

# Planning Phase: Designing an Initiative

When designing a new initiative, program leads should be clear on what they seek to achieve and how their work will address the issue identified in the exploratory phase of the initiative. Clearly defining an initiative's core framework—including its vision, mission, and goals—and explicitly outlining how it will address inequities will help program partners identify funding streams, develop inclusive steering committees, and structure the initiative to sustain its focus on equity. Intentionality in the planning phase can also build the infrastructure needed for initiatives to center equity for the long haul. Pivotal planning activities include bringing people with lived experience systems into early planning conversations, establishing formal partnerships and contracts with community-based organizations, and identifying and building capacity to collect metrics that reflect equity goals.

## Strategies to Consider

- **Tie the initiative to an existing commitment or strategy around racial equity** in your community or state. Cast your net broadly to include not only criminal justice partners, but also public health, housing, and other municipal or state agencies and community-based organizations that prioritize racial equity to align related efforts.
- **Bring people with lived experience of the criminal justice and behavioral health systems into the planning process from the start** to ensure that their perspectives are centered in program design. Pay them for their time. Consider how to ensure traditional stakeholders are willing and able to work in authentic, sustained collaboration with community experts.
- **Create a steering committee, workgroup, or advisory group** that includes diverse voices from impacted communities and the trusted organizations that serve them. This group should have an explicit charge to guide and oversee work toward racial equity goals, ensuring that the program design and implementation are reflective of community perspectives, needs, and priorities.

## Questions to Ask Yourself

- What strategies could lead to more equitable outcomes at the key decision points identified in the exploratory phase?
- Do you have an elected champion, as well as community and staff champions? Do they have a shared understanding of racial equity and the racial equity goals of the initiative?
- How can the people most adversely affected by the issue be actively involved in solving it over the long term? Are people affected by the initiative at the table for the planning phase? How can you include and center voices that are often excluded from the conversation?
- How do the data metrics you collect align or not align with the equity goals of the initiative?
- What supports or accountability systems can be built into routine practices to prioritize equity?
- How are you prioritizing transparency and inclusivity when developing policies and practices, and what process is in place to provide feedback to those who assisted with development?
- What are your ideas or strategies to enhance program recruitment, enrollment, or engagement of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) populations the initiative intends to serve?

- **Build in strategies for ongoing, repeated community engagement**, including mechanisms for accountability, transparency, and a feedback loop with the community. Recognize that these strategies may need to shift over time as new issues and challenges arise.
- **Ensure regular cultural competency/humility and race equity training is a priority** for internal teams, key stakeholders, and community members. Offer recurrent (rather than one-off) training and professional development opportunities to educate and raise awareness of issues impacting BIPOC individuals and the historical context that contributes to existing challenges and opportunities.
- **Use the right data to measure your progress of decreasing racial disparities and increasing equity**. Identify metrics that align with the target issue identified in the exploratory phase and support partners in reliable data collection (e.g., providing sufficient training, staffing, and technology solutions). Take care to include community-defined metrics of success (e.g., changed lives) rather than a sole focus on moving the needle on disparity measures. Initiative leads should also take time to learn about Tribal data sovereignty and meaningfully partner with Tribal leaders on the categorization, use, and interpretation of data.<sup>1</sup>
- **Invest in relationship building**. Trust is key! Forging relationships in communities with historic mistrust in justice and health systems won't happen overnight and often requires dedicated staff time and funding. Consider hiring community members to act as liaisons to build trust with the population of focus and enhance community engagement.

## Community Spotlight — Cook County, Illinois

Since joining the Safety and Justice Challenge (SJC) in 2017, Cook County has centered community engagement in their efforts to address the main drivers of the local jail population and reduce systemic inequities for historically marginalized communities such as BIPOC individuals, LGBTQ people, and people with disabilities. Cook County made a coordinated effort to incorporate community voices into the planning process in several ways:

1. Hiring a community engagement coordinator and six community liaison workers with lived experience in the justice system to enhance community coordination efforts;
2. Regularly convening a committee of diverse community stakeholders to ensure that efforts are in line with community needs;
3. Implementing Everyday Democracy's Dialogue to Change<sup>2</sup> model to engage with the communities most impacted by the justice system;
4. Increasing community awareness of SJC and county reform efforts by disseminating information through community engagement coordinators and liaison workers; and
5. Seeking regular input from community members to shape Cook County's strategies to reduce the jail population and improve their justice system's effectiveness and fairness.<sup>3</sup>

From 2020 to 2021, Cook County connected with 264 community members over the course of 31 small group dialogue sessions held throughout the county. These sessions gave community members a place to share their ideas and perspectives on working with justice stakeholders to support systemic change in the local justice system.<sup>4</sup> Participants included parents, students, educators, county workers, ministers, city staff, and people with lived experience of the justice system. These engagement efforts culminated in a community-wide summit that brought community members and local leaders together to discuss the themes that emerged from the dialogue sessions. Discussion during this summit emphasized the importance

1. Risé Haneberg and Kate Reed, *Applying the Stepping Up Framework to Advance Racial Equity* (New York: The Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2023), <https://csgjusticecenter.org/publications/applying-the-stepping-up-framework-to-advance-racial-equity/>.

2. "Dialogue To Change," Everyday Democracy, accessed April 31, 2023, <https://everyday-democracy.org/dialogue/>.

3. Kim Davis-Ambrose and Dayna Behrens, *Cook County Safety and Justice Challenge Initiative: Community Engagement 2020-2021 Activity Report* (Chicago: Cook County Office of the President, 2021).

4. Ibid.

of ongoing engagement and continued conversations between officials and people most impacted by the system. Cook County is continuing efforts to engage with the community and working toward paying people who have been in the justice system for their participation in these ongoing efforts.<sup>5</sup> The county has since created **countywide equity-focused committees**, such as the Cook County SJC Racial Equity Cohort Fellowship and the Cook County Equity Fund Taskforce, both of which **bring voices of the community, partner agencies, and lived experience into the decision-making process.**<sup>6</sup>

## Key Resources from across the SJC Network

- [Community Engagement Strategies to Advance Justice Reform](#), Urban Institute
- [Equity through Action: A Tool to Action Plan through an Equity Lens](#), Justice System Partners

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5. "Focusing on Racial Equity in The Justice System," Safety & Justice Challenge, accessed April 8, 2023, <https://safetyandjusticechallenge.org/blog/focusing-on-racial-equity-in-the-justice-system/>.

6. Cook County Equity Fund Taskforce, *2021 Cook County Equity Fund Report* (Chicago: Cook County Office of the President, 2022).



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