



Spotlight Series >>>



W.K. KELLOGG  
FOUNDATION



SPR



eternal  
knot  
evaluation



# Organizational Journeys in Centering Racial Equity *PART TWO*

AUGUST 2023



BROUGHT TO YOU BY THE W.K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION





# Table of Contents





# Foreword

**I**n 2020, we saw a global pandemic take the lives of many loved ones and leave many children without caregivers in Black and Indigenous communities. We also saw highly publicized murders of Black people at the hands of law enforcement and vigilante neighbors, and an increase in hate-filled violence toward Asian and Asian American community members. Each wave of grief or violence brought a stark reminder of the racial inequities inherent in and perpetuated by our social structures. While all racial inequities originated and became embedded in our systems centuries ago, something about the pressing weight of these overlapping crises led to a renewed outcry for racial justice.

The summer of 2020 became a Summer of Solidarity, when countless numbers of people felt shocked, grief-stricken, angered or made uncomfortable enough to commit or recommit to the pursuit of racial equity and joined those who have been fighting for it for decades. Our expressions of solidarity across the globe revitalized the hope that we can, together, reshape the world; a solidarity we continue to need in 2023 as we face the outcomes of policies from the local level to the federal level that threaten decades of Civil Rights work.

Nonprofit and community-based organizations play a critical role in building a better world, transforming our communities into equitable places of opportunity and advocating at local and national levels for changes to the systems that disrupt so many lives. Many of us, including the leadership and staff of

the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF), have come to understand that transformation starts within. We can only contribute to a more equitable future, if our organizational processes, practices and relationships as colleagues and with the families and communities we serve are also equitable.

Commitment is simply the first step; it must be sustained through thoughtful and deliberate action. In 2007, after acknowledging racism as a primary obstacle that keeps children from thriving, the WKKF board of trustees committed explicitly and unequivocally to being an effective anti-racist organization that promotes racial equity and racial healing. Since then, we have learned the journey toward equity must ultimately involve every individual staff person and leader charting the course and traveling together, with continual



commitment, learning and refinement. In the spirit of transparency, we tell the story of WKKF's transformation process in [One Journey](#), where we describe the approaches, standards, practices and policies that provide pathfinders and guardrails for our ongoing process of learning, self-examination and change.

We derive immense inspiration from our community and organizational partners who offer their own stories of transformation in this Racial Equity Spotlight Series. The vignettes shared here and in part one provide compelling examples of nonprofit organizations charting their own unique courses toward racial equity, and the challenges, successes, pain points and joys experienced along the way. We are deeply grateful for their generosity in sharing honest



## Key Terms

WKKF describes racial healing as a critical pathway to racial equity and the transformation of systems. *What do we mean by racial equity and racial healing?*

- *Racial equity* is the condition where people of all races and ethnicities have an equal opportunity to live in a society where a person's racial identity would not determine how they are treated or predict life outcomes.
- *Racial healing* helps build trust and authentic relationships within communities, so people can work together across differences to change systems and structures into ones that affirm the inherent value of all people.

reflections. Their openness gives all of us opportunities to integrate new insights and learning into our organizational journeys.

As we press onward in solidarity, let us all remember that racial healing starts with these moments of truth-telling and that truth lights our paths forward.

*La June Montgomery Tabron*  
*President and CEO*  
*W.K. Kellogg Foundation*



# Acknowledgements

## **INTERVIEWEES:**

### **Kalamazoo Community Foundation**

- Carrie Pickett-Erway, former president and CEO
- Sandy Barry-Loken, vice president of community impact and investment
- Sarah Lee, vice president of marketing and communications
- Jordan Duckens, former director of marketing and communications

### **Mothering Justice**

- Danielle Atkinson, founder and national executive director

### **HealthNet of West Michigan**

- Maureen Kirkwood, president and CEO
- Keyuana Rosemond, chief innovation officer

### **Teaching Lab**

- Sarah Johnson, chief executive officer
- HaMy Vu, chief operating officer
- Andrea McDade, senior director, people and culture

### **U.S. Breastfeeding Committee**

- Amelia Psmythe Seger, former deputy director
- Nikia Sankofa, executive director

## **AUTHORS:**

- Traci Endo Inouye, Eternal Knot Evaluation
- Dr. Rachel Estrella, Social Policy Research Associates
- Laura Wong Ravinder, Social Policy Research Associates
- Dr. Anna Marie Ramos, Social Policy Research Associates



# Introduction

**T**his publication is the second in a series of organizational spotlights intended to lift up the journeys of organizations across the country who are focusing on centering racial equity within their internal programming and operations. The first set of spotlights was released earlier this year and profiles five different organizations and their internal racial equity journeys.

The impetus behind the overall series stemmed from an increasing number of organizations asking for advice and guidance on their own internal racial equity journeys following the summer of 2020. The murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd—in quick succession and against the backdrop of a global pandemic wreaking disproportionate impact on communities of color—compelled millions of people of all races to take to the streets, to raise their voices against police brutality and to demand racial justice. The momentum of the movement toward racial justice created an opening for many to reflect on their own beliefs and biases, and search for ways to bring about the change that they hoped to see for the country into their own personal and professional spheres.

Nonprofit organizations, many dedicated to advancing the well-being of low-income and racially diverse communities, recognized that this charge was mission critical. Staff at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF) reported that many grantee partners came to them asking for resources and examples for how to approach rooting out bias and advancing

equity within their organizations. How are others approaching this work? How can we do better? Where should we start?

## **LEADING WITH STORIES**

These spotlights start from a premise that there is no magic formula for how to do this “right.” While many are striving to ensure equity within their organizations, the different paths that each takes on that journey are necessarily grounded in the rich complexity of organizational and community context. An extensive library of useful frameworks, tools and resources exists to help guide organizations on their respective journeys. We also know, however, that what many are still craving are stories of others’ experiences—particularly those with similar organizational or community contexts—as a means to inform their own learning and action toward organizational growth and transformation.

With this in mind, in early 2021, WKKF engaged Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) and Eternal Knot Evaluation to spotlight





the organizational racial equity journeys of a diverse subset of organizations from within WKCF's grantmaking portfolio. While the first set of five spotlights drew from interviews with grantee partners held in 2021, this second series draws from conversations with a new set of five grantee partners carried out in the summer of 2022. In those conversations, organizational leaders generously reflected on their organizational journeys to that point, shared challenges and decision points, and ultimately shared learning from their experience that might support others.

The spotlights in this series again represent a diverse set of organizations. They include:

- A Kalamazoo-based community foundation deeply living into its values by authentically following the lead of community in its anti-racist organizational journey;
- A Detroit-based grassroots policy advocacy organization focused on empowering mothers of color, which is navigating how to root out and address white supremacy culture within their own organization.
- A national nonprofit organization focused on shifting the paradigm of teacher professional learning that is simultaneously endeavoring to shift its own paradigm around advancing organizational equity through staff-centered efforts; and, finally
- A health service provider serving the Grand Rapids, Michigan, community that is leveraging an equity-focused strategic plan to create a throughline for its internal racial equity work;

- A national coalition of 125 breastfeeding member organizations that is endeavoring to advance the racial equity journey of its broader network of diverse partners;

In telling the stories of the profiled organizations, we purposefully led with the voices of grantee leaders. The underlying framework for the series, however, is an updated version of an institutional support framework developed specifically to support the foundation in thinking about centering its three intersecting approaches—racial equity, community engagement and leadership. Described as the foundation's DNA, they are interwoven into all of the foundation's work on behalf of children, and this framework integrates this with new field-level thinking about organizational development, organizational equity, philanthropic equity culture and organizational change. Each spotlight references one or more of the core elements of WKCF's DNA institutional Support Framework. The framework is linked [here](#), and briefly described in an appendix to this series.

## **THE INVITATION**

We look forward to you exploring and reflecting upon the stories of this new subset of WKCF's grantee partners, which are presented in the following spotlights. Precisely because there is no "right" path forward, we believe there is tremendous significance in learning from the trials and triumphs of others. We express our sincerest gratitude to the five organizations showcased here, all of whom have engaged in candid reflection with us such that others might gain insights into their own journeys.



# Kalamazoo Community Foundation

**CENTERING COMMUNITY WITHIN ANTI-RACIST TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE.**

**DEARBORN, MICHIGAN**

**I**t was 1930 when the Kalamazoo Community Foundation (KZCF) made its very first grant to the local public school system. The grant focused on ensuring that underserved children had access to food, clothing, and resources to get an education. In the almost full century since that first grant, KZCF has continued to deeply invest in and mobilize resources in support of the local community, earning a reputation as a true partner in catalyzing community change and well-being for the residents of Kalamazoo. The most recent iteration of the foundation's mission makes explicit their commitment to "mobilize people, resources and expertise to advance racial, social and economic justice" with the aim of Kalamazoo being "the most equitable place to live." >>>





In support of this vision, the Kalamazoo Community Foundation has been deeply engaged in its racial equity journey for decades and has received peer and field-level accolades for its efforts, all of which offer useful learning for organizations on similar journeys. This spotlight showcases the specific efforts of KZCF to live into its value for upholding, centering and following the lead of the Kalamazoo community in its work and operations, through the guidance of a uniquely-comprised Anti-Racism Transformation Team (ARTT). KZCF's ARTT approach offers potentially useful learning for other explicitly community-centered foundations and other organizations similarly situated to be accountable to multiple layers of stakeholders, primary among them being the immediate communities they serve.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL JOURNEY**

**W**hile it can be argued that the foundation's focus on equity began with that first grant in 1930, the Kalamazoo Community Foundation's internal racial equity journey began in earnest in 2000 with the adoption of its first "diversity policy." As recorded in a 2014 Foundation Review reflection authored by KZCF leaders,<sup>1</sup> this policy, crafted by the foundation's board, was the beginning of the organization's first structured process to "fully embrace and act upon our commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion."

## **Setting the Foundation: Becoming an Anti-Racist Organization**

KZCF's commitment to diversity in that first diversity policy explicitly named race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, economic circumstance, physical and mental abilities and characteristics, philosophy and religion as priorities for attention. In the first several years following adoption of the diversity policy and associated implementation plan, the organization was steadfastly focused on fostering an inclusive culture that embraces all elements of that diversity.

