

# Partnering with Federal Agencies to Advance Racial Equity

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# Introduction



***An equity agenda at this scale has never been attempted to date. We welcome the challenge, and we look forward to working more closely with you to deliver an America in which everyone can thrive.***

**Chiraag Bains**, Deputy Assistant to the President & Deputy Director of the Domestic Policy Council for Racial Justice and Equity at the White House<sup>2</sup>

January 2022 marked the one-year anniversary of [Executive Order 13985](#), the Biden-Harris Administration's landmark order on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government, which has resulted in the development of racial equity action plans across 90 federal agencies.<sup>1</sup> The issuance of the executive order last year signaled a promising shift in the federal government's understanding of its power to realize the aspirations of racial equity and to transform governing systems and structures to become antiracist and equitable. With the order, the administration also affirmed that the federal government has a role, and indeed an imperative, in designing a nation that works for all.

To meet this moment and assist federal agencies in realizing their racial equity aspirations, PolicyLink and Race Forward partnered to bring their years of experience to bear on this new and growing federal work. Building from decades of work with state and local governments to achieve racial equity through the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE), Race Forward brought its extensive set of racial equity assessment, planning, and implementation tools to support federal agencies in their quest to advance institutional change strategies in service of governing for racial equity. And building on its deep expertise in racial equity standard setting and partnering with federal agencies to design and implement equitable policies, PolicyLink brought a detailed racial equity framework, exemplified in [For Love of Country: A Path for the Federal Government to Advance Racial Equity](#), a report outlining clear actions agencies could consider to further embed racial equity into their work—both internally and externally. It also examines the various roles that agencies play and ways they might work to center racial equity in each of these capacities.

In turn, PolicyLink and Race Forward co-led a Racial Equity Governing Pilot Project with federal agencies in the fall and winter of 2021 and 2022. This report discusses critical elements of these partnership pilots and lessons to inform and support the longer term aspirations of the federal government to become actively antiracist. More specifically, this report describes the work that commenced in partnership with agency offices, considers observations and lessons learned along the way, and discusses efforts that must continue at the federal level to fully realize the intentions of the executive order and move this country toward a more racially just future.

# Pilot Partnerships: Bringing the Executive Order to Life



*In every department and in all aspects of what we do, we need to be intentional about infusing equity and racial justice. Every agency will place equity at the core of their public engagement, their policy design, and program delivery to ensure that government resources are reaching Americans of color and all marginalized communities—rural, urban, disabled, LGBTQ+, religious minorities, and so many others.*

Ambassador Susan Rice, Domestic Policy Advisor to the Biden-Harris Administration and Director of the Domestic Policy Council<sup>3</sup>

The executive order made clear that government has a critical role to play in the nation’s racial equity reckoning. Heads of agencies were required to work in partnership with the Director of the Office of Management and Budget to “study methods for assessing whether agency policies and actions create or exacerbate barriers to full and equal participation by all eligible individuals.”

- At the six-month mark of the executive order, a report was to be delivered to the President that describes any best practices that were identified in the study during this assessment period.
- At the one-year mark, heads of agencies were to submit an equity action plan for their specific agency that addressed any barriers to full and equal participation.

While these plans were being created, there was no prescribed blueprint for moving forward. Offices within agencies therefore had a unique opportunity to examine some of their own policies and practices through other exploratory methods.

In a spirit of co-learning, PolicyLink and Race Forward launched a pilot program designed with the expressed goal of collaboratively testing strategies to embed racial equity into the policies and practices of each agency. The team worked with almost a dozen agencies in the planning phase of the pilot, and then focused on the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for the implementation phase. Specifically, the pilot projects partnered with the leadership in the offices of Field Policy and Management as well as Recapitalization at HUD to assess the relative foundational efforts of the offices to address racial inequities in their respective policies and practices. This included assessing leadership and staff engagement in current equity efforts, potential for positive equity impact at scale, and current program shifts underway that were aimed at reducing disparities experienced by low-income communities of color.

With both action planning and learning components, the pilots created a structured space for staff to deepen their skills around understanding and applying equity tools to select programs and policies, as well as designing equity strategies and action plans for their work. Staff were engaged in both deep-dive work sessions as well as interactive learning sessions, so as to facilitate increased equity knowledge and application in ways that were actionable, pragmatic, and immediately tangible. As the pilots wrapped up, participants self-assessed that they were 4.3 times more likely to know how to determine performance measures related to racial equity.

