



In this new interview series on race equity, APHSA shares stories from state and local human services leaders who are leading the way as they embed a race equity lens into their policies, programs, and organizational culture. This issue focuses on the extraordinary work underway in Alexandria, VA. Kate Garvey, Director of the Department of Community and Human Services (DCHS) for the City of Alexandria, has fostered a culture of race equity in human services, and shares some of her insights for our readers.

It's clear that you and your organization have made a commitment and are doing the hard work necessary to build a culture of equity in human services. What drove you to start this journey?

Garvey: Our department is given the privilege every day to enter the lives of individuals and families, typically when they are in significant distress. Our actions impact their lives in the most profound ways—making decisions about whether or not they will receive financial assistance, if their children will remain with them, or if they will receive treatment. This privilege and our roles as public servants call us to hold ourselves to the highest standards. Inequity and racism operationalized in our work means that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) face disparate treatment, disproportionate contact, and much worse outcomes. We must admit the power we wield in people's lives, and when racism drives or is even just present in our dealings, people will suffer, and that makes us culpable for that suffering. When we recognize and address our biases and have systems of accountability to assure that our decisions and services reflect equitable practices, we believe better outcomes will be achieved; it is our obligation to drive to that end.

In addition, I must acknowledge a single staff member, Allyson Coleman, who is our Organizational Development and Equity Chief, who for years was forging this path, oftentimes on her

own. Her urging and willingness to keep pushing forward were integral to our starting and staying in this journey.

You've made an intentional effort to be inclusive of voices at all levels within your organization to guide your equity work. What strategies have been successful in creating a safe space where people of different backgrounds and perspectives are equipped with the right tools to come together to support this work?

Garvey: We have been partnering with the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE) (<https://www.racialequityalliance.org/about/>) in this effort and they recommend the establishment of Racial Equity Core Teams to lead the work. The DCHS Racial Equity Core Team (RECT) is a group of 26 employees representing programs across our department, in both front-line and supervisory positions, comprised of people with diverse backgrounds, experiences, races, and ethnicities. We used an application process to ensure that we were drawing in individuals who were committed to the work, and to make clear this a critical endeavor that would take time and investment. Members have gone through training together focused on the systems/macro view—GARE's "Advancing Racial Equity: The Role of Government" and "Using a Racial Equity Tool"—as well as the cultural and individual vantage point—Service Never Sleep's "White Supremacy 101," "Bias and

Microaggressions," and "Allyship" along with other key development experiences. In addition, the managers and supervisors of the department have participated in these trainings to assure that we are moving toward shared language, understanding, and expectations. The functioning and the leadership of RECT demonstrates for the organization what is possible as people with different backgrounds and perspectives come together to drive toward change.

Your work in Alexandria has been a multiyear process and continues to evolve. What does it take to sustain momentum for a long-term vision where race equity is a core value of your agency's work? What accountability mechanisms do you put in place to fulfill those objectives?

Garvey: I think the most essential element is that you must maintain both a sense of urgency and an understanding that this is forever work. The urgency must drive toward action and your staff and partners need to see progress to have faith in the process and to continue to be engaged. As an organization, you must invest your resources (people, time, and funding) to continue to move the ball forward. The forever work shows up throughout the structure and functioning of the organization: Human Resources—hiring, promotions, discipline, training, policies and procedures, program design, service delivery, oversight, and outcomes.

The accountability mechanisms are both concrete—measuring whether or not you are achieving the outcomes you expect—and environmental—what your staff, clients, and partners tell you about their experiences, and how they are faring in your system. Both call you to account and expose where progress is not being made.

Frankly, I have struggled to maintain credibility about this work with our staff during the pandemic. While we have focused efforts to respond to the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on BIPOC residents and have been successful in that work, we have stalled in some of our internal efforts. It speaks to the necessity of having enough resources and being able to continue pressing on even when emergencies hit. Communicating consistently is also critical. We are often so focused on the actions before us that we may not be making sure that everyone is aware of the efforts that are being made. Taking stock and showing our progress should be built into any long-term strategies. While that does not mean you should claim victory when everyone completes a training, it does mean that you should share the accomplishment and how it feeds into your ability to move closer to your goals.

How have you used data to inform your priorities for advancing racial equity? How are you using the data to monitor your progress?

Garvey: Our organization is committed to making data-driven decisions across our department, which cannot be done without centering racial equity. We have used data to identify how historically marginalized communities are currently being affected by inequities in our city, as well as disproportionality in how many members of those same communities of color are accessing our programs and services. In the spirit of equity, we plan to further utilize the data to identify outcomes that will inform how we assess and implement our internal and external policies, practices, and procedures.

In addition, our department has partnered with the city's Office of

Performance and Accountability to work on a project that will further help identify racial disparities within our programs and services. The project involves using preselected program-level indicators, or quantitative metrics, to measure the disparities in BIPOC clientele accessing services as compared to the total city population.

As a way to model the project process, homelessness data were used from the city's Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). Several indicators comparing BIPOC and White clients were measured, including the total number served in emergency shelters for the previous year, the average length of time clients remained in emergency shelters, and how many clients exited those programs to permanent solutions, to name a few.

With achieving racial equity at its core, the goal of this project is to further help us identify where more of our department's discussions, work, and resources need to be applied to create better outcomes for communities that are historically marginalized in the City of Alexandria.

What is something you are particularly proud of that your team has accomplished through its work to advance equity?

Garvey: I am so proud of the ongoing and truly responsive work of members of the RECT in leading "Holding Space" sessions for BIPOC staff who are dealing with the trauma brought on by the repeated acts of racial hatred and violence throughout this year. The members of RECT have led these sessions, creating safe spaces for racial healing and self-care for BIPOC staff. With so many horrendous events happening throughout the year, this team kept coming back to make a place for people to grieve, to be angry, and to just be. The amount of trauma that people are suffering is profound and these efforts were critical to responding to that trauma.

I am also proud that our Leadership Team, in the face of these repeated horrific events, made a statement acknowledging the racism that exists in our organization and committed to eliminating inequities stemming

from racism that negatively affect our workforce, our clients, and our community. We recognized that we must work to eliminate racism's impact on our clients and to ensure that we are not complicit in creating, perpetuating, or upholding this system. Toward that end, we committed to the following areas of action in partnership with the Racial Equity Core Team:

- Developing methods for reporting, responding, and reaching resolution to acts of racism
- Reviewing policies and procedures through a racial equity lens, informed by data analysis
- Ensuring racial equity in hiring, promotional, performance, and disciplinary actions
- Training and professional development of all DCHS staff
- Offering caucusing and safe spaces for all employees

For your peers in other human services agencies who are at an earlier stage in their own journey, what words of advice can you share with them?

Garvey: I would stress that it is critical to listen and to learn, to reach out to those who know how to do this work, and most important, to own what is really happening in your organization. Call it out for what it is and commit to changing it and understand that you cannot and will not do it on your own. Your leadership and accountability are critical, but you need everyone to move the work forward. It is likely that members of your staff are way ahead of you in their thinking, their knowledge, and their readiness. Let them lead you. Finally, I would say prepare to face very painful truths about your organization and to feel driven to make change ... and don't look back.

Interested in learning more? Visit APHSA's Call to Action (https://aphsa.org/About/call_to_action.aspx) page for tools and documents developed by the City of Alexandria and other human services agencies to advance their race equity work. This page will continue expanding as we share more voices through our race equity interview series. 