During that time period, the foundation launched a Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Fund, focused on diversifying its donor base, and—importantly—put in place an "inclusion statement" that focused on ensuring that "all people will be considered in employment or volunteer participation," to which it still holds itself accountable today. This statement was built into KZCF grant agreements for those seeking responsive funds and funds from the matching gifts program; to date, grantee partners must acknowledge that if they accept funds from the community foundation, they too must be ready to commit to this value of inclusivity in their own work and operations where possible.

This was only the starting point. Reflecting back on that time, Sandy Barry-Loken, vice president of community impact and investment, reasoned, "If we were working to

<sup>1</sup> Pickett-Erway, C., Springgate, S., Vance, T. (2014) *Difficult Conversations: Lessons Along the Journey Toward Inclusion*. Foundation Review 6(1). <https://scholarworks.qvsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1193&context=tfr>.



hold partners accountable in different ways for their DEI journeys, we really needed to be robust in our own learning and internal growth.” KZCF’s participation in a Council of Michigan Foundation initiative focused on diversifying donor bases during this period only further reinforced the foundational importance of authentic community partnership in meaningfully carrying out the organization’s mission. Sarah Lee, vice president for marketing communications, underscored the aligned importance, then, of “every single staff person shoring up their competency in that area.”

That was the catalyst for the next phase of KZCF’s journey. In 2006, all KZCF staff and board members participated in a two-and-a-half day anti-racism workshop, led by a local partner—Eliminating Racism and Claiming/ Celebrating Equality (ERAC/CE). The training, “Understanding and Analyzing Systemic Racism,” was a turning point in the foundation’s journey, fostering shared language and shared understanding around not just equity, but racial equity and the implications of centering anti-racism in the work of the foundation. From that training forward, all newly hired KZCF staff members have been required to participate in the training as part of their orientation.

In 2010, the KZCF’s Board of Trustees officially adopted an anti-racist organizational identity for the foundation. Underscoring that “structural racism perpetuates the inequities that threaten the well-being of our community,” the Board resolution was intended to signal

to the community the foundation’s firm commitment to eliminating inequalities and racism. Through the continued support of ERAC/CE, the foundation challenged itself to engage in an anti-racism and equity analysis in all aspects of their work, to acknowledge and learn how white supremacy, colonialization, systemic racism, and associated trauma impact the realities of those the foundation seeks to support, and—ultimately—*uphold, center, and follow the lead of those historically oppressed communities in shaping foundation strategies and decision-making.*

### **Forming The Anti-Racism Transformation Team**

While organizations often articulate a broad commitment to being “community-centered,” KZCF was fully dedicated to taking clear structural action to manifest this commitment. In 2017, after extensive planning, the organization launched an Anti-Racism Transformation Team (ARTT). As Barry-Loken, one of the founding members of the ARTT, described, “The ARTT was envisioned as a vehicle for ensuring community members have a seat at the table to help guide the work and hold the accountability for helping lead us toward the transformation that we know will help us better support community.”

The ARTT is a 24-member advisory and decision-making body equally comprised of both internal and external representatives, whose purpose is to “dismantle racist



practices, policies and procedures” in support of the organization’s long-term transformation. The ARTT was created because staff at the foundation realized that an exclusively internal diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) committee can be “really insufficient” for achieving the level of transformation to which KZCF was aspiring. External representatives were encouraged to bring new perspectives, ask hard questions, and guard against unintended biases. “Sometimes in spaces when we’re examining a policy, practice, decision,” Barry-Loken explained, “[it] is easier for an external person to raise questions without the concern of power dynamics than an internal staff member to do so.”

Members of the ARTT must apply to serve a three-year term. Staff at various levels of the

organization are purposefully represented, and community members are also recruited to represent diverse views and expertise. While some ARTT community members are grantees or long-time community partners, as Barry-Loken noted, some representatives have no history with the foundation at all. “It is important to us to have as many different perspectives as possible,” she explained, adding that, while the ARTT is required to be comprised of a majority people of color, “we also need white folks to be learning and leaning into the work as well.”

The ARTT is guided by a comprehensive charter developed by the inaugural team and updated in 2021. In addition to codifying the ARTT’s purpose, member make-up, and various committees that comprise its structure, the charter also importantly outlines how the committee is envisioned to work together. A clear set of values guides the work of the ARTT, which is granted “authority to determine anti-racist priorities and provide support to the internal staff in carrying out those priorities.” Various subcommittees are named in the charter, and clear lines of accountability are also established—to each other, to the foundation, and to the community itself.

### **Making Progress Toward Dismantling Embedded Racism**

In the seven years it has been active, the ARTT has been integrated into all major organizational decisions, activities, and policy changes. As former President and CEO Carrie Pickett-Erway shared, “there’s

**“ Sometimes in spaces where we’re examining a policy, practice, decision [it] is easier for an external person to raise questions without the concern of power dynamics than an internal staff member to do so. ”**

► SANDY BARRY-LOKEN, VICE PRESIDENT OF COMMUNITY IMPACT AND INVESTMENT





literally nothing they haven't touched in the community foundation." They have furthered the institutionalization of anti-racist practices at KZCF, and shaped high-impact decisions through asking questions and challenging long-held assumptions. "[Racism] can be so insidious," Barry-Loken reflected. "[Racist practices] can be deeply embedded, and you think it's just standard practice, but really, [when] you think about it, who is this benefitting?"

Staff members lift up the revamped board recruitment process as an example of one that has been shaped by the ARTT, which encouraged the foundation to move to an open invitation recruitment process and



**“Racism can be so insidious. [Racist practices] can be deeply embedded, and you think it’s just standard practice, but really, [when] you think about it, who is this benefitting?”**

► SANDY BARRY-LOKEN, VICE PRESIDENT OF COMMUNITY IMPACT AND INVESTMENT

adopt a composition policy that states that at least half of trustees must have lived experience with oppression. Previously, the trustee recruitment process was comprised of nominating names to a slate that was vetted and winnowed down by a governance committee. “With that kind of process,” Lee acknowledged, “you are just reinforcing people with power and privilege.” An open process with ARTT member input in the application review has ultimately led to “diversifying the highest level of power and authority within the organization,” as the board now includes two seats for community members who bring diverse lived experiences and perspectives to the board of trustees. As another sign of how power has been shifting, in the last few years, board members have



joined the ARTT and some ARTT members have even become board members.

The ARTT is also credited with institutionalizing anti-racism though advocating for a DEI Director position, introducing a DEI curriculum for the board of trustees, and incorporating anti-racism in KZCF's strategic planning. The ARTT has also had direct input into hiring and promotion within the foundation, with members partnering with the human resources department to review job descriptions, serve on hiring committees, and review criteria for promotions. Staff diversity

**“The external folks at the table bring so much accountability to the work that we are doing. They continue to challenge us, to make sure that we don’t fall into, ‘This is always how we’ve done it.’ Or, that somehow we stop asking questions that center ‘what would be the most racially equitable decision to make this moment?’ ”**

► SARAH LEE, VICE PRESIDENT FOR MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS



has increased from 13 percent to now being almost 60% BIPOC staffed, which Barry-Loken noted has, in turn, “significantly changed the way we think about things, how we engage with our community, and how we even have conversations with one another.”

The ARTT has influenced the core grantmaking work of the foundation as well. ARTT team members joined with internal staff to review KZCF's internal spending policy and propose an adaptation that resulted in the Board approving an increase to the foundation's spending policy. Lee put this shift in perspective, explaining, “beginning in 2021, that is an additional \$2 million that we’re investing in community... really centered on ensuring that we’re advancing racial equity in the community.”



Organizational change has been swift and meaningful. Lee reflected on the value of the ARTT, and particularly the involvement of members of the Kalamazoo community in the decision-making process. “The external folks at the table bring so much accountability to the work that we are doing,” she explained. “They continue to challenge us, to make sure that we don’t fall into, ‘This is always how we’ve done it.’ Or, that somehow we stop asking questions that center ‘what would be the most racially equitable decision to make this moment?’”

### **Aligning with a Broader Transformative Journey**

While the ARTT vehicle itself is one that might seem straightforward to replicate, its effectiveness lies in the deep investments in the ARTT as an authentic vehicle for dismantling racism and bolstering community accountability, as well as simultaneous investments that the foundation has made in its larger transformation as an organization. “It’s the hardest work we’ve ever done,” emphasized Barry-Loken.

The early investments in establishing KZCF’s vision for an anti-racist organization were foundational, for example. Staff had a basis to appreciate the charge of the ARTT, and members of the ARTT themselves participated in similar trainings that unpacked concepts of internalized racist superiority and internalized racist oppression. As multiple staff members explained, over the years through organizational investments of time and resources in all-staff trainings, racial

caucusing, conflict literacy workshops, internal team conversations, and many more internal initiatives, “we’ve struggled, and had some real pitfalls in order to get to this point.” Through this process, however, KZCF has evolved to a baseline level of shared language and understanding, and a culture where people are largely getting “comfortable with uncomfortable conversations.”

A deep focus on and commitment to relationships were also described as key. The ARTT was launched in tandem with Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation (TRHT), a core initiative funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. The TRHT work is a community-based movement to bring about transformational and sustainable change to address the historic and contemporary effects of racism through a focus on building trust-based relationships across communities, organizations and sectors. In alignment with this programmatic work, ARTT members are similarly encouraged to continue to center relationships, cross-racial understanding and healing; each is encouraged to have 1:1 conversations with each other in order to be fully and authentically grounded in each other’s experiences and perspectives.

Finally, staff shared that top-level buy in was also vital for reinforcing a strong sense that the ARTT was carrying out mission critical work. The ARTT was launched as a Board mandate, and leadership and the former CEO were front and center championing the importance of the ARTT as well. The work of





the ARTT—which is fundamentally challenging existing power and privilege—could have easily been dismissed otherwise. “When you’re dismantling [racism],” Lee explained, “you’re constantly challenging, you’re constantly questioning... that is why you need support at the highest leadership level.”

