



Harris County Equity Guidelines

BACKGROUND

From 2012 to 2016, the United States bore witness to a period marked by heightened racial tensions and unrest. Brutality against Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), inclusive of those who are mentally and or physically disabled and LGBTQ+, were personified in the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Freddie Gray, Rekia Boyd, and Kayden Clarke and sparked a national conversation about historical inequities faced by marginalized communities. Against this backdrop, Milwaukee County became the first county in the nation to declare racism as a public health crisis and was soon joined by jurisdictions across the United States.ⁱ

However, it was the public death of George Floyd, the following year, that catapulted issues of racial inequity back into public consciousness. On June 30, 2020, Commissioners Court passed a resolution declaring racism *and* sexism as a public health crisis, recognizing that “racism has deep and harmful impacts that unfairly disadvantages Black, Indigenous, People of Color” and “harms every person in our society.”ⁱⁱ By addressing sexism alongside racism, the county is equipped to examine disparities at multiple layers such as the compounding effects of race and gender on wages and Minority- and/or Women-Owned Business Enterprise (MWBEE) contracts.

On March 30, 2021, Commissioners Court approved an equity framework that described “goals and strategies for advancing equity in the selection, development, implementation, and evaluation of projects” funded by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) 2021.ⁱⁱⁱ This framework promoted an equity-centered approach to “be embedded throughout the lifecycle of each ARPA-funded project.” In 2022, the Harris County Flood Control District, as an extension of 2018 Bond prioritization of equity, created the Prioritization Framework for Allocation of Funding from the Flood Resilience Trust. This framework’s purpose was to create a single project efficiency metric which placed a “greater emphasis on the number of people benefitted by a Bond ID and ensures that all Bond ID sizes and types are rated based on their effectiveness in mitigating flood risk.”^{iv}

In March 2024, the Office of County Administration hired its first Chief Equity Officer signaling a continued commitment to prioritizing equity. One month later, Commissioners Court adopted a county-wide strategic plan framework with the vision of a Harris County that is safe and fair, healthy, secure, resilient, thriving, and connected. By providing “community-centered services and infrastructure effectively, efficiently, and equitably,” Harris County is “creating opportunities for all to be safe, healthy, and economically secure.”^v

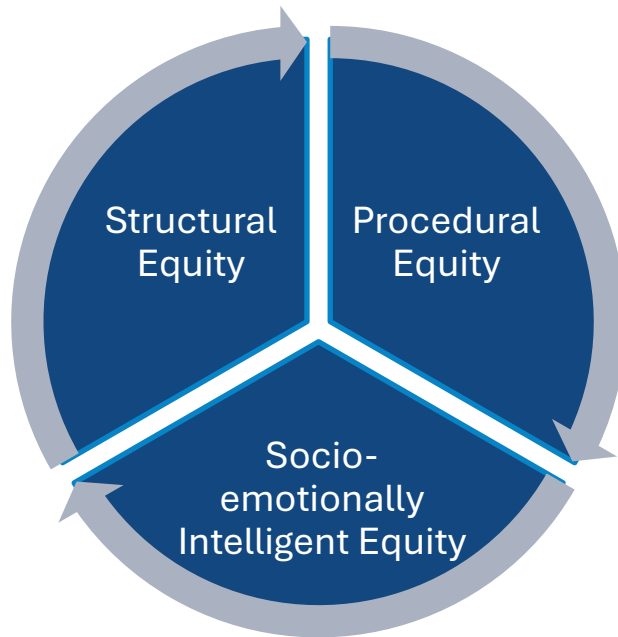
To fully act upon the goals and priority outcomes established by Commissioners Court, as outlined within the strategic plan, a common understanding of equity is required across county departments. The equity

guidelines encumbered in this document are intended to serve as a common definition to be implemented across the county. This document contains initial guidance and will continue to evolve as our capabilities and commitments develop further.

EQUITY DEFINITION AND GOALS

Equity is the actionable pursuit of recognizing that there are groups who have disproportionately benefited from inequities and others who have had the burden of solving the problems created by inequities. In other words, equity is the actionable commitment to significantly reduce the disparity in the distribution of benefits and the actionable commitment in reducing the burdens of aligning and embedding goals, objectives, and outcomes related to inclusivity and accessibility to the historically marginalized.^{vi} Equity is a conscious practice, grounded in research, and informed by data that actively engages and addresses the historical, cultural, and institutional dynamics and structures that privilege some and disadvantage others. The Harris County Equity Framework Model, as adapted from the Urban Sustainability Directors Network (2021), consists of three interrelated parts- structure, procedure, and socio-emotional intelligence.^{vii}

- **Structural Equity** is achieved when the historical, cultural, and institutional dynamics that have traditionally privileged some and disadvantaged others are not only recognized but actively addressed. This form of equity seeks to rectify underlying structures- frameworks, policies, and practices.
- **Procedural Equity** is the development, implementation, and equitable distribution of sustainable programs, standard operating procedures, and practices that create impact with communities, populations, and groups that are otherwise not considered.
- **Socio-emotionally Intelligent Equity** is the capacity to recognize, understand, address, and mitigate the impacts of interpersonal, individual, structural, systemic, and institutional racism and sexism on the wellbeing of others. Socio-emotionally intelligent equity is locational or context-specific and recognizes that assumed knowledge is detrimental to progress, thus promoting a uniform starting place.