Both pilot partnerships with the offices of Field Policy and Management and Recapitalization were intentionally co-designed with leadership and team members from each office, including dedicated planning time to align on vision and priorities for the work together to advance racial equity. To facilitate this, the design and the implementation of the pilots prioritized:

- **Understanding the current state of each office:** Developing a fact-based view of equity challenges using disaggregated quantitative data; stakeholder interviews from a wide range of impacted parties; as well as academic articles, media, literature reviews, and so forth.
- **Scoping the focus of the partnership:** Understanding an office's programs and related impacts on racial equity; key priorities of any past, current or desired racial equity work; and aligning with office leadership on an area of focus for the pilot.
- **Planning for robust participation of staff across each office:** Working with leadership to create a number of touchpoints across each office to ensure staff of a variety of identities, perspectives, roles, and tenure contributed to and benefited from work in the partnership.
- **Co-creating equity strategies:** Working with office subject-matter experts to support their development of strategies for a racial equity action plan.

The pilots pursued these priorities through regular strategic meetings with office leadership, weekly small group action-planning workshop sessions, and five educational “learning labs” for each agency office.<sup>4</sup>



*[The pilot] made me more aware about the work that needs to be done on a transformative level to improve racial equity.*

HUD staff person



*It was really helpful to have a focused conversation around racial equity and what to consider when performing a racial equity assessment.*

HUD staff person

## Racial Equity Learning Labs

Throughout our co-design process, both the Office of Field Policy and Management and the Office of Recapitalization expressed a desire and priority to build upon existing efforts of staff to normalize and expand organizational understanding of racial inequities across each office and the larger agency. In part due to actions of the previous administration, the majority of staff participating in the pilot had not been exposed to any equity trainings over the previous three years. As a result, learning labs were designed as a series to support staff in exploring a range of topics, from the role of the federal government in advancing racial equity, to the selection and application of racial equity tools, to creating racial equity action plans. Over 230 staff participated in these labs, representing a broad spectrum of pre-existing familiarity with systemic racism and the role of government in addressing and reversing its impact.

While the labs presented foundational concepts and tools, a key element of the labs' success was providing opportunities to share office-specific examples of how those concepts and tools apply within the context of each office, enabling HUD staff to start to see how the trainings could be incorporated into their ways of working. Building on foundational equity concepts, subsequent trainings introduced a variety of equity tools, equity assessments, and equity action plan templates. The templates were sourced from dozens of examples compiled from local and state governments across the country in the GARE network that have led racial equity action planning in their jurisdictions. One staffer noted that the learning labs fostered a sense of increased ability to be creative in developing ideas for embedding racial equity into their work: “[Learning labs] showed how we can develop new habits—new ways of thinking about problems and solutions.”

After completing trainings about the application of racial equity tools and using a results-based framework, staff indicated they were 4.5 times more confident in knowing which questions to ask to determine how a particular program or policy may, or may not, advance racial equity than they were before the trainings. In the Office of Recapitalization, 94 percent of staff who participated in the learning labs indicated they would become more active in advancing equity within their work if they had more training.



***This training provided some concrete approaches that can be applied to our work and it was much appreciated!***

HUD staff person

## Action-Planning Small Groups

To help bring the application of concepts and tools offered in the learning labs to life, small groups were also convened on a parallel timeframe to focus on strategies to embed racial equity into projects and the actual work of each office. Opportunities to apply equity concepts and tools that were reviewed in the labs were critical to the process of ensuring that the collaboration between the offices, PolicyLink, and Race Forward would pivot to the implementation of equity efforts. These deep dives offered space for smaller teams to further examine and address some of the stark disparities in well-being experienced by low-income people and frontline communities of color interacting with HUD initiatives and offices by focusing on specific projects, policies, and programs that they immediately influence.

## The Office of Field Policy and Management at HUD

Within the Office of Field Policy and Management, staff from the Eviction Prevention Initiative team identified the development of guidance for providing holistic support to renters of color facing eviction as a critical racial equity priority in response to the disproportionate burdens made evident in root cause analyses. This was particularly pressing due to the end of the federal eviction moratorium in August 2021. Even before the pandemic, Black, Latinx, Native American, and other renters of color were more housing insecure than white people and those behind on rent are overwhelmingly low-income households who experienced job and income losses during the pandemic. As of October 2021, only 32 percent of the \$32.5 billion in emergency rental assistance had been distributed nationwide through state and local emergency rental assistance programs, and many states with a high concentration of renters of color behind on rent also were experiencing low rates of assistance distribution.<sup>5</sup>

Drawing from their experience as staff on the ground in communities where renters of color face a multitude of crises in parallel with eviction threat, the Eviction Prevention Initiative charter team developed guidance and resources for field office staff as they support renters at risk of eviction, who may simultaneously be facing other critical shortfalls (e.g., urgent needs for legal assistance, for protection from physical threats of violence, for access to free health care). Staff initiated proactive racial equity-oriented programmatic updates, resulting in guidance that will be shared with Field Policy and Management field staff nationwide across

65 regional and field offices. This pilot project with the Eviction Prevention Initiative team has the potential to assist the over six million households with rent debt—of which a disproportionate share, over 50 percent, are households of color. Its impact represents a targeted universalism approach, whereby a solution is crafted benefiting all by centering those most impacted by structural harms.