## LOOKING FORWARD

**S**taff anticipate that the work of the ARTT—alongside their ongoing journey as an organization—will continue to evolve. KZCF’s commitment to racial justice and the ARTT as a vehicle to support that goal, however, will endure. The ARTT has been formally institutionalized with a place on KZCF’s organizational chart, embedded within the Equity, Learning and Culture Team. The foundation’s new mission and strategic plan are both strongly aligned with its vision for Kalamazoo County to be the most equitable place to live. And, as a reinforcement of its commitment to community-centered practice and operations, the foundation recently published a comprehensive “Resource Guide” that powerfully and explicitly outlines the foundation’s racial-equity centered frameworks, language, and approaches to promote collective understanding among staff and the partners with whom it collaborates in the pursuit of its mission.

At the time of the writing of this spotlight in early 2023, the foundation finds itself in a moment of transition as it seeks a new President/CEO. However, it is not a moment that invites any possible course change. “The work continues,” Lee emphasized. “The

work doesn’t stop because there’s a lot of things going on right now...or that we are in a moment of flux. People are just naturally leaning into their power. You have been ceded this power. Go forth and do the work.”

## Key Takeaways from KZCF’s Journey

- Stay the course; transformative change takes meaningful time and investment that is rooted in a strong commitment to living into values as an anti-racist organization.
- Unpack commitments to operating as an organization accountable to the community it serves and what it might take to operationalize them.
- Acknowledge the opportunity afforded by those outside the organization asking hard questions and shedding light on embedded institutional biases.
- See the end goal; integrating community voice and power into all major organizational decisions, activities, and policy changes is not easy to put in place, but it can lead to meaningful, authentic and transformative change.
- Build shared understanding and value for an anti-racist organizational vision for the organization such that big initiatives like the ARTT are launched within a reinforcing culture with full leadership and staff buy-in.



# Mothering Justice

ALIGNING THE ORGANIZATION TO REFLECT THE WORLD THEY WANT TO LIVE IN. **DETROIT, MICHIGAN**

**F**ounded in 2012, Mothering Justice is a grassroots policy advocacy organization whose mission is to empower mothers of color to influence policy on behalf of themselves and their families.<sup>2</sup> Located in Detroit, Mothering Justice is dedicated to improving the quality of life for families by empowering mothers of color with resources and tools to use their power to make equitable changes in policy. The organization's policy agenda is focused in four key areas: reproductive justice (with a central focus on Black maternal health), affordable childcare, basic needs security, and time off to care.>>>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.motheringjustice.org/about>



In addition to being an organization focused on supporting mothers of color, Mothering Justice is an organization led and staffed by Black mothers. This has implications not just for the work that they do externally, but how they function internally as an organization. This spotlight tells the story of how the leaders and staff of this organization endeavor to resist white supremacy and live into their principles of racial equity, justice, and authenticity to reflect the world they want to see.

### ORGANIZATIONAL JOURNEY

**S**ince its inception, Mothering Justice's staff have had continuing conversations about what it means to be a women of color organization in a world where white supremacy is so deeply entrenched and embedded in policies and practices. Founder and national executive director Danielle Atkinson shared that coming from a space of authenticity as women of color was key: "Since our creation, we have had a conversation around what does it mean to be a women of color organization? I believe that there are throughlines in more than just our oppression as people of color, but in our stories of being that can bring us to a place of independent political power for the purposes of our organization's existence...I knew that there was no way that we can be authentic in how we reach people if we weren't coming from a space of authenticity around our own story and joy."

For the staff at Mothering Justice, coming from a "space of authenticity" requires persistent interrogation and action around

**“ Since our creation, we have had a conversation around what does it mean to be a woman of color organization? I believe that there are throughlines in more than just our oppression as people of color, but in our stories of being that can bring us to a place of independent political power for the purposes of our organization’s existence. ”**

► DANIELLE ATKINSON, FOUNDER AND NATIONAL EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

how white supremacy shows up, not only in the policies that they are working to promote or combat, but in how they operate internally. Their organizational journey has therefore been rooted in constant reflection about the values they hold and how to stay true to them when the dominant paradigm for working mothers is both oppressive and neither child- nor family-centered.





## Aligning work structures and processes with lived context

Atkinson shared that white supremacy is so pervasive that its impacts are felt even in organizations run by people of color, noting “There’s still white supremacy, even in a completely Black organization... the nonprofit industrial complex does not make [the dismantling of white supremacy] very easy at all.” She explained that nonprofit organizations, like the for-profit corporate world, emphasize hierarchy and uphold structures that are detrimental to the world they want to create. She adds that trying to work against these normed structures to create a workplace that is nurturing

**“We welcome the sound of children... the fact that you can multitask, the fact that you are a caregiver, all of those things are qualifiers. So, we just welcome different work arrangements based on people’s other responsibilities...”**

► DANIELLE ATKINSON, FOUNDER AND NATIONAL EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

and fulfilling and not baked into white supremacy is deeply challenging and a current struggle Mothering Justice faces.

Honoring their lived contexts as Black working mothers is critical to Mothering Justice’s approach. According to Atkinson, this means that, as they think about their organizational structures and processes, attending to how they do their work is equally important as what they do. As such, the organization focuses on making sure that staff can do their work “in ways that recognize and accommodate the lived experience of staff so that they can lean on their gifts and do their work without having their life responsibilities treated as barriers.” In practice, this means empowering their staff to get the work done in a timely way, but within timeframes that accommodate their life responsibilities. Staff are valued for their expertise and are therefore trusted to work their eight hours a day in ways that work for them. Trust and flexibility are key. “Everyone is an expert in what they do,” Atkinson emphasized. “So, there doesn’t need to be this overbearing management structure. People are tasked with governing themselves and the pace of their work.”

Given its deviation from traditional, rigid work models, offering this level of flexibility could evoke concerns about productivity. Atkinson acknowledges that their way of working “gives people more leniency,” but this is something that she also embraces because it reflects “how we want to show up in the world and what world we want to be in.” She also encourages



employers to lean on trust. She notes that employers often jump to making assumptions when deadlines are not met or things do not go as planned, but she posits that using inquiry and joint solution-making is a better approach. This was described as asking first what happened, then following up with a question around what needs to change, and then making a plan with that staff member to ensure that the change is implemented and effective.

Respect for timeframes is reflected not just in the relative trust and autonomy staff have for completing their work in ways that work best for them, but also in the way in which the organization acknowledges and accommodates the context of working mothers. In practice, this accommodation means never scheduling meetings at school pickup times and simply accepting the reality of potential work disruptions due to the need to attend to family matters. To this end, Mothering Justice has incorporated a “peer system” so that if something happens to a staff member or her family that keeps her from being able to perform her duties, someone else at the organization can step in as needed. Atkinson shared that an organization that values working mothers should “create a budget that realistically speaks to how they want people to work,” which, for Mothering Justice, means endeavoring to have two people to support every job so that the expertise and burden can be shared. Accommodating the context of working mothers also means embracing children as part of the work context. Mothering

Justice has always welcomed the sound of children. While the shelter-in-place orders associated with the pandemic forced other organizations to get used to having children in the background in meetings, this was always considered the norm at Mothering Justice. “The pandemic changed things for a lot of people, but not necessarily at Mothering Justice,” reflected Atkinson. She explained that seeing and hearing children in the background has always been the norm. “That never was seen as unprofessional. That’s really *professional*, the fact that you can multitask, the fact that you are a caregiver, all of those things. We welcome different work arrangements based on people’s other responsibilities because we know that women of color disproportionately have to carry the burden and joys of caregiving.”

### Reflecting values and (re)defining expertise

Another way in which Mothering Justice pushes back against white supremacist norms is by naming them and then actively attending to their mission and values as they develop paths for resistance. Atkinson offered several examples of how this has unfolded within the organization. She described how Mothering Justice attends to dress codes as an example of how the organization names and pushes back on respectability politics.<sup>3</sup> Mothering Justice intentionally does not have a dress code because its leaders believe how one dresses has no bearing on job qualifications, performance, or the value one brings to the

<sup>3</sup> *Respectability politics refers to the pressure to conform to mainstream, white-dominant standards of appearance and expression (e.g. hair, dress, language).*



workplace. As Atkinson shared, “Things that we accredit to performance evaluations, all of those things, should be evaluated for the value added to your mission.”

While this philosophy reflects the world Mothering Justice staff want to live in, its leaders also recognize the importance of acknowledging the priority the “outside world” places on these norms so that staff have the information they need to make healthy decisions for themselves, depending on situational contexts. “We talk about what the world looks like, and what it means to have credibility, and we let people make those decisions based on those conversations. So, if you can do your job in the outfit that you’re wearing, then you’re dressed appropriately,” she explained. “Now, whether or not somebody in the outside world will see you as dressed appropriately, or whether or not that will discount you in their eyes, you’ve got to make that calculation and account for that. And that could look a ton of different ways.”

Similarly, Mothering Justice has been actively asking themselves what constitutes “a qualification for something” and questioning the notion of “expertise,” recognizing that how this has been defined, valued, and rewarded has been largely influenced by white supremacist practices and structures. The organization therefore makes it a point to pause and ask critical questions about their expectations and their processes related to human resource (HR) efforts. For example, as part of their hiring process, Mothering Justice leaders pause to ask themselves if the position

**“Things that we accredit to performance evaluations, all of those things, should be evaluated for the value added to your mission.”**

► DANIELLE ATKINSON, FOUNDER AND NATIONAL EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

needs a specific degree, and if candidates also have life experience that is both applicable and valuable to the position. Atkinson notes that asking themselves these critical questions and applying them to their hiring process ensures that the organization refrains from “having minimum standards that could disqualify people who have really incredible life experience to add to the organization.”

Mothering Justice is also intentional about creating clear paths for growth within the organization and “readying staff” for positions that they hope to have in the future, rather than relying on the presence of a credential or degree to signal readiness and ability to do the job. According to Atkinson, a critical aspect of this strategy is “creating a space where people can be vulnerable about things that they don’t know, and things that they want to know, and then being ready and capable of providing opportunities.” To that



end, staff are encouraged to talk about the kind of position they hope to have in the future, and then they work with their HR team around how to get “ready” for the job they want. Depending on the need, the “readying” can take multiple forms, including trainings, job shadowing, or apprenticeships.

Atkinson adds that in order for this to work well, the organization needs to emphasize that they value learning as part of the process of growing, and this includes embracing failure as a learning opportunity and recognizing learning as a process that takes time and will come with mistakes. Atkinson notes that fostering this culture of honest engagement is “the most important thing” when supporting

Black women to thrive in the workplace.

