

Implementation Phase: Adapting Initiatives to Advance Equity

Equitable implementation works to address cultural, systemic, and structural norms that privilege some groups over others. For criminal justice-behavioral health initiatives, equitable implementation involves reviewing key data points and assessing the initiative for racial equity in both process and outcomes on an ongoing basis. As many Safety and Justice Challenge (SJC) initiatives observed in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, communities may find that their interventions work to achieve one goal (in this case, reducing jail populations) but do not advance another (reducing racial disparities). Alternatively, some programs may have begun without an explicit racial equity focus but recognize a need for one as disparities persist or emerge. And other initiatives may have started strongly with a commitment to equity, but a shifting political climate, leadership and staffing changes, or other factors can cause momentum to stall. Addressing persistent inequities in your initiative can be challenging and requires humility and flexibility to adjust strategies as needed. The work of racial equity is slow, rarely linear, and often challenging, so most initiatives will encounter stops and starts, need to amend plans and goals, or find themselves shifting strategies. Communities in it for the long haul must celebrate small wins while working steadfastly towards long-term racial equity goals.

Strategies to Consider

- **Assess the initiative's racial equity impact** and recommend course corrections. Several **racial equity tools** that can be used at any point in an initiative's lifecycle are available for public use. The Government Alliance on Race and Equity developed a racial equity toolkit specifically for government staff, elected officials, and other community-based organizations that is customizable for local needs.¹ Other communities have created their own racial equity tools.² Many communities engage an **external evaluator** to lead this work with an objective lens.
- **Schedule regular informal check-ins to assess racial equity in process and outcomes.** Intentionally set aside time to bring an equity lens to quality assurance across the program. Consider posing questions from this guide to cross-systems stakeholders at each checkpoint.

Questions to Ask Yourself

- Does the initiative produce, reproduce, or ignore racially inequitable outcomes?
- Are you able to learn what you need to know from the available data? Is there data demonstrating how specific initiative components affect populations by race and ethnicity? What data is still missing? How can it be obtained?
- How will the initiative's racial equity impact be evaluated and reported to the community? How will that impact be addressed, particularly in the event of any unintended consequences?
- If sustained or worsened inequities are identified, how can the initiative tap into community expertise to help shape course corrections?
- What supports do practitioners need to reduce bias at various decision points?

1. Julie Nelson and Lisa Brooks, *Racial Equity Toolkit: An Opportunity to Operationalize Equity* (New York: The Local and Regional Government Alliance on Race and Equity, 2015), <https://www.racialequityalliance.org/viewdocument/racial-equity-toolkit-an-opportuni-2>.

2. Risé Haneberg and Kate Reed, *Applying the Stepping Up Framework to Advance Racial Equity* (New York: The Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2023), p. 11, <https://csgjusticecenter.org/publications/applying-the-stepping-up-framework-to-advance-racial-equity/>.

- Create opportunities for people with lived experience of the justice system—including program partners, participants, and steering committee members—to **provide meaningful feedback on the initiative**.
- **Employ humility and willingness to make changes** if strategies result in persistent or increasing disparities. It's never too late to employ strategies from the Exploratory and Planning phases.
- **Develop internal guidance and regular, repeated training** to increase consistency across key decision points (such as arrests, access to diversion, and sentencing).

Community Spotlight — Mecklenburg County, North Carolina

Mecklenburg County implemented many evidence-based practices that reduced its jail population by 11 percent from 2014 to 2017—the year the county joined SJC. While Mecklenburg had made substantive progress in their efforts to reduce the jail population, racial disparities persisted in their jail data. Data from 2019, for example, showed that people of color were still overrepresented in the jail population, with Black and Hispanic people making up 78 percent of the jail population while only making up approximately 46 percent of the local population.³

Mecklenburg County leaders have been working extensively to address continued disparities and ensure that positive outcomes are being realized equitably. The county partnered with the W. Haywood Burns Institute to identify racial disparities at key decision points of the criminal justice system.⁴ The county's Criminal Justice Services department also worked with the New York State Psychiatric Institute to **create a comprehensive online implicit bias training program** that is mandatory for Mecklenburg County criminal justice professionals.⁵

In 2021, Mecklenburg County's Criminal Justice Advisory Group (CJAG) established the Criminal Justice Community Engagement Task Group to elevate community voices and ensure that community members had meaningful ways to engage with the justice system and participate in the development of policy change.⁶ This group **comprises community members with diverse backgrounds and local justice system partners, meeting once a month** to serve as a liaison between the community and the justice system. Task group members work to help improve relationships between the community and the justice system, create a more equitable system, improve the quality of life of community members, and **provide recommendations to the CJAG**.⁷ In January 2023, the CJAG approved the task group's six-month plan focusing on supporting neighborhoods in identifying the gaps and resources needed to build an equitable Mecklenburg County through community empowerment.⁸

Key Resources from across the SJC Network

- **Measuring Progress: Declining Populations, Rising Disparities**, CUNY Institute for State and Local Governance
- **Racial Equity Toolkit: An Opportunity to Operationalize Equity**, The Local and Regional Government Alliance on Race and Equity

3. "Mecklenburg County, NC," Safety and Justice Challenge, accessed May 17, 2023, <https://safetyandjusticechallenge.org/our-network/mecklenburg-county-nc/>.

4. "Safety + Justice Challenge," Mecklenburg County Criminal Justice Services, accessed June 5, 2023, <https://cjs.mecknc.gov/Safety-Justice-Challenge>.

5. Ibid.

6. "Criminal Justice Community Engagement Task Group," Mecklenburg County Criminal Justice Services, accessed April 8, 2023, <https://cjs.mecknc.gov/Committees/Community-Engagement>.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

