



Laying the Tracks for an Equitable Recovery and Long Term Repair

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Ensuring an equitable and inclusive recovery begins with laying new tracks. Just as laying new train tracks once connected towns across the country to each other, we need to lay new tracks that connect the generations of families, especially among Black, Brown and Indigenous Americans—to opportunities that increase intergenerational mobility and rates of upward mobility. Communities of color have historically been denied access to the foundational building blocks of well-being. We know that systems can be re-designed in innovative ways to prevent this and that we can also work toward repair, strengthening our common purpose and our care for one another. Systems can and must be a force of good—together we can accelerate the good by redesigning the harmful elements to ensure that everyone is able to get on the tracks toward mobility and well-being.

We focus on advancing race equity, not to the exclusion of other groups that have been harmed, but because we believe by first illuminating structural root causes of race inequity within the context of human services, we can drive broader inoculating changes for other structural inequities, such as gender, gender identity, sexuality, disabilities, and socioeconomic status. We think of this approach as a ripple effect and a way to build our collective muscle for addressing all disparities.

At APHSA, we are committed to doing the intentional and systematic work that is required. We are confident that we can counteract the structural barriers our own systems have fostered. To do so, we must:

Reverse Engineer Policies and Practices to Reset Foundations

Systemic and structural barriers are not random—they have been created and sustained over



our nation's history and are now wired into our health, social and economic systems, in the United States. Black, Brown and Indigenous People of Color have worse outcomes across health, education, employment and other social outcome measures regardless of their socioeconomic status.¹ These inequities persist and will not disappear on their own. Indeed, our greatest imperative is to consider our country's past in order to reshape our future.

In human services, we must reverse engineer the structures we have built—step-by-step—to see what is underneath, and proactively advance systems able to dismantle structures that drive inequities, using all of the levers available to us—policy, fiscal, practice and operations. Dismantling structural racism and institutional bias must be at the heart of our systems work now and for as long as it takes—requiring intentionality, deep listening, and focus every step of the way.

¹ https://aphsa.org/About/call_to_action.aspx#aalookatthedata See also Hayes-Greene, D. & Love, B.P., The Groundwater Approach: Building a Practical Understanding of a Structural Racism, Racial Equity Institute (2018).



Working with our federal partners, we need to examine national policies in the context of history—both in terms of what policies preceded them, how they’ve built on each other, and how they have been operationalized in practice. We must work to understand the patterns and what must be done to disrupt them. For example, we know all too well the disproportionate number of Black, Brown and Indigenous children who enter the child welfare system² and the disparate outcomes for families of color who interact with it.³ These persistent disparities—impacted by racial bias and discrimination—are untenable and we must collectively pledge to eliminate them.

The far-reaching impact of the decades of discrimination in housing is another example that spotlights the cumulative and far-reaching impact of both overt and subtle structural racism. Redlining was an explicitly racist policy; it was replaced by zoning restrictions—some appearing race neutral—but that continued to disproportionately impact communities of color. Today we see the lasting impact of those policies on Black, Brown and Indigenous People of Color, where the impact is now exacerbated by disparities like low performing schools, lack of employment opportunities, and the digital divide, because investments have been systemically eroded in communities impacted by these past housing policies.

The bottom line is that we must identify long-seeded, structural and often unconscious biases embedded in institutional practice and mindsets. We must ensure that we are not using data to reinforce systemic inequities and bias. Working across all levels of government and with communities, we must build a data infrastructure that puts equity at the center, and is carried through all aspects of data collection, sharing, analysis and dissemination.⁴ We must consistently be asking ourselves, what works? for whom? and in what circumstances?—all with explicit attention toward reducing inequities.

Invite Families to Lead the Design Team

Families experiencing poverty and facing significant adversities must be on our design team, informing decision-making in the context of family strengths, community assets, and practical solutions. We need to involve families and communities in analyzing where



Re-engineering Policy for an Equitable Future

- Address racial, gender and ethnic wealth gaps by enhancing tax credit policy, eliminating benefits cliffs that act as roadblocks to upward mobility, and adopting incentives that create savings and opportunities for wealth accumulation
- Invest in primary prevention approaches centered in family input that alleviate pressures and mitigate the vastly disproportionate impacts of generational poverty and community trauma experienced by Black, Brown and Indigenous communities of color
- Prioritize evidence frameworks that put equity at the center, leveraging data-sharing and increasing analytics capacity along with family and community voice, to build new solutions
- Equip and invest in the human services workforce to better understand and confront implicit bias and structural policy that has exacerbated inequalities

² When comparing maltreatment across race and ethnicity, American Indian/Alaska Native and African American children have the highest rates of being in foster care at 16.0 per 1000 for American Indian/Alaska Native and 9.1 per 1000 for African-American children versus 5.3 per 1000 for White children based on 2018 data. Source: AFCAR data.

³ See https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubpdfs/racial_disproportionality.pdf

⁴ See AISP, A Toolkit for Centering Racial Equity through Data Integration, May 2020.



existing efforts are falling short and what needs to be changed for them to work.

People know what they want and need and are the best architects of their future. We must shift our people-serving systems to fully listen first and make a path forward together. We must embrace coaching models designed to put families in the driver's seat. This requires that we critically examine federal and state policies to ensure that people—not the system—are the ones steering the way. As leaders, we must resist designing programs and services that claim to know better from the start; we must recognize systemic inequalities and bias. If we define people by their trauma, we not only risk overlooking their strengths and resilience and the possibilities before them, but also likely limit their own view of the world.

Today, we understand better that to unlock the potential in any of us, we must have hope, give and receive praise, and be allowed to pursue our dreams. We must promote a sense of belonging and agency—and meet families where they dream. Co-creating services and plans and being co-accountable for their results, must be at the heart of our prevention models.

Build on What Brain Science Tells Us

We know dramatically more than in decades past about how toxic stress can affect our development, and the COVID-19 pandemic has substantially increased the stressors we all face. As we look toward recovery, the importance of addressing these issues and ameliorating these effects has become even more clear. Brain science has shown us that years of cumulative stress—often experienced by people living in poverty—can contribute to negative physical and behavioral health outcomes, and that for many communities of color, toxic stressors are compounded by a particularly pernicious stressor—the

constant experiences of subtle and explicit discrimination. We also know that through upstream investments like maternal and paternal health, access to food, housing, and quality child care, we can buffer stressors that overload and weigh parents down. By utilizing human-centered design principles we can more effectively deliver services that equip families with what they need to prevent prolonged exposure to stress, help build resiliency, and adapt to adversity. Together we can lift the weight of toxic stress from families.

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Human services are the [cornerstone](#) to building well-being so that all families can thrive. With a resolute focus on: advancing race equity; building on the assets of families and communities; leveraging the many advancements in the field, and our members' long-standing experience administering these services on the ground, we can advance a recalibrated human services system that lays the long overdue tracks to equitable and inclusive economic mobility for Black, Brown and Indigenous People of Color. This is our commitment now and for as long as it takes.

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