“People of color, Black women in particular, do a lot of posturing to make up for a perceived knowledge gap.” Atkinson shared. “So, we try to make the space really welcoming and safe to say, “I don’t really know how to do this part of my job,” because that’s the most important thing. We are spending so much time trying to keep a job and to hide anything that might disqualify us from employment, that we don’t get to be honest about the things that we need help with.”

### **Focusing on mental health and healing**

Fostering a workplace culture that supports staff to embrace vulnerability and practice honest engagement can be a challenging task generally, given inherent power dynamics in any organization. But for organizations like Mothering Justice, whose staff are predominantly Black mothers, there are added layers of complexity and burden to consider, given the persistent and disproportionate harms—both seen and unseen—that they experience as a result of racism in all its forms.

In order to create a culture that encourages vulnerability and honest engagement, Mothering Justice has an explicit focus on attending to the mental health and healing needs of its staff. While the murder of George Floyd and others has been described by leaders of other organizations as a “wake-up call” and a catalyst for organizations to start exploring issues related to racial







equity and racial justice, as an organization of Black women and Black mothers, the impact of these murders was personal.

“For us, moments like George Floyd’s murder, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, all of them were moments to step back and make sure that we are okay as mothers, parents, many of us parenting Black children and Black boys,” explained Atkinson. “We have since talked about Breonna Taylor and about Black women. We feel like Black women are not held in the same light. And Black women are usually the caregivers and the storytellers of the murders and mistreatment of Black men. And then when it is us, that it is not necessarily seen the same way. So, rest and reflection around our own mental health is always at the forefront when moments like that arise.”

In addition to having flexible work structures that enable staff to take time off to process and heal as needed, Mothering Justice creates intentional spaces for open conversation so staff can talk, in community, about pressing issues. For example, Mothering Justice has scheduled biweekly “Mama Agenda Mondays,” which serve as a space for open conversation as well as a forum for peer learning wherein staff share resources with one another, offer book recommendations, and hold learning-focused discussions. One important outcome of these discussions has been the illumination of ways in which internalized racism affects not only the mental health of staff, but also their ability to thrive at their jobs. Atkinson explained,

“It was made apparent to me very quickly that we had to address internalized racism because it wasn’t just about not having women of color at the table. It was women not feeling like they could *approach* the table.”

In response, Mothering Justice has been placing an even stronger emphasis on leadership development, with attention to fortifying staff not only with the tools they need to engage successfully in their work, but to do so in ways that sensitively attend to their mental health.

This includes having a strong focus on belonging. To ensure that their efforts align with staff needs, organization leaders make sure to solicit feedback from staff to understand what belonging should look like and feel like within their organizational culture, and what is needed to foster that. They then deploy resources to support these efforts, with the ultimate goal of creating a space that allows their staff to fully live into their brilliance.

“I think we’d all agree, if Albert Einstein was having a mental breakdown and all we needed to do was provide resources for him and his mental health so that he could be brilliant, we’d be like, ‘Yes, get all the money to make him whole so that he can be brilliant,’” Atkinson reflected. “And we see the people that work at Mothering Justice in the same light. We know there’s brilliance there. How do we unburden [staff] so that [they] can live into that brilliance? That’s the important



piece, right? We can't move this work forward without that brilliance. These people are not disposable. We have to solve for that so that we can lock into this brilliance."

## LOOKING FORWARD

**G**iven the insidious, persistent, and deeply entrenched nature of racism and white supremacy, the effort to remain vigilant in recognizing and working against their manifestations is an enduring struggle. Creating a culture of safety and learning is key to Mothering Justice's efforts to respond in ways that are healthy, align with their values, and advance their mission. As they continue to build upon this strong foundation, there are also areas for continuing growth. For example, Mothering Justice is currently wrestling with how to expand the diversity of their staff in ways that do not result in feelings of tokenism and that support a sense of belonging for all. As they work to thoughtfully and sensitively diversify their staff, they have been leaning on the expertise of coalition partners that represent different communities to support Mothering Justice in understanding "where we need to be to really be an organization that represents mothers of color." At the same time, they are working on promoting stronger internal and external understandings of the extensive heterogeneity within the Black community so as to foster a deeper appreciation for the diversity of people and strength found within the community, and within their staff.

The organization continues to focus on creating a culture where staff feel valued

and empowered to live into their brilliance, and that pushes against harmful structural norms rooted in white supremacy. Atkinson recognizes that there are tradeoffs to this approach, noting that it is "hard, and things move slowly... slower than we would like." She also suggests, however, that when you consider the long-term impact of diversifying staff, building their skillsets, supporting their leadership, and deepening the institutional wisdom of the organization, the tradeoffs are well worth the investment.

## Key Takeaways from Mothering Justice's Journey

- Lead from a space of authenticity that lifts up and honors staff members' identities.
- Consistently interrogate how white supremacy manifests within organizational policies and structures.
- Identify and implement organizational policies that recognize and accommodate staff members' lived experiences and contexts.
- Attend to mental health and healing needs of staff in ways that encourage vulnerability and honest engagement.
- Intentionally create spaces for staff to engage in community with each other and offer opportunities to provide feedback to support healing and belonging.



# Health Net of West Michigan

LEVERAGING AN EQUITY STRATEGIC PLAN TO CREATE AN ORGANIZATIONAL THROUGHLINE. **GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN**

**F**or the last nine years, Health Net of West Michigan (Health Net) has served as a bridge to healthcare and social service systems to ensure that community members, especially those who are low-income, are connected to the resources they need to lead healthier lives. Through active case management, support for navigating systems, transportation, and community outreach and education, the organization works in close collaboration with local partners and community members to promote community health and wellness. >>>



Underlying that mission is an assumed value for equity and ensuring equitable health access and outcomes for the diverse communities that Health Net serves. This spotlight tells the story of the organization's iterative efforts over the past several years to meaningfully bring this underlying value to the fore of its programming and operations. Health Net's story offers useful insights to organizations early in their life cycle, given the intentionality of their efforts during the formative years of their organization.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL JOURNEY**

**H**ealth Net started in 2014 as a merger between two nonprofit programs and organizations. As such, there were a lot of inherited organizational beliefs and structures that staff and/or leadership had to navigate as the two organizations became one. The staff itself was not very racially and ethnically diverse, and the board at that time was largely comprised of White male executives from various local health and mental health systems. While there was already strong value in place for serving the diverse Grand Rapids community, Health Net had not yet had the opportunity to deeply reflect on what that meant for their approach as a consolidated organization.

### **Focusing on Individual “Level Setting”**

This began to quickly shift in 2015. Executive director Maureen Kirkwood shared that almost directly following the merger, the organization prioritized creating an equity team that had broad representation from leadership and



staff across the organization. The formation of this team also coincided with Health Net's participation in a national oral health initiative explicitly rooted in health equity. As they began this work, a founding member of the equity team and Health Net's current chief innovation officer, Keyuana Rosemond, remembers a moment where the equity team realized, “Oh, our staff actually don't have a concept of what [health equity] means. We don't have shared language, we don't have shared definitions. We don't have a baseline overall from which we are speaking, and there are folks at different points of their journey and it was very critical that we level set.”

In response, in those very early years, much of the focus was on the individual, through equity-focused trainings and exercises commonly used in diversity training.





Rosemond remembers doing implicit bias testing, having staff examine their own privilege through experience-based group activities, like “privilege walks” and talking through everyone’s “invisible knapsack.” The organization also created a whole series of educational and engagement activities around Martin Luther King Day each year. It was a good start, Rosemond reflected, but “folks were finding it really hard to connect that work to their [own] work on a day-to-day basis.”

The equity team responded by engaging staff in discussions about the Grand Rapids community specifically, from a systems and policy perspective. The team led staff through discussions of redlining, and “white flight,” what it means to have a segregated “city within a city,” and the power and social structures that affect the communities that they serve. Again, there was good progress from this investment in staff education. Because the focus was on individual staff members, however, Rosemond shared, “We weren’t really moving the needle as it relates to staff education....with staff transition, we constantly found ourselves in a space needing to level set again.” Kirkwood also remembers that time as being a chaotic few years of getting the organization off the ground, where they were planning from event to event without a larger plan in place. “There really wasn’t really a throughline.”

### **Stepping Back to Focus on Organizational Change**

In 2018, therefore, the equity team paused and went back to the drawing board to

**“We weren’t really moving the needle as it relates to staff education....with staff transition, we constantly found ourselves in a space needing to level set again.”**

► KEYUANA ROSEMOND, CHIEF INNOVATION OFFICER

discuss what they could do to measurably move Health Net forward. This was the impetus for the development of what was referred to as an “equity strategic plan.” The plan forced Health Net to shift the focus to itself as an organization, and to name some specific goals for weaving principles of equity and inclusion throughout all aspects of the organization. As Kirkwood explains, “It created an opportunity to really think about how equity is connected to everything we do.”

The plan itself was comprised of six separate areas that the Equity Team wanted to prioritize: diversifying its board of directors; ensuring that leadership and staff exhibit behaviors that promote equity and inclusion; putting in place internal practices and policies that sustain an intentionally equitable and inclusive workplace; deepening community partnerships with those committed to equity; diversifying Health Net’s suppliers and



vendors; and aligning external communication and marketing materials with an equity and inclusion lens. It included some clear goals in each of these areas, as well as offered specific action steps and timelines to achieve them.

Ultimately, it created the necessary throughline to connect staff equity education and engagement to organizational goals. As an example, in addition to ongoing staff learning sessions, Health Net codified its commitment to level setting by building equity-focused training into its onboarding curriculum. Within the first 30 days of starting at Health Net, Rosemond shared, all staff are given a baseline context for understanding social determinants of health and how they affect Health Net's client population. "We can [now] provide everyone an equal context when they enter the organization... around public health, social determinants of health, institutional racism, etc."

