In this series on race equity, APHSA shares stories from state and local human services leaders about their work embedding a race equity lens into their policies. As part of APHSA’s Third Thursday virtual learning series for May, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) and a representative from the Government Alliance on Racial Equity (GARE) gave a presentation entitled Building Field Capacity: Institutionalizing and Operationalizing A Racial Equity Practice. The presentation included several speakers from CDSS, including Department Director Kim Johnson; Office of Equity Director Marcela Ruiz; and Civil Rights, Accessibility, and Racial Equity (CARE) Office Chief Maureen Keffner. The CDSS team shared their experience as a participant in GARE and how it has guided their strategy and understanding in centering their mission in equity, creating new resources to support the work and their staff, and applying an equity lens to policy and budget decisions.

Participation with GARE

GARE, a national network of local and state governments working to achieve racial equity and advance opportunities for all, has worked with hundreds of jurisdictions across the country. Jessica Buendia from the California Strategic Growth Council, which works as the state sponsor of the Capital Collaborative on Race & Equity and the state-level GARE work, joined the webinar to discuss the framework they developed for government action toward racial equity. She spoke about the collaboration, across 18 participating agencies in California, which is implementing race equity into departments ranging from social services, to climate, to transportation, and more. The California Strategic Growth Council has worked for the past 10 years on the Health in All Policies task force, which was brought together to embed health equity and sustainability throughout all government, and it has continued to build on these experiences with GARE’s Race Equity Approach. The Council’s approach has three main components:

1. Normalizing the conversation around race and its need for urgency and prioritization
2. Organizing to build internal capacity and partnership across programs and sectors
3. Operationalizing these race equity tools to then embed them into practices and utilize data to inform strategies and drive results

One of the major keys to success of California’s Strategic Growth Council is that it consists of the highest level of leadership in state government, including six cabinet secretaries, three government appointees, and the Director of the Office of Planning and Research. The Strategic Growth Council is now working with teams within departments to develop race equity action plans, helping with messaging and supporting the overall direction of the work so that program participants hear a clear message that this is a priority at the highest level of government. The council also created a racial equity resolution that includes the following priorities:

- Integrating racial equity into their own agency operations and into Council leadership, operations, programs, policies, and practices
- Identifying and implementing concrete and measurable actions to achieve racial equity and to report on the progress to the Council as a whole, as that of each member agency
- Working with State Boards, Departments, and Offices to align and advance the Council’s commitment to race equity
- Using a minimum of two public Council meetings as a forum to share racial equity actions, milestones, and best practices, and to actively engage communities and stakeholders to gather public input on the topics

**Interested in learning more?** Visit APHSA’s Call to Action page ([http://bit.ly/APHSA_Action](http://bit.ly/APHSA_Action)) for information and resources developed by other human services agencies to advance their race equity work. This page will continue expanding as we share more voices through our race equity series.

**Work Within the Department**

The CDSS’s mission is “to serve, aid, and protect children, families, seniors,
and adults,” and because of this mission and the programs that the department oversees—including child welfare, safety net programs like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, housing and homelessness services, child care, immigrant integration, tribes, disaster response, and more—the department is uniquely positioned to look at race equity. The department knows that they must look at race equity by understanding the history of the programs they administer and whom they were originally designed to serve, and how that population has changed over time. They must also acknowledge the inherent power dynamic between who is served, how they are served, and what level of service they receive. To truly disrupt poverty and inequities, they must be intentional in their actions going forward.

In order to truly and comprehensively look at equity, the department knew they must look at not only their external programs, but also the sentiments of their staff and internal culture. Their Workforce Diversity and Inclusion Efforts began prior to 2016, but they joined GARE and its Race Equity Working Group in 2018 and began department-wide trainings, including antibias trainings in January 2021. They are now moving forward to include LGBTQ+ and disability trainings as well. The CDSS is also currently analyzing results from a department-wide survey, for which they received more than 50 percent completion, about internal racial equity and workplace culture that Race Forward and GARE helped them issue in February 2021. They also continue to hire new positions with explicit focuses in diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The CDSS looks at equity as both an outcome, which they define as “when your background and identity no longer determine your socioeconomic outcomes” and a process, saying “we apply equity when those most impacted by structural inequity are meaningfully involved in the creation and implementation of the institutional policies and practices that impact their lives.” There must be meaningful engagement and empowerment of communities that are most impacted by poverty and inequities, and in order to create transformative change people must be both consulted and collaborated with to make sure that materials and services are truly accessible. While California acknowledges that they are still at the beginning of their journey, they have learned that it is essential to build organizational capacity, communicate and act with urgency, and partner with others both within their own organization and with peers and colleagues doing similar work across the country.

To learn more about this effort, please visit http://sgc.ca.gov/programs/hiap/racial-equity or reach out to the Director of the Office of Equity at California Department of Social Services, Marcela Ruiz, at marcela.ruiz@dss.ca.gov.

Kim Johnson is the Director of the California Department of Social Services.

Marcela Ruiz is the Director of the Office of Equity at the California Department of Social Services where she works with the Office of Tribal Affairs, Immigrant Integration Branch, Civil Rights, Equal Employment Opportunity, Language Services, and Accessibility teams to improve access and outcomes for historically excluded populations.

Maureen Keffer is the Chief of the Civil Rights, Accessibility, and Racial Equity (CARE) Office at the California Department of Social Services.