division within SSA.

SSA initially joined a GARE cohort that offered training and resources on institutional racism and systems change. As part of this process, the agency conducted an internal assessment that found gaps in organizational knowledge and demonstrated the need for more intentional systems change going forward. The need for leadership support became clear and would be required for meaningful change. With support from the Chief Executive Office, the Board of Supervisors, and SSA Executive Directors, the agency committed to address assessment findings.

In 2019, the agency started to build internal capacity to enable implementation. Leadership roles and Systems Improvement teams were established to help advance racial equity across departments. Staff understood that education and awareness would not be enough for sustainable change. Internal capacity and infrastructure were needed as well.

At that time, Tamika van den Akker became the agency's full-time Racial Equity coordinator. Her responsibility was to gather information and guide inclusion and equity efforts. The goal was to address barriers that prevented people from being recognized and included, as well as promote broader county equity initiatives. (Santa Clara County SSA's Race and Equity Effort, 2019).

Other national events in 2020 further affected the agency's activities. The COVID-19 outbreak and the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery prompted several institutions across the country to examine their own procedures and policies. During this period, SSA publicly acknowledged inequalities related to recruiting and retention, child welfare, and benefits systems. The agency also acknowledged that even race-neutral policies might lead to divergent outcomes for different populations (Santa Clara County SSA, Corrected: Race Equity, 2020, internal document). This was a crucial turning point for the agency, as SSA more actively worked to incorporate a racial justice lens across agency programs and policies. The work also grew increasingly integrated into day-to-day operations, laying a foundation for more formalized systems.

Internal Infrastructure and Organizational Systems: Lessons from Santa Clara Social Services Agency

As Napa County continues expanding its Race, Equity, Inclusion, Diversity, and Belonging (REIDB) framework, conversations with staff from Santa Clara County SSA provide several opportunities to strengthen local approaches. Even though Santa Clara County and Napa County are very different in size and structure, some of the internal strategies employed by Santa Clara can help inform future efforts within Napa County HHSA.

One element of SSA's approach highlights the importance of building internal structure before focusing too heavily on external efforts. Staff explained that equity work first needs to be

understood and supported inside the organization itself. Tamika van den Akker described the process by saying that “progress moves at the speed of trust,” highlighting the importance of relationship building internally with staff and then externally with community partners. This perspective aligns with Napa County HHSA’s REIDB priorities and suggests an opportunity to further invest in internal engagement and capacity building across its program divisions.

Santa Clara operationalized this effort through a centralized SharePoint resource hub where staff can access information related to racial equity work. The site includes materials on their mission statement, shared terminology, historical context, learning resources, and details about team structures. It also includes question-based content designed to help guide staff understanding about racial work and why it matters in government work. This approach is similar to that of Napa County HHSA and can be useful as it expands internal resources and works to ensure they are easy to navigate and directly relevant to staff roles.

In addition, in 2020, Santa Clara invested in communications through a quarterly internal newsletter called *The Praxis Connection*. Grounded in the concept of “a continuous loop of critical reflection and action,” the newsletter functions as an ongoing engagement tool that connects staff to key equity concepts, data, and practical applications. Staff explained that the newsletter helps keep employees connected to equity concepts, agency priorities, and examples of how the work is applied in practice. Each issue connects to one of the county’s strategic pillars while continuing to reinforce important concepts over time. One staff member explained the process by saying, “You’re going to see the same information, but just going down a layer each time.” This layered approach to communication may provide a useful strategy for Napa County and reinforcing HHSA’s REIDB concepts without overwhelming staff.

A consistent challenge noted by Santa Clara is the gap between resource availability and staff awareness. Even when resources existed, many staff still reported not knowing where to find them or how to use them. As a result, the agency began to leverage internal analytics to better understand how staff utilize the internal SharePoint platform. Staff noted that engagement with SharePoint resources increased after presentations, outreach activities and agency-wide events. The agency took a more intentional approach and began using internal metrics to track engagement and identify patterns, and in doing so, became much more aware of what kinds of activities were actually reaching staff. This highlights the value in tracking and measuring utilization to guide improvement in outreach efforts for Napa County.

Santa Clara’s Office of Diversity, Equity, and Belonging (ODEB) overseas racial equity work across the county system. Under ODEB, is the Racial Equity and Social Justice (RESJ) Division, SSA’s internal racial equity infrastructure, created to provide leadership and coordination. SSA further formed REAL Teams, or Racial Equity Agency Leadership Teams, consisting of staff from a variety of classifications from frontline workers to executive leadership embedding equity efforts at all

levels. (See Appendix Figure 1). These teams were created to promote system improvements and foster shared ownership and diverse perspectives. Staff understood that leadership support was very crucial in helping to drive efforts forward and stressed the need to let people get involved beyond formal job classifications. Staff shared that it's important to "take off their titles at the door" to help build trust and authentic collaboration. These structures promote shared ownership, accountability, and encourage communication and collaboration across divisions, allowing for better alignment with agency and county goals. Complementing these structures are trainings on structural racism, unconscious bias, and cultural competency.