The equity strategic plan also created an opening and an impetus for Health Net to make progress in some areas that demonstrated that, as an organization, they were also "walking the talk." In the first year after the equity strategic plan

**“[The Equity Strategic Plan] created an opportunity to really think about how equity is connected to everything we do.”**

► MAUREEN KIRKWOOD, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



was developed, Health Net had a dedicated focus on diversifying its workforce, identifying and implementing steps such as examining recruitment efforts, re-evaluating technical requirements to value lived experience in outreach positions, working more intentionally with community partners for referrals, and tapping into cultural groups and networks for recommendations. The organization was also able to make headway in its efforts to diversify its board, establishing desired competencies and creating aligned screening tools, with two new board members added in late 2018 who brought needed perspectives and expertise and increased racial/ethnic diversity.

To ensure an equitable and inclusive workplace, the equity strategic plan also called for a reexamination of existing



policies. One of the policies that got revised was Health Net's bereavement policy. While the former policy allowed a certain number of days off for a death of an immediate family member, the new policy is much more flexible, recognizing that the kinship networks within families of color or LGBTQ families may extend beyond traditional family structures, and that cultural traditions for transnational families might require extended time off for travel. Rosemond described this as a clear example for many about what it looks like to think differently about the assumptions we hold, which created an opening to consider what barriers client populations might similarly be facing. It was, she underscored, "a gamechanger."



**“I think putting that expectation forward [through the vehicle of an equity strategic plan], that everyone could agree upon, and then being able to execute it and implement it in the way we have, has been really powerful.”**

► KEYUANA ROSEMOND, CHIEF INNOVATION OFFICER

Health Net also took a hard look at its vendor and procurement policies to, as Rosemond emphasized, “live out our values through financial and economic opportunities for our neighbors and community, particularly communities of color, and their business.” As an organization, they are now more inclusive around prioritizing local women-owned, LGBTQ-owned, and Black- and Brown-owned businesses, and “pouring those dollars back into the community.”

Looking back, leaders agree that, by naming priorities in the equity strategic plan, Health Net was able to move swiftly and deliberately forward in ways that they might not have otherwise. It also had the added benefit of making both equity-focused intentions and



progress visible to staff. As Rosemond shared, “I think putting that expectation forward [through the vehicle of an equity strategic plan], that everyone could agree upon, and then being able to execute it and implement it in the way we have, has been really powerful.”

### Prioritizing a Supportive Culture

Health Net launched a new three-year equity strategy in 2021, which is envisioned to guide the organization through 2023. The contours of the new plan largely remain the same, continuing to build upon the progress that has been made since 2018. There is, however, a new named focus on culture and ensuring that employees feel empowered to show up authentically as their “whole selves.”

“We focused a lot on internal policies, procedures, and operations in that first iteration,” Rosemond explained. “In the second iteration...we are

**“We focused a lot on internal policies, procedures, and operations in that first iteration. In the second iteration...we are really looking aspirationally about who we want to be as an organization, our values.”**

► KEYUANA ROSEMOND, CHIEF INNOVATION OFFICER

really looking aspirationally about who we want to be as an organization, our values.” In the year leading into the new plan, the organization revamped its organizational values and developed WE CARE values as a means to center well-being and equity, along with collaboration, adaptation, respect and education. WE CARE values continue to guide their approach, and all staff and board members signed a statement affirming their commitment to these values.

Operationalizing equity values within organizational culture can be a challenge, and—as they have since the beginning—Health Net continues to iterate on their approach, guided by active reflection and staff feedback. For example, Rosemond shared that in their early staff education efforts, the organization had been focused on creating “safe space.” It has become clear that they had room to push themselves further and really create what she referred to as “brave space,” where people were expected to “lean into conversations” and be okay with things getting uncomfortable.

Another learning being applied is intentionality around not having staff of color—or those most marginalized within any given issue area—be the ones that carry the weight of leading conversations on that topic. This, they have found, empowers others to step up within conversations about race or gender. It also emphasizes that these are not individual identity issues that are being unpacked, but issues that are owned by everyone—because ultimately, as Rosemond emphasized, “it’s about how do we do the best work for our clients and our community.”





Especially against the backdrop of the pandemic and incidents of local racial violence, Health Net has also intentionally created space to focus on the mental health and wellness of their staff. In addition to all-staff spaces for intentional group processing, they have instituted a number of facilitator-led affinity groups where “people can deeply unpack [their thoughts and experience] depending how they self-select as a group.” In the past few years, Health Net has hosted groups for Latina staff, Black female staff, as well as a White women’s accountability and anti-racist group. They have also just launched an accountability group for male-identified staff, which is focusing on gender-based mental health at the intersection of race.

### Leveraging the Roadmap

The past nine years have not been all smooth sailing. Both Rosemond and Kirkwood described moments where it was clear from staff confusion that they were missing the mark in what they were trying to achieve, as well as instances where they had to navigate through outright resistance to how racial equity goals were being articulated, or the quick pace of organizational change. They both credit organizational progress to frequent reflection and ongoing iteration.

Within an iterative approach, having an equity plan served as a useful roadmap that could buffer against resistance, clarify intentions and keep everyone on the same page and moving forward. Rosemond contrasted Health Net’s initial equity efforts, which were volunteer-run and ad hoc, as starting to be seen by staff and board as “just another side thing.” The introduction of the equity

plan in 2018, Rosemond explained, was a way to formally “codify all the things we were doing so that it’s clear that it’s [not a side thing, but] part of the fabric of our organization.” Importantly, she further elaborated, “If I were to transition out of this organization tomorrow, the organization still has a roadmap to continue this work.”

The plan also had the added benefit of creating a focus and body of work that others can tangibly engage. At one point, Health Net’s equity team included a board liaison who was able to regularly report progress on elements of the plan and point to concrete areas where the Board could provide input or serve as champions. Having a clear plan also allowed funders to identify a tangible way they can financially support Health Net’s equity journey. Ultimately, Kirkwood underscored that this ability to seek out and receive dedicated support for their equity-focused work—including the hiring of a full-time Equity Project Manager—has been a catalyst for their trajectory of growth and development.

A plan, however, is just a plan. Both Kirkwood and Rosemond emphasize that successful implementation of the plan is rooted in the tight connection made between an organizational focus on racial equity and their overall capacity to serve the Grand Rapids and larger Kent County community. On one hand, this looks like having front-line staff make explicit connections between sometimes abstract terms like “structural racism” or “social determinants of health” and the issues that they see and support in communities they serve day-to-day. “Everyone is at capacity in the organization,” Kirkwood



explained, “sometimes you have to help them see, ‘Oh learning about this will help me be better at my job and helps further our mission.’”

It also looks like empowering their largely female staff to serve as better advocates for Health Net’s clients. “Healthcare is still, at the administrative level, a largely male-dominated field,” Rosemond shared. “If you’re working in the areas of medicine and insurance...we want to make sure that our staff, particularly women of color, have the confidence to go into these situations and know what they are talking about. If they are being challenged, [we want them] to have the tools and wherewithal to push through in those situations.”

## LOOKING FORWARD

**R**eflecting back, Kirkwood believes that along the way there have been a lot of “aha” moments among staff, “a lot of awakening. And it has impacted people...the light goes on. You can’t turn it off again. You can’t unknow something that you now know.” She has also seen firsthand how this has strengthened their organization and their ability to carry out their mission to serve the Grand Rapids community. One goal that is on the immediate horizon is to deepen a focus on equity beyond their client work. “We are at a lot of conversational tables locally, at the state level, and even nationally,” Kirkwood explains. “How do we keep the health equity focus front and center as we are representing our organization?”

Health Net leaders anticipate that they will continue to learn and iterate on their organizational equity journey going forward,

naming new goals and metrics for themselves every few years. Kirkwood likened Health Net’s organizational journey to her own personal journey, as one that “continues, and never ends.”

## Key Takeaways from Mothering Justice’s Journey

- Unapologetically put equity front and center from the very beginning of an organization’s founding.
- Connect racial equity to the core work of the organization.
- Recognize the inevitability of staff turnover and invest in individual journeys while simultaneously attending to the broader organizational journey.
- Create a clear roadmap around equity-centered organizational change to buffer against resistance, clarify intentions, and keep everyone on the same page and moving forward, and to create a tangible way for funders to support equity-focused investments.
- Attend to individual, organizational and cultural change to foster supportive culture that ensures that equity takes root and can move organization forward.
- Regularly reflect on progress and iterate approaches to centering racial equity to ensure forward momentum aligns with your core vision.



# Teaching Lab

MOVING TOWARD INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF  
RACIAL EQUITY. WASHINGTON, D.C.

**F**ounded in 2016, Teaching Lab is an education nonprofit organization that works nationwide to fundamentally shift the paradigm of teacher professional learning for the pursuit of education equity. The organization aims to transform professional learning in service of improved student outcomes by collaborating with various leaders to foster supportive instructional systems, and ultimately building a teacher-led network that leverages grassroots organizing and research-based professional learning. Supporting over 5,000 educators in over 30 school systems across the United States, Teaching Lab is deeply committed to a vision of a world where teachers and students thrive together in communities that support lifelong learning and meaningful lives.

In line with this vision, Teaching Lab's founders have held a fundamental goal of centering racial equity in both its external partnerships and operational structure. This spotlight tells the story of the organization's efforts to identify staff needs, to adapt and experiment, and to invest meaningful resources toward a more equitable organizational culture. Taking place over just the past seven years, Teaching Lab's story will resonate with those who have engaged in similar "all in" efforts with multiple pivot points over a short period of time. Those thinking through how to more strongly operationalize and institutionalize racial equity within their own organization may also benefit from early learning from Teaching Lab's journey thus far. >>>



## ORGANIZATIONAL JOURNEY

**T**he CEO of Teaching Lab Sarah Johnson proudly states that racial equity has been built into the DNA of the organization from its inception, and that this was actually one of the things that drew her to the organization. As such, Teaching Lab has been unafraid to take on different approaches to centering racial equity within its work and operations, deeply listening to staff and making changes accordingly. As Teaching Lab's chief operating officer, HaMy Vu stated "I don't think that we are afraid to practice, to fail and to really show our commitment."

### Bringing on an External Partner to Build Capacity

Early on, as it was just beginning to build systems and structures, Teaching Lab contracted with 45 Lemons, a firm with an anti-racist organizational development approach that was aligned with Teaching Lab's commitment to racial equity. At the time, according to Vu, staff expressed interest in having 45 Lemons lead organic efforts to facilitate conversations aimed at understanding staff needs around advancing and socializing their racial equity work. Engaging consultants in this capacity was intended to alleviate facilitation responsibilities among team members and enable equal opportunities for participation.