***The Federal Government must recognize and acknowledge its role in systematically declining to invest in communities of color and preventing residents of those communities from accessing the same services and resources as their white counterparts.***

President Joe Biden<sup>6</sup>

## The Office of Recapitalization at HUD

The Office of Recapitalization staff focused on how to rethink their underwriting role in the Rental Assistance Demonstration for public housing—a program that provides local public housing authorities with an option to privatize management of public housing and often leads to loss of housing for Black and Brown communities. Staff from this office focused on the ability to approve or deny applications for Rental Assistance Demonstration conversion (privatization) submitted by public housing authorities. Black Americans are overrepresented in public housing by a rate of over 3 times, Latinx Americans are overrepresented in public housing by a rate of over 1.4 times. Because of this overrepresentation, communities of color may be disproportionately impacted by Rental Assistance Demonstration conversions. Reimagining how the Office of Recapitalization conducts underwriting or compliance functions was one way that HUD staff saw they could potentially improve the experiences and outcomes of public housing residents of color.

In weekly sessions, the group reimagined the underwriting process not only as a review of the financial soundness of a proposed conversion transaction, but also as a potential federal checkpoint on whether public housing authorities are meaningfully engaging residents and listening to their perspectives related to the decision of whether or not to convert from public housing to Rental Assistance Demonstration housing. Through these sessions, staff prioritized a set of actions that were focused on potential interventions aimed at supporting a more equitable resident engagement process in public housing conversions. Staff also gained an understanding of the potential to insert a federal review of questions related to racial equity, generally reserved for local and state offices, into the underwriting processes. Developing these new practices has the potential to prioritize the participation of over 56,000 households in critical housing decisions that impact them directly.



***It felt new and daunting but going over each step made me think now that this is something we can do/should do when we develop our [equity] strategies.***

HUD staff person

## Early Signs of Impact

Ultimately, both the action planning and learning components of the pilots were aimed toward supporting agency staff in interrogating the opportunities to embed elements of racial equity immediately into their program implementation and policy design. Both components sought to challenge and support staff to see how advancing racial equity is a critical responsibility shared by all federal employees—and a responsibility that should be exercised diligently, and daily.

Overall, participants noted a 3.8 times improvement in their ability to develop a racial equity action plan, and 1.3-2 times improvement in understanding of core equity concepts (relative to baseline collected before trainings). Even more essential, they noted a 4.3 times improvement in their ability to determine performance measures related to racial equity. At the end of the pilots, 86 percent of participants had a better understanding of tools needed to effectively implement a racial equity action plan, compared to just 6 percent at the start of the pilots.

# Pilot Partnerships: Observations and Considerations for Long-Term Racial Equity Action Planning within Federal Agencies

The first set of pilots offered invaluable lessons about what might be required to embed equity into select programs within the federal government as well as encouraged agencies and offices to create bold racial equity plans that lead to lasting results.

- **The work of embedding racial equity into and across federal agency offices will take time and require sustained guidance and capability building, strategy, operations, and training.** The opening created by the executive order is unprecedented and should be celebrated. It represented an important starting point with a clear moral and historical imperative. Reorienting policy and practice across all agencies and offices to be actively antiracist will inevitably be nonlinear, adaptive work. Offices will need time, space, and extra capacity in order to tangibly and actively determine how they might be able to create racial equity action plans that are directly connected to existing goals. While the work of embedding racial equity may be an immediate priority for certain agencies like HUD, creating an authentically racially equitable federal government will require a sustained process of improving policy and practice.

Initiatives like For Love of Country and Race Forward's Federal Initiative for Racial Equity, with its subsequent publication [\*Advancing Racial Equity: A Framework for Federal Agencies\*](#), can be a bridge for agencies and offices unsure of where to begin but, ultimately, top agency leadership must instill and continuously reinforce a norm around advancing racial equity within their employee ranks, and throughout their tenure. Moreover, it is important to be clear-eyed that an executive order cannot do the entire work of reforming a large bureaucracy. Alongside deep commitments from leadership and staff, accompanying legislative efforts and judicial support of the results of all of the equity efforts are critical scaffolding that will protect racial equity gains made as a result of agency and office responses to the mandate of the executive order.