Participants further attributed their ability to advance equity work despite broader political sensitivity to consistent backing from agency leadership, executive leadership, and legal counsel. This alignment has enabled clear, consistent messaging, and reduced internal hesitation or fragmentation. For Napa County, this highlights the importance of continued leadership engagement and shared understanding of REIDB efforts.

Another takeaway is Santa Clara's framing of racial equity as a system improvement instead of a single or abstract issue. Staff noted that resistance often came from uncertainty about relevance, with common feedback such as, "I don't understand why I should care about this," and often questioned how the task related to their work responsibilities. In response, SSA focused on linking equity work directly to service delivery outcomes and organizational effectiveness. This reframing helped staff better understand the connections and how their daily tasks were directly relevant.

Data and Continuous Improvement

Data and evaluation are integral to SSA's overall approach. The agency used a variety of tools to inform decision making including the Employee Engagement and Wellbeing Survey and Employee Equity Survey, departmental focus groups, executive Interviews, and an agencywide initiative and priority assessment. These tools allowed the agency to detect discrepancies, track progress, and change strategies as needed over time, as shown in the SSA Strategic Plan Roadmap (See Appendix, Figure 2).

These efforts are complemented by a broader countywide initiative to standardize data collection and evaluation practices. The goal is to ensure that equity efforts are grounded in measurable outcomes and can be clearly communicated, so "you have the data that show this particular demographic is experiencing these disparities at a higher rate," shared by Tamika van den Akker. For Napa County, this reinforces the importance of aligning REIDB efforts with data systems that support both internal decision making and external accountability.

Racial Equity Efforts in Napa County Health and Human Services Agency

Napa County HHSA has a strong foundation of equity awareness through its REIDB work. These efforts include, but are not limited to, internal SharePoint materials, ongoing trainings, monthly agency-wide observances, cultural events throughout the year, staff engagement tools, immigration resources and an immigration toolkit, a race equity policy and evaluation tool that is applied to every HHSA policy and procedure, and an REIDB Committee that consists of a cross-section of HHSA staff from every division (8 in total), plus the Agency Director, Communications Manager, and Ethnic Services Manager who are standing members. HHSA also has an internal staff newsletter that includes a REIDB focus through a standing section.

Equity is also baked into internal processes such as hiring, and HHSA has a specific policy and procedure that addresses hiring and interview questions. There is also both agency and county-wide leadership support. For example, the Napa County Board of Supervisors released *their Statement on Valuing, Supporting, and Protecting Historically Marginalized Communities*, (December 17, 2024). Equity is also part of the county's Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP) 2024-2027, which focuses on Housing, Behavioral Health, Access to Health Services, Racial Equity and LGBTQ Inclusion, and Economic Stability and HHSA's Strategic Plan. The CHIP is backboned by HHSA which operationalized the CHIP with over $10M (using various sources across the Agency) over three years, with more funding being directed at the strategies over the term of the CHIP. HHSA leadership is also a key stakeholder in providing input to the County's General Plan Baseline Data Report and General Plan Update to help ensure a "Health in All Policies" approach to embed health and equity considerations into decision-making across governmental sectors beyond "just Health and Human Services."

Santa Clara's approach provides several insights into Napa County HHSA as it evolves its REIDB framework. These strategies include bolstering internal infrastructure and communication, continuing ongoing efforts to leverage data to track impact, creating cross-functional teams and maintaining a focus on tying equity efforts to systems improvement and broader service delivery goals.

While not all equity efforts of Santa Clara County and SSA may translate directly to Napa County HHSA, they offer reference points and help identify opportunities to enhance current efforts over time.

Recommendations

Based on this study, some suggestions emerge for Napa County HHSA. These include exploring sending key staff to GARE training, adopting the GARE framework and building upon HHSA's Strategic Plan to continue ensuring that equity is incorporated into everyday operations. Additional recommendations include ensuring that current REIDB staff feel empowered to bring equity work back to their programs, and in a consistent manner so that everyone across the agency receives similar messaging even though the practices may differ within programs. Further recommendations include the use of staff surveys, assessments, and focus groups, reviewing current all-staff equity training with staff development teams, and leveraging SharePoint analytics to better understand staff engagement, as well as the creation of internal wellbeing and equity surveys. And finally, a crucial piece is ensuring that staff have time to engage in training, conversations, and focus groups on race and equity work.

These efforts would come at minimal additional cost to Napa County HHSA. However, it could help improve awareness of current REIDB work, ensure that messaging is more consistently shared across program divisions, help determine baselines and address gaps moving forward.

Conclusion

The Santa Clara County Social Services Agency provides a compelling case of how racial equity work can be operationalized and become embedded into the day-to-day activities of government. Through leadership buy-in and support, intentional internal structure, staff buy-in, and use of data to inform decision-making, SSA transformed from equity as a concept to equity as an integrated organizational practice. SSA's example shows that racial equality work is something that develops over time, and effective agencies are those that are prepared to learn, adapt, invest in educating staff, and make continuous process improvements.