According to Vu, 45 Lemons brought an ability to ground organization-wide and group discussions in the Awake to Woke to Work framework,<sup>4</sup> and to better understand the concept and manifestations

**“I don't think that we are afraid to practice, to fail and to really show our commitment.”**

► HAMY VU, CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER

of white supremacy, which then helped them to explore how racial inequities show up in Teaching Lab's internal operations. These tools supported Teaching Lab staff with creating a shared language, fostering a culture of accountability (rather than blame), examining how inequities can show up when there is a sense of urgency and considering how to repair when harm has been committed.

A number of racial equity efforts were launched during this period as well. In early 2019, Teaching Lab created racial affinity groups, spaces where staff of similar racial backgrounds could share their experiences and perspectives with each other. These have evolved over time. Whereas these group were self-facilitated when first launched, Teaching Lab has since engaged an external facilitator to, as Vu explained, “ensure that everyone gets to participate and not have to act as a facilitator.” The composition of the groups has evolved as well. While the first two affinity groups were simply comprised of staff who had identified as White and staff who identified as people of color, the organization now has an affinity group for staff who identify as Black, Indigenous or people of color, and

<sup>4</sup> Equity in the Center's Awake to Woke to Work is intended to support shifts in organizational culture and operationalize equity. More information about the publication is available on their website: <https://equityinthecenter.org/aww/>.





White. Teaching Lab has also launched an intersectional group comprised of Black women.

Johnson and Vu further reflected that it was useful to bring in 45 Lemons to also support building the capacity of organizational leaders stewarding this work. Namely, they were able to provide organizational leaders with executive coaching while working to minimize challenges with power dynamics. On a weekly basis, 45 Lemons convened senior organizational leaders to discuss anything taking place in the company and how to lead with an equity mindset. They also provided individual coaching to support executive staff in navigating people management as well as team strategy and communications. This leadership facilitation opportunity entailed monthly sessions intended to increase leaders' self-awareness by unpacking and addressing issues and challenges that affect their leadership. To that end, leaders participated in sessions focused on exploring their conscious and unconscious biases using the Johari Window framework.<sup>5</sup> They also engaged in reflection about leadership identities (including race/ethnicity and gender) and how their own conceptualization of their leadership identity affects how they "show up" in their work.

### **Operationalizing Equity Within the Organization**

Teaching Lab was simultaneously focused on how to tangibly embed racial equity within its operations. A racial equity working group, launched in late 2018, was charged with articulating how to align Teaching Lab's mission with their day-to-day work. One of the clear ways

to do this was to acknowledge the importance of ensuring that their staff reflected the student populations in the school communities that they serve. "We make a commitment to working with school communities with at least 60 percent of students of color or students living in poverty," Vu explained. "That means we explicitly have a goal that our staff members at every level and in every department are at least 60 percent of color." In elaborating on this, Vu states "we've always been at least 50 to 60 percent people of color. That has not changed. It's more just like a deliberate effort to make sure that it's something that we maintain."

Through thoughtful hiring processes that cast a wide net in recruitment and minimized bias in hiring, the diversity in Teaching Lab's growing team of 40 staff members continues to reflect this goal. Teaching Lab leaders recognize, however, that diversity in and of itself is not the goal. Rather, centering racial equity requires meaningfully supporting and leveraging that diversity to guide the organization forward.

Practically, this has meant simultaneously attending to staff-centered processes, including compensation using a racial equity lens. 45 Lemons was a partner in supporting them in this area, conducting market research to provide competitive salary ranges, and supporting company leaders with considering how these structures are communicated, rolled out, and implemented. With their redesigned compensation system, Vu confidently shared, "we have no discrepancies based on race or

<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johari\\_window](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johari_window)



gender or other indicators in our compensation system, and that is a huge deal.”

Centering racial equity has also encompassed building opportunities to listen to and engage staff to ensure that the diversity of expertise and lived experience is authentically guiding the organization forward. For example, Teaching Lab convened staff “design groups” focused on improving organizational culture and continues to administer regular culture surveys to understand and improve staff experience. These survey responses are analyzed organization-wide, by race—including individuals with and without staff management roles—and are an important tool for exploring and responding to differences in experiences across demographic groups. “As is unfortunately true in many companies,” Vu reflected, “staff of color [sometimes] experience a company differently than White staff members.” Making results available organization-wide and engaging in follow up discussions around emerging issues created an opening to name

**“We have no discrepancies based on race or gender or other indicators in our compensation system, and that is a huge deal.”**

> HAMY VU, CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER

these differences. For example, Teaching Lab held numerous facilitated discussions on microaggressions that were either witnessed or experienced with colleagues or external partners.

### **Institutionalizing the Work**

The sociopolitical shifts that occurred after George Floyd’s murder in 2020 were not a “wake-up call” for Teaching Lab but rather, according to Vu, an affirmation “that we were on the right direction and we’re going to keep doubling down.” The nature of conversations in staff racial affinity groups shifted during this period, as staff were critically processing the shifting climate while continuing to hold Teaching Lab accountable to its racial equity values.

An important shift took place in 2022. Despite continuing work with external consultants and a number of ongoing internal equity-focused initiatives, staff feedback indicated a desire for greater coordination and institutionalization of these efforts. Vu shared that, after moving through most of the elements of the Awake to Woke to Work framework, “We wanted to figure out for ourselves what our values are... you can have Awake to Woke to Work, but what does it look like at Teaching Lab? What does it mean for Teaching Lab to live this?”

In response, 45 Lemons assisted Teaching Lab in crafting a Commitment to Educational Equity, Racial Justice and Liberation in its own words, designed to serve as a set of principles that undergird their personal, internal and external work.<sup>6</sup> Leadership also dedicated resources to

<sup>6</sup> Teaching Lab’s Commitment to Educational Equity, Racial Justice and Liberation is described on their website: <https://www.teachinglab.org/equitycommitment>.



grow a People and Culture team, which then expanded from one staff member tasked with transactional human resource functions to a team of six with capacity to address relational aspects of the organization. Further, this expanded team has been able to be strategic about articulating and implementing a comprehensive vision for embedding racial equity throughout the culture and operations of the organization.

Senior director of People and Culture Andrea McDade, who was hired to lead racial equity strategy development and implementation, emphasized that this step was designed to institutionalize racial equity within the organization and foster a sense of staff engagement. “What we’ve done is we’ve connected everything we do to the journey, and we have positioned and communicated to our team members that we are on a journey together,” she reflected. “This is not People and Culture alone. This is not Executive Team alone. This is we’re [in] this together. So that means we not only need your feedback, we want to go beyond feedback. We want you to be a part of the solution.”

Teaching Lab is in the process of launching a number of staff-centered and staff-led initiatives toward that end. It has launched a Racial Equity Coalition that encompasses three workgroups, wherein staff explore how they may better embed racial equity into their company culture through diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), workplace equity practices, and educational opportunities (e.g., learning experiences around anti-racism, allyship, and microaggressions). Teaching Lab is also piloting

**“We're not going to make the impact that we want to see in schools and in students if we don't make sure that our team is set up, is continually learning, is supported, that we are growing as a culture, that we are continually bringing on the best people and training the best people.”**

► HAMY VU, CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER

a series of additional revisions to its racial equity programming to continue aligning staff members’ daily and interpersonal actions with their company values. In their implementation processes, the human resources team provides multiple avenues for staff to check-in with them about progress and ask any questions that may arise, including office hours, updates during companywide meetings, and question and answer periods through their Slack channel.

The new shifts made by Teaching Lab have required a significant investment of time, energy, and resources. According to Johnson, thus



far it has been worth it. “Andrea and team have built many, many structures where we can make our racial equity values come alive,” she explained. “You can have words on a page, but they don’t mean anything if people aren’t doing things with them.”

Vu underscored the importance of the direction they are headed as well, stating, “We’re not going to make the impact that we want to see in schools and in students if we don’t make sure that our team is set up, is continually learning, is supported, that we are growing as a culture, that we are continually bringing on the best people and training the best people.”

## LOOKING FORWARD

**T**eaching Lab’s work of institutionalizing its racial equity efforts, while showing promise, is still relatively new.

Leaders are committed to continuing engaging staff to reflect on and evaluate how racial equity is being integrated within the organization. As the work gets implemented, Teaching Lab intends to consider external partnerships to support their internal approach. One area they anticipate focusing on in the near term is specifically considering how to strengthen their approach to integrating racial equity within a remote work environment, where engaging staff in uncomfortable conversations about race and racism can be particularly challenging.

Organizational leaders acknowledge racial equity as a value and that the work is on-going, rather than focused on meeting a goal or endpoint.

Vu elaborated, “racial equity, racial justice work is a journey. It’s a journey for each of us as individuals, but it’s also a journey for us as an organization. I think we’ve done a lot and I think we’ve made some missteps as well, but I think we are committed to listening, working, and to stay the course and not give up.”

## Key Takeaways from Teaching Lab’s Journey

- Utilize external equity consultants and conceptual frameworks to help implement, deepen and refine efforts.
- Consider phased approaches to external consultant engagement and be attentive to potential indicators that signal organizational readiness to lead and implement internal efforts (or aspects of those efforts) more independently.
- Ensure equal opportunities for participation across staff and supporting team members across levels, as this is key for institutionalizing the work.
- Follow staff’s lead by creating vehicles both to authentically solicit racially disaggregated staff feedback on their experience within the organization, and for staff to meaningfully set organizational direction going forward.
- Recognize that racial equity is a commitment, rather than a goal, which requires ongoing time, resources, and willingness to adapt.





# U.S. Breastfeeding Committee

NAVIGATING RACIAL EQUITY CAPACITY BUILDING WITHIN AN EXTENDED NETWORK. WASHINGTON, D.C.