We are committed to:

- **Building capacity** within county government by creating a shared language, understanding, and analysis of equity, and by developing tools and practices to support equity-centered solutions.
- **Measuring and understanding** key disparities within our priority outcomes.
- **Closing gaps** in our priority outcomes; positioning disproportionately impacted groups and neighborhoods for improved future outcomes.

EQUITY STRATEGIES

The equity strategies below can be adapted as needed to improve any investment decisions, program development and delivery, or ongoing county service offerings.

- Identify inequities, disaggregating historical data and outcomes by race, ethnicity, gender, and/or geography and other demographic variables.
- Analyze specific factors underlying inequities such as racial and gender discrimination, disparate policy impacts, and institutional and structural barriers, and adjust program design accordingly.
- Elevate the leadership and ownership of community representatives of disproportionately impacted groups throughout program or service development, delivery, and evaluation.
- Target resources and strategies to minimize incremental burdens or unintended consequences for groups experiencing disparities while maximizing their access to intended benefits and outcomes.
- Evaluate performance through defined metrics and provide opportunities for reflection, creating space for continual improvement.

- Benchmark performance on key outcomes and use of equity strategies to other jurisdictions; share best practices across jurisdictions.
- Publish transparent results via a publicly available website and other outlets, ensuring performance information is accessible and reaches disproportionately impacted groups.

EQUITY OPPORTUNITIES AND RESOURCES

County departments are encouraged to pursue these additional opportunities to embed equity in their work:

- Pursue ongoing equity training from the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE) or similar resources.
- Identify equity champions to spearhead changes in each department, embedding equity in the department's internal processes and external projects and services.
- Create an equity action team including external stakeholders to foster a sense of mutual understanding between Harris County and the communities we serve. For example, the City of Austin created such a team to ensure that community input helps define what equity means and how it is assessed in city policies and decisions. The team includes over 450 members from across a variety of different organizations and institutions in the city.
- Use an equity hiring tool in hiring processes and enable fairer candidate evaluations (support available from Human Resources).
- Create equity performance measures and setting associated targets to drive accountability and transparency in equity-related efforts.
- Create an equity assessment template for use in evaluating policy proposals and projects. The City of Madison, Wisconsin piloted both comprehensive (for broad impact policies) and fast-track (for smaller projects) versions of a Racial Equity and Social Justice Tool designed to ensure equity is built into the development of policies, programs, and budgets as early as possible, rather than as an afterthought.
- Analyze the impact of current services and potential decisions, use a burden and/or benefit analysis to determine the equity outcomes of a given project. This might involve:
 - **Working with an impact evaluation organization:** Many academic institutions and research centers offer data and impact analysis which can demonstrate the ongoing effects or overall impacts of a given policy change. Proactively forming partnerships and/or using data sources to track equity impacts can help programs course-correct towards more equitable outcomes or provide information that can improve the design and development of future projects.
 - **Creating an accountability initiative:** For example, the City of Seattle created a Race and Social Justice Initiative that seeks to eliminate institutional racism and hold government responsible for when projects or policies fall short on equity standards.

Other useful resources include:

- [The Opportunity Atlas](#)
- [The Color of Wealth in the United States](#)
- [The Racial Equity Toolkit](#)
- [Building Equitable Organizations Toolkit](#)

- The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity
- The Government Alliance on Race and Equity
- Commissioners Court's Analyst's Office Assessment (now the Research and Analysis Division) of Racial and Gender Equity Impact Assessments
- The Harris County American Rescue Plan Act Equity Framework
- City of Madison Analysis Tools
- Seattle Racial Equity Toolkit
- The Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis Institute for Economic Equity
- King County Equity and Social Justice Strategic Plan
- ATLAS, Office of Management and Budget data platform

CHANGE LOG

Version	Effective Date	Description
1.0	11/09/2021	For Discussion at Commissioners Court
2.0	07/15/2024	Expanded Definition of Equity

Endnotes

ⁱ National Association of Counties (NACO). “Equitable Governance” (n.d.) Retrieved July 10, 2024, from <https://www.naco.org/program/equitable-governance>.

ⁱⁱ Harris County. “Harris County Commissioners Court June 30, 2020 Agenda” (June 2020) Retrieved July 10, 2024, from [Commissioners Court Agenda \(hctx.net\)](#).

ⁱⁱⁱ Harris County. “Harris County Commissioners Court March 30, 2021 Agenda” (June 2020) Retrieved July 10, 2024, from [Commissioners Court Agenda \(hctx.net\)](#)

^{iv} Harris County Flood Control District. (n.d.). Prioritization framework. Retrieved July 10, 2024, from <https://www.hcfdc.org/Activity/2018-Bond-Program/Prioritization-Framework>

^v Harris County. “Harris County Commissioners Court March 26, 2024 Agenda” (June 2020) Retrieved July 10, 2024, from [Commissioners Court Agenda \(hctx.net\)](#)

^{vi} Urban Sustainability Directors Network (USDN). “Equity and Buildings: A Practical Framework for Local Government Decision Makers” (June 2021). Retrieved July 10, 2024, from https://www.usdn.org/uploads/cms/documents/usdn_equity_and_buildings_framework_-_june_2021.pdf.

^{vii} Urban Sustainability Directors Network (USDN). “Equity and Buildings: A Practical Framework for Local Government Decision Makers” (June 2021). Retrieved July 10, 2024, from https://www.usdn.org/uploads/cms/documents/usdn_equity_and_buildings_framework_-_june_2021.pdf. p 16.