Although Napa County HHSA operates in a different context, many of the approaches used by Santa Clara County SSA provide concrete examples that may serve to enhance future Napa County HHSA REIDB activities.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the following Santa Clara County Social Services Agency team members for taking time from their busy schedules and important work to support this project: Tamika van den Akker, Racial Equity Manager and Rafael Maldonado, Racial Equity Management Analyst. Special thanks to Wendy Merklinghaus, BASSC EDP Liaison for Santa Clara County, for assisting

the agencies in coordination. This look into Santa Clara's Social Services Agency would not have been possible without their support.

References

Government Alliance on Race and Equity. (GARE). (n.d.). Retrieved May 2026 from https://www.racialequityalliance.org

U.S. Census Bureau. (2025). https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/santaclaracountycalifornia/PST045224

Census Reporter. (2024). https://censusreporter.org/profiles/05000US06085-santa-clara-county-ca/

Data USA. (2024). https://datausa.io/profile/geo/santa-clara-county-ca

County of Santa Clara, Division of Equity and Social Justice, Office of Diversity, Equity, and Belonging (2026) https://desj.santaclaracounty.gov/odeb/racial-equity-strategic-roadmap

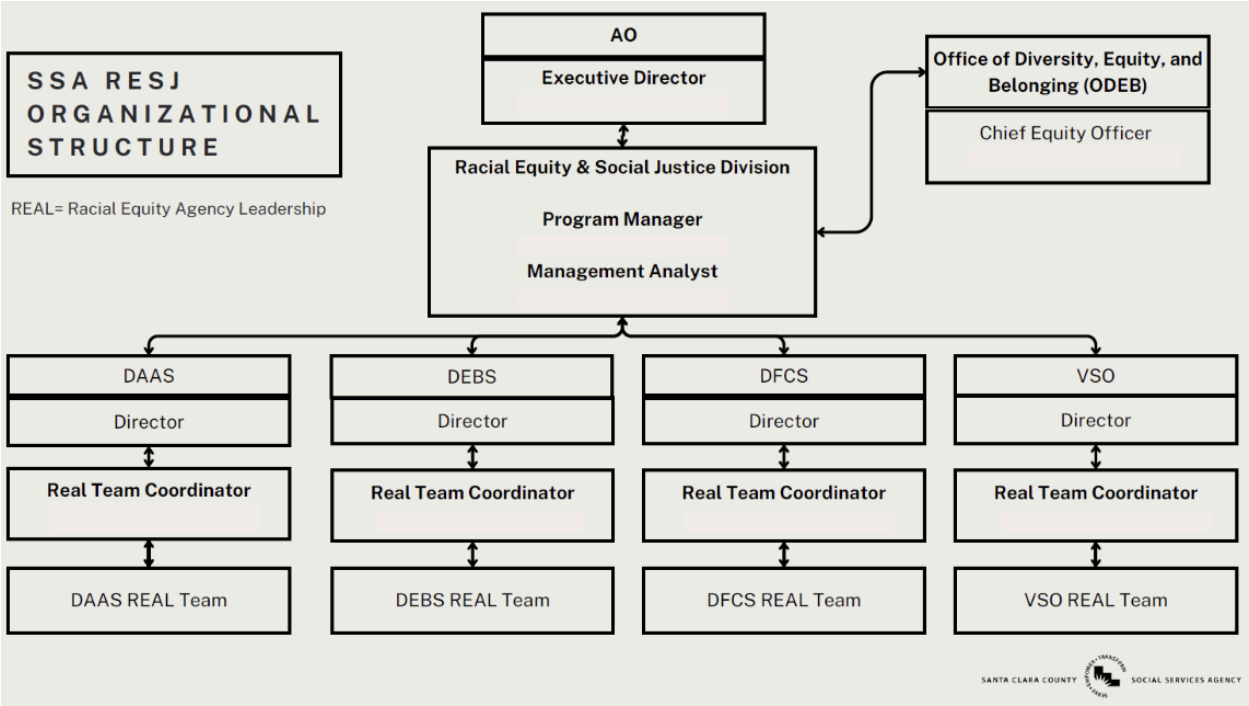
Santa Clara County SSA's Race and Equity Effort, 2019, Unpublished internal document.

Santa Clara County SSA, Corrected: Race Equity, 2020, Unpublished internal document.

Napa County Board of Supervisors Statement on Valuing, Supporting, and Protecting Historically Marginalized Communities. (December 17, 2024). https://www.napacounty.gov/3818/Immigration-Inclusivity

Appendix

Figure 1: Santa Clara County Social Services Agency (SSA) Division of Racial Equity and Social Justice (RESJ) Organizational Structure



Acronyms in the organizational chart are as follows:

RESJ - Racial Equity and Social Justice

REAL- Racial Equity Agency Leadership

AO- Agency Office

DAAS - Department of Aging and Adult Services

DEBS - Department of Employment and Benefits Services

DFCS - Department of Family and Children's Services

VSO- Department of Veterans Services Office

Figure 2: Santa Clara Social Services Agency (SSA) Strategic Plan Roadmap