**T**he U.S. Breastfeeding Committee (USBC) was formed in 1998 in response to the Innocenti Declaration of 1990,<sup>7</sup> which calls on every nation to establish a multisectoral national breastfeeding committee comprised of representatives from relevant government >>>

<sup>7</sup> Among other recommendations, the *Innocenti Declaration* calls on every nation to establish a multisectoral national breastfeeding committee comprised of representatives from relevant government departments, nongovernmental organizations, and health professional associations to coordinate national breastfeeding initiatives.



departments, nongovernmental organizations and health professional associations to coordinate national breastfeeding initiatives. Twenty-five years later, the USBC has grown from a small group of breastfeeding advocates to a coalition of more than 125 organization members. At the USBC, community-based and cultural organizations, breastfeeding coalitions, national organizations and federal agencies work collaboratively to drive efforts for policy and practices that create a landscape of breastfeeding support across the United States. As a backbone institution, the USBC uses an equity-centered, collective-impact approach to bring together diverse organizations in multi-sectoral collaborations, also known as constellations.<sup>8</sup>

This spotlight shares the story of the USBC's decade-long journey to advance racial equity in maternal child health policy and practices, starting with its immediate sphere of influence within the organization, then extending to its member organizations and partners. Told from the perspective of both long-standing and more recent executive staff, the spotlight offers candid learning for other collaboratives and networks similarly navigating the complexity of bringing diverse organizations together on a transformative journey.

## ORGANIZATIONAL JOURNEY

**D**espite the well documented health benefits of breastfeeding for both the infant and parent<sup>9</sup>, breastfeeding rates in the United States vary widely because of the multiple and complex barriers families face when starting and continuing to breastfeed. Policy, system, and environmental barriers can affect any family, but they have a disproportionate impact on historically underserved and marginalized populations. A 2014 CDC study<sup>10</sup> found that zip codes with higher proportions of Black residents have significantly lower access to maternity care and lactation support. Looking at these and other similar data, the USBC recognized that addressing national, systemic inequities at the field level would simultaneously require strengthening the racial equity capacity of those organizations leading this charge.

### Beginning with Leadership

U.S. Breastfeeding Committee leaders started where there was the most direct influence: the leadership team itself. With the generous support and guidance of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF), in the early 2010s, USBC engaged racial equity consultants to do an intensive training with the leadership team, board of directors, and key stakeholders with ongoing touchpoints for a year.

<sup>8</sup> *The Constellation Model of Collaborative Social Change*

<sup>9</sup> Ip, S., Chung, M., Raman, G., Chew, P., Magula, N., DeVine, D., Trikalinos, T., Lau, J. *Breastfeeding and maternal and infant health outcomes in developed countries. Evid Rep Technol Assess (Full Rep).* 2007 Apr;(153):1-186. PMID: 17764214; PMCID: PMC4781366.

<sup>10</sup> Lind, J. N., Perrine, C. G., Li, R., Scanlon, K. S., Grummer-Strawn, L. M.; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). *Racial disparities in access to maternity care practices that support breastfeeding - United States, 2011. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep.* 2014 Aug 22;63(33):725-8. PMID: 25144543; PMCID: PMC5779438.



The trainings began with a focus on individual learning. USBC deputy director, Amelia Psmythe Seger shared, “Our consultants understood that leaders have to be prepared to do this work on an intrapersonal, interpersonal and organizational level. We were supported to examine where and when our personal ideas about race were formed, and work together while building interpersonal rapport. We learned how to have difficult conversations about sensitive and personal topics, which was essential preparation to come into the larger boardroom and understand how to engage in this work.”



**“The center needs to hold, because organizational change is really messy. When resistance and fear come up, it is helpful to have people who are really connected to themselves and really connected to one another to do the work and see it through.”**

► AMELIA PSMYTHE SEGER, DEPUTY DIRECTOR

These trainings were illuminating to board members, many of whom identified as white women working as healthcare managers and clinicians. “Honestly, as a white woman new to this type of conversation it felt raw and humbling.” Psmythe Seger reflects. “I had to suspend the drive to get it right, and instead just show up for each moment as it unfolded. There was plenty I thought I understood intellectually, but that’s very different than having the courage to stand with a sister as she expresses pain, loss, and anger, and that’s different again from vowing to collaborate for change. Some of the white women on the board chose to step away and make space for others to come, particularly for women of color to be in positions of



leadership. The consultants were excellent at helping us learn how to navigate that.”

As leaders who had been part of early training intensives stepped away and/or completed their terms, the organization was also challenged to sustain the knowledge gained and pass the learnings along. One way they did this was by establishing

**“You can’t do the deep, personal work in a room of 100–200 people where in many are having their first exposure to racial equity concepts and principles. We were trying to have this really big, raw, intrapersonal transformational work happen in the ‘big room’...you have to bring people along on the journey even when the destination is urgent.”**

► AMELIA PSMYTHE SEGER, DEPUTY DIRECTOR

mentorship pairs. A seasoned board member was paired with a newer board member to provide knowledge, advice, and support. The pair was also provided a discussion guide that covered racial equity topics with the hope of fostering meaningful and authentic inclusion. USBC also developed an annual survey for board members to reflect on and assess inclusionary dynamics. This fostered transparency and supported accountability across generations of board cohorts.

Over time, the leadership team gained the capacity to hold and guide organizational changes toward racial equity. Psmythe Seger reflects, “The center needs to hold, because organizational change is really messy. When resistance and fear come up, it is helpful to have people who are really connected to themselves and really connected to one another to do the work and see it through.”

### Focusing on Organizational Change

USBC leadership leveraged this capacity to focus on enacting long-term change at the organization level. One early success centered on diversifying USBC’s membership table. At the time, each member organization was allowed only two representatives. USBC changed this policy to allow member organizations to name up to four representatives, with strong urging, to use this as an opportunity to encourage individuals who can contribute lived experience as a member of a priority population. In USBC’s case,





the member representative policy change doubled the number of people in the room and brought new, critical voices to the forefront of USBC's collaborative work.

At the recommendation of Dr. Kimarie Bugg, the USBC's first African American board member, the USBC formed the CRASH committee in 2013. "CRASH" is a mnemonic for the components of culturally competent health care: consider Culture, show Respect, Assess/Affirm differences, show Sensitivity and Self-awareness, and do it all with Humility. The CRASH committee was tasked with reviewing the USBC structures, policies and practices and developing a set of recommendations in five areas: USBC membership, governance, personnel, coalitions and overall. These recommendations were a way to prioritize and ensure that equity is intentionally infused throughout every layer of the USBC system.

"Like many organizations, we didn't get it right from the start," Psmythe Seger reflects. With the benefit of hindsight, she recommended that equity committees be granted clear authority and ongoing participation by and/or support from executive staff whenever requested or desired, to both navigate and disrupt the system they're trying to change. Involvement of executive staff, Psmythe Seger explained, will better facilitate taking committee recommendations and connecting them to implementation within complex organizational change

efforts where "some mechanisms will be in place, some will need to be developed, while others are dismantled."

Equity-centered structural change takes time, especially within a network of organizations like the USBC, where any given change might require layers of approval. Psmythe Seger described an example of a policy change that could require a bylaw revision, which then might take a year or more until legal review is complete and a quorum of the membership organizations understand and are ready to vote for the change. "It's not fast, and that can be frustrating when you want things to be different to alleviate pain and undue harm," she admits. "We circled around for several years before and enough of the changes had been implemented that everyone could recognize that the functional shifts were recognizable."

USBC executive director, Nikia Sankofa, who joined the organization in 2019, emphasized the complexity of advancing equity-centered cultural change within a network of organizations as well. "What became very clear to me," she explained, "was that some of these outstanding committee recommendations were outside the locus of our control. For example, the USBC can create systems, trainings, and educational resources that members and coalitions have access to, but whether or not they are going to have a diverse leadership and have DEI practices in place? I don't know if they are going to do that. They are their own entities,



and we can only do what we do and serve as a resource and provide opportunities to support organizations on a journey.”

### Extending to Member Organizations

Truly building a more equitable field of maternal health, however, required the USBC to purposefully navigate that complexity and invest at the level of member organizations. Recognizing the transformational quality of their initial leadership equity trainings, the USBC chose to take a similar approach with members and conference attendees, starting with intensive trainings focused on naming and disrupting inequitable systems by convening brave conversations for change. It quickly became apparent, however, that the intimacy the co-facilitators had been able to foster when working with 12-15 leaders was not transferable to a large audience. Though those dozen people were deeply committed, there was not adequate capacity to hold 100+ people through difficult and honest conversations about race.

Psmythe Seger emphasized that while beginning with a strong, disruptive approach worked well for USBC leadership, the larger group needed a more “gentle awakening” to start. She explains, “As a leadership team, we didn’t recognize that you can’t do the deep, personal work in a room of 100-200 people wherein many are having their first exposure to racial equity concepts and principles. We were trying to have this really big, raw, intrapersonal transformational work happen in the ‘big room,’ ... you have

**“Rather than talking about safe space, talk about ‘safe enough’ space. Like space that is safe enough to have really courageous conversations. It has to be done with care so that in particular, those most oppressed and those most hurt by these systems aren’t further harmed in the process and their labor is not required. It’s very delicate. And it’s very complex.”**

► AMELIA PSMYTHE SEGER, DEPUTY DIRECTOR

to bring people along on the journey, even when the destination is urgent.”

Looking back, leaders deeply regretted the approach taken, with Psmythe Seger recalling the specific consequences of not attending to the safety of women of color: “The way we did it was pretty brutal, I think,”



she reflected. “From what I could see, the women of color paid a price. Many people, particularly white people new to equity and justice engagement, didn’t realize the pain and damage evoked from what they were saying or questioning while trying to process something new.”

The experience emphasized the importance of attending to intentional spaces for belonging when bringing a diverse group of member organizations

**“We started our journey with race. We are now very much at a space where we are talking about gender inclusive language, which is a difficult space in the lactation field. So, we are definitely emerging there and feeling lots of pushback and pain, I would say in the field, in terms of how we talk about people.”**

► NIKIA SANKOFA, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



together on a journey. Creating intentional spaces required acknowledging different levels of readiness among those in the room and ensuring people of color were not taking on the burden of educating their peers. It also required structuring “safe enough” spaces that still inspired candid reflection and honest engagement to lead to transformative change. Psmythe Seger explains, “Rather than talking about safe space, talk about ‘safe enough’ space. Like convenings that are safe enough to have really courageous conversations. It has to be done with care so that in particular, those most oppressed and those most hurt by inequitable systems aren’t further harmed in the process and their labor is not required. It’s very delicate. And it’s very complex.”