- **The executive order focuses on advancing holistic racially equitable policymaking and practice at the agency level—but existing racial equity efforts at the office level are plentiful, and should not be overlooked.** The existence of the executive order provided a necessary spark to engage in racial equity thinking in agencies throughout the federal government. While the equity action plans were being developed at the leadership level, there were simultaneously many complementary and sometimes intersecting equity opportunities at the office level. The kinds of program- and practice-based changes that federal offices were able to focus on in the pilot were likely to be led by career federal workers. Many of the workers had extensive experience and knowledge of the programs they were supporting and had the unique opportunity to identify improvements that could directly impact the program participants.
- **Agency offices are enthusiastic about the executive order’s explicit recognition that advancing racial equity is a role of the federal government.** Our discussions with agency and office leaders made clear that the executive order was a welcome mandate—in some cases providing political support to engage in racial equity efforts that Agency leaders and staffers had been hoping for over many years. Some pilot participants spoke of having worked in the federal government for decades, waiting for the moment when top leadership would make plain the fact that the federal government has always had a role and responsibility when it comes to advancing racial equity in the United States. The issuance of the executive order signifies a true watershed moment for the country, but also for tens of thousands of federal employees who have led efforts to embed racial equity in their work without a sweeping mandate. These staff want and need federal leaders, at all levels, to demonstrate leadership and buy-in for efforts to advance racial equity.

- **Agencies and offices may not share a universal understanding of how past federal actions have contributed to racialized outcomes in the United States.** Prior to the launch of these pilot partnerships, many offices—including the offices of Recapitalization and Field Policy and Management—had already begun convening internal committees, including working groups specifically focused on increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. While each office included highly dedicated staff taking up initiatives, staff across offices were not always equipped with the tools to know where to begin the work of embedding equity into practice. Office leaders and staffers came into the pilots with a range of prior personal and professional understanding of structural racism and how to pursue equitable change through policy and practice. Many participants also expressed that the culture of federal agency offices has at times been unwelcoming of discussions regarding race and racially disparate impacts of federal programs and practice.

The learning lab component of the For Love of Country and Race Forward pilot created a common starting point for participants to be in a group training module that provided space for them to consider how individual, institutional, and structural racism can operate in ways that are linked and reinforcing. Through this equity-centered education and training module, staff developed a baseline understanding of how to begin embedding racial equity into practice.

# Conclusion

PolicyLink and Race Forward have been honored to work closely with the Biden-Harris Administration to inform its executive order making equity and racial justice “the responsibility of the whole of our government.” As agencies embrace this historic commitment, there is still much work yet to be done to realize racial equity. PolicyLink and Race Forward commend members of the administration, agency leadership, and career agency staff for their commitment to these efforts and welcome continued partnership as we collectively build a more perfect multiracial democracy.

# Notes

1. The anniversary of Executive Order 13985 culminated in federal agencies' submitting to the Office of Management and Budget reports identifying barriers to racial equity that may be faced by communities of color as a result of Agency policies/programs/actions, as well as potential steps to address those barriers.
2. Racial Equity: "The Whole of Government Responsibility," a PolicyLink and Race Forward webinar, February 3, 2022, available at [https://www.policylink.org/webinars/whole-govt-responsibility\\_2-3-22](https://www.policylink.org/webinars/whole-govt-responsibility_2-3-22)
3. Joe Davidson, "Susan Rice Wants Every Federal Agency to Focus on Racial Equity," *Washington Post*, January 29, 2021. Available at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/rice-biden-federal-racial-equity/2021/01/28/a9c0a3be-61b2-11eb-ac8f-4ae05557196e\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/rice-biden-federal-racial-equity/2021/01/28/a9c0a3be-61b2-11eb-ac8f-4ae05557196e_story.html)
4. The curricula for the learning components were similar, but not identical, for the Office of Field Policy and Management and the Office of Recapitalization. Where needs differed based on the office's role or the roles of the staff participants, the learning labs were customized to fit context. One office participated in five labs, and the other participated in four labs.
5. Sarah Treuhaft, et al., "Rent Debt in America: Stabilizing Renters Is Key to Equitable Recovery," PolicyLink, September 16, 2021. Available at <https://nationalequityatlas.org/rent-debt-in-america>
6. Davidson, "Susan Rice Wants Every Federal Agency to Focus on Racial Equity."

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## Author Biographies

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**C. Zan Wildwood** is an equity practitioner with over 25 years' experience designing racial and health justice programs, policies, and practices in both the public and nonprofit sector. They have helped design offices of equity and racial equity action plans in local government, co-delivered multiday racial justice skill-building retreats for environmentalists from all over the country, and they co-founded the Sexual and Gender Minority Youth Resource Center and the Portland, Oregon chapter of Showing Up For Racial Justice.

**Carlton Eley** is Senior Director for Federal Strategies for Race Forward. He was the first urban planner hired by the Office of Environmental Justice at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and he managed a portfolio on equitable development. From 2015 to 2019, Carlton completed multiple projects that served to re-energize the American Planning Association's focus on advancing equity, including chairing the Social Equity Task Force. Carlton was named the 2021 Sojourner Truth Fellow for Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of Michigan.



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