At subsequent conferences, USBC started offering identity caucusing for six identity groups: African American Community, Asian and Pacific Islander Community, Latinx Community, LGBTQIAS+ Community, Native American/Alaska Native Community and White Community. These spaces allowed people who share a similar identity the time and space to process and unpack the learnings of the conference in real-time. They could engage in deeper discussions without fear of hurting others. These were spaces to vent, emote, release, ask questions, provide feedback, support one another, and engage in healing conversations. Additionally, USBC trained board members and conference committee members on how to be effective “conference weavers” to help facilitate meaningful interactions and interrupt negative dynamics.

As the USBC has applied these learnings to their conferences, these spaces have begun to turn into places that foster community and belonging. Psmythe Seger shared that while they still do not have it all figured out, and are still tailoring and altering their approach to equity, recent convening participants have shared that convenings “now feel like a beloved community.”

## **LOOKING FORWARD**

The USBC leaders emphasized the ongoing nature of the organization’s equity journey. Recently, the USBC has started to deepen its work in gender inclusion, as not all people who become pregnant or give birth identify as

women or mothers, but this has proven difficult within a field that has historically tied itself very closely to the identities of women and mothers. Reflecting on this current growing edge for USBC and the field, Sankofa shared, “We started our journey with race. We are now very much at a space where we are talking about gender-inclusive language, which is a difficult space in the lactation field. So, we are definitely emerging there and feeling lots of pushback and pain, I would say in the field, in terms of how we talk about people.”

The USBC is currently finding ways to track and assess diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts of their organization, member organizations, and the first food field. Within their organization, the CRASH committee is working on adding metrics to their recommendations to track progress moving forward. With their members, USBC has updated their membership application, which members update every five years, to track DEI efforts of member organizations. And for the field, in 2022 USBC administered a survey and conducted interviews to get a better understanding around whether the field has a shared definition of diversity, equity, and inclusion and what organizations are doing to advance DEI within their spaces. Reflecting on the ten-year journey they have taken to get here, Psmythe Seger shared, “It can take a long time to build the necessary trust, but you know that you’ve got it when anyone can speak into a place of discomfort or dissenting or unpopular view.”





## Key Takeaways from the USBC Journey

- Start where you have the greatest influence; investing in specifically furthering the individual and collective journeys of leadership teams can offer a strong foundation to weather the messiness of organizational change.
- Ensure a simultaneous focus on equity-centered structural and cultural change within organizations to demonstrate what equity looks like in practice.
- Encourage patience for change, particularly within networks of organizations with multiple layers of fostering understanding and approval.
- Recognize that different group sizes and compositions require different approaches.
- Build a “container” for equity-focused change to happen, one that minimizes harm by providing structures and supports for equity work while still fostering space for authentic reflection and engagement that leads to hard conversations and transformative change.
- Hold the big picture for why your organization is doing the challenging work of building capacity to advance racial equity; overcoming challenges can be bolstered by seeing this work as mission-critical.





# Conclusion

**A**s was the case in the first set of spotlights, the spotlights featured above emphasize the complexity of deepening organizational approaches to centering equity—and the significant degree to which each organization’s journey is shaped by contextually-driven factors. The accounts show different starting points, priorities, and approaches—all taking into account the unique circumstances of each organization’s staffing, culture, structure and readiness for change. They also underscore the long-term and iterative nature of this work, and the value of sustained and layered organizational commitment over a period of years to propel a level of forward momentum and transformation to which many are striving.



In the coming months, beyond these two sets of organizational spotlights, SPR and Eternal Knot Evaluation will also be developing a series of learning papers focused on important themes that emerged over the course of their interviews with over 40 organizations who shared their racial equity stories. While we recognize that every organization’s journey will be different, it is our hope that by reading these spotlights and learning papers, organizations may find some points of resonance and that they will not only feel supported in their efforts, but also feel encouraged and equipped with new ideas and perspectives that can fortify organizational approaches and sustainability within this long-term movement for racial justice.





# The Underlying Framework for this Series

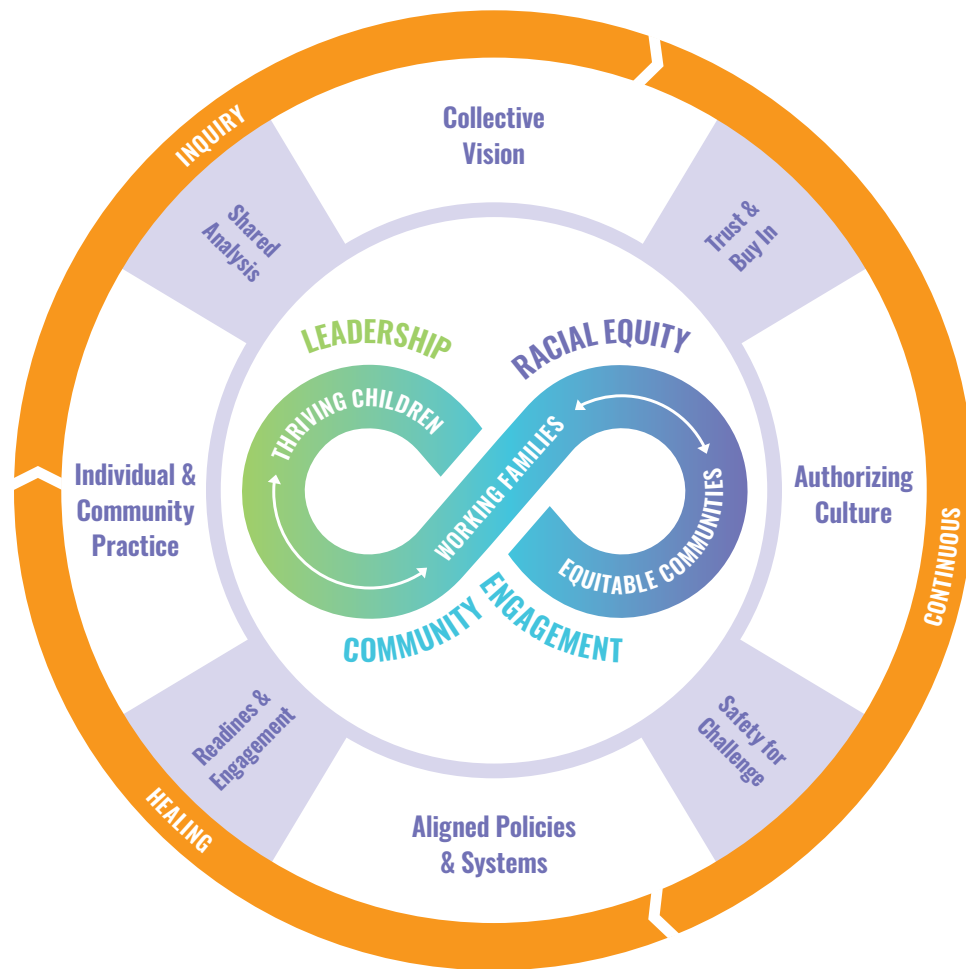
A wealth of published organizational development and change literature exists that summarizes common elements necessary for the sustainable implementation of change. The WKKF Institutional Framework provides additional nuance that must be taken into consideration when fostering institutional contexts for equity-focused, values-based change. While there is comparatively less guidance published in this area, there is a growing base of collective learning being generated from equity-focused foundations and their partners who are actively reflecting on lessons learned from their own journeys. The stories of organizations highlighted in the following spotlights add to our collective learning, as each has embarked on racial equity journeys that have facets that embody different aspects of this framework over the course of their own pursuits toward centering racial equity, diversity and inclusion within their respective organizations.

## The W.K. Kellogg Foundation's Institutional Support Framework

The heart of WKKF's Institutional Framework (framework) shown below is the foundation's priorities of—thriving children, working families and equitable communities—surrounded by its three intersecting DNA strands that are embedded across all of the foundation's work: racial equity, community engagement and leadership. However, the core elements of the framework are reinforced in the literature as key supports to centering equity-focused missions more broadly.

As described in a full paper ([linked here](#)) there are four core elements connected by separate “facilitators” that are important enablers for implementation of each of the elements. The four elements include:

- **Collective vision**, or the degree to which shared understanding exists such that staff can understand, personally and professionally align with, and embrace the organization's core equity values.
- An **authorizing culture** comprised of visible and engaged leadership, dedicated resources,



and a clear sense of expectations and accountability such that staff can step forward as equity-focused leaders with confidence they are doing the core work of the organization.

- **Aligned policies and systems** that integrate an organization’s core values around equity, eliminate unintentional bias and ensure that day-to-day operations truly “walk the talk.”
- Finally, attending to **individual and community practice** that recognizes the personal journey within the organizational journey, and allows for exploration of beliefs about, histories of and experiences with race, racism and racial equity—both individually and in community with other staff or with the communities they serve or represent.

Recognizing that these elements are not static or standalone, each is connected by four facilitators that must be activated and attended to when centering core values. Depicted in the graphic as “spokes” that help to facilitate movement in a wheel of change, these are highlighted separately not only because of the complexity involved in meaningfully implementing these facilitators, but also the potentially detrimental implications of *not* addressing them. An organization cannot arrive at a collective vision without a shared equity analysis, which must be predicated by investments in supporting readiness and engagement on individual journeys. An authorizing culture requires organization-wide trust and buy-in, and effective equity-centered





policies and systems require a culture where there is the freedom to ask hard questions and challenge the status quo, and that ultimately holds the organization accountable to meaningfully align with its core values.

Importantly, this framework is also encircled by a continual process of *inquiry, continuous learning* and *healing*. The outer band is intended to reinforce the dynamic nature of institutional support, recognizing that all organizations, but especially social change

foundations, are continuously learning from community wisdom and changing in response to an always evolving context. The specific concepts captured in the outer band are not only an embodiment of WKKF's long-term commitment to reflection and learning, but also reinforce the foundation's core belief that any meaningful change must simultaneously attend to healing and restoring to wholeness, to productively move forward anew.





**Spotlight Series** ▶▶



# Organizational Journeys in Centering Racial Equity *PART TWO*



B R O U G H T   T O   Y O U   B Y   T H E   W . K .   K E L L O G G   F O U N D A T I O N