

SOCIAL EQUITY

TOOLBOX 

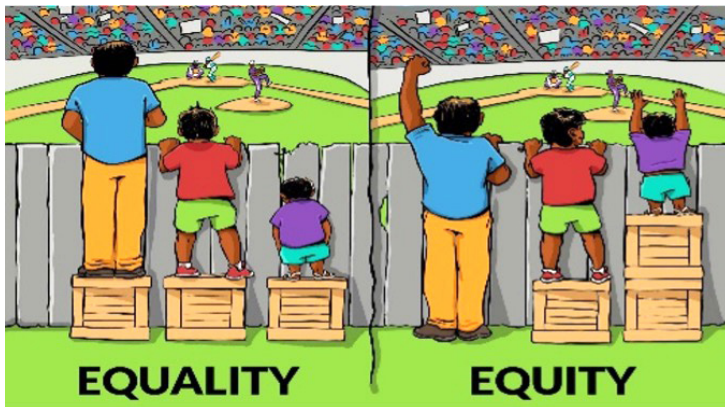


WHAT IS SOCIAL EQUITY AND WHY IT MATTERS TO PUBLIC WORKS

Social Equity is concerned with the fair, just, and equitable distribution of public services. Public works professionals manage the investment of hundreds of billions of dollars into community infrastructure every year. Communities rely on this infrastructure to support and protect quality of life and to provide access to schools, jobs, parks, and other amenities that allow residents to thrive. Public works also provides solid waste management, site and building permitting, beach and coastal management, and landscaping services. Residents benefit when these services and infrastructure investments are provided in an equitable manner.

EQUALITY VERSUS EQUITY

A core principle in the evaluation of the fairness of services is that equality is not equity. The complexity of our communities and the intricate nature of services provided by local government do not lend themselves to one-size-fits-all solutions. The diverse needs of the community must be understood, and solutions tailored to ensure equity in outcomes and opportunities for success.



ROADMAP OF POSSIBLE ACTIONS

Guiding Principles as a Starting Point

Review your organizational guiding principles – do your vision and mission statements and your organizational values include equity? If so, evaluate how these principles have been operationalized. If not, engage your organization in a dialogue to update. Your guiding principles are foundational and declare an intent for organizational action. If social equity is important, it needs to be expressly stated.

Evaluate Departmental Actions

Create a cross departmental group to conduct an evaluation and recommend actions. The success of this groups depends on the full support of the department's leadership and management teams. This group should be diverse and representative of the services and hierarchical levels of the organization. (Note: this group needs to be provided the freedom to ask tough questions and raise difficult issues.) Facilitation of this group by a professional who understands this issue is highly recommended. Engage community stakeholders to obtain input with a focus on outreach to all parts of your community. Evaluate your inventory of services and programs by asking the following questions:

- If there are jurisdictional social equity policies, do your programs and services comply?
- Are outcomes from programs and services equitably shared across the whole community?
- How is the community engaged in the delivery of services and is there an effort to reach all members of the community, including those that are hard to reach and historically under-represented?
- How do you measure success? Is there a way to disaggregate results to evaluate by census tract or by demographic data and to look for disparate results by demographic groups or by neighborhoods?
- Are access to services complaint-based and is there bias in how complaints are made or acted upon (i.e., requires technology not available to everyone, not multi-lingual, requires "knowing the right person")?
- Is there bias built into program designs and investment decision making processes?
- Evaluate infrastructure data across different neighborhoods (tree cover, access to a park, mass transit options, pedestrian and bicycle facilities, condition of roads and trails, flooding). Is there disparity in access and condition of infrastructure?
- Does the demographic make-up of your organization at all hierarchical levels mirror the demographic make-up of the community? Are there barriers to meeting diversity goals?
- Do your contracting policies and practices create economic opportunity for all? Do you regularly contract with Small, Women- and Minority-owned (SWAM) contractors? Are SWAM companies successful in winning contracts? Are there barriers to SWAM contracting opportunities?
- Finally, are there strong accountability mechanisms to ensure follow-through, and are performance requirements met at all levels of the organization?

Educate Your Workforce

Social equity issues can be hard to understand, and it can be emotional to evaluate and address. Spending the time to understand the concepts and language and how to fairly assess programs and actions is an important first step. Some ideas on how to proceed include:

- Conduct a social equity tour of your community – your human services department is a great resource to organize this tour. Visit local foodbanks, homeless shelters, affordable housing complexes, revitalization areas, new commercial areas, poorer communities, and more affluent communities. Compare the

levels of service and discuss the challenges and opportunities faced in these different areas.

- Develop learning opportunities with the following objectives:
 - Understand bias – implicit and explicit – and the impact of historical biases on communities.
 - Understand how to develop and analyze metrics to evaluate outcomes versus counting activities. Understand how to effectively disaggregate data to understand outcomes in different parts of the community.
 - Understand how to effectively engage the community and hear from all voices.
- Learn by doing – the focus on these educational efforts is to provide employees the knowledge to take action. Supervisors should set expectations for their employees to use these skills to make changes and improve services and advance overall organizational goals.

Measuring Results

Measure outcomes – what gets measured gets done. Identify the factors that influence social equity and the indicators of success. Develop specific performance measures based on these indicators. Measuring performance is not an exact science. Every effort needs to be made to develop evidence-based metrics that correlate with desired outcomes. Social equity outcomes can take many years to achieve, so including leading indicators that point toward future success will be important. Considerations for performance metrics should include:

- Decisions need to be data-driven and evidence-based.
- Measures must focus on desired outcomes and be understood by the community.
- Transparency – accountability to the communities we serve is a critical success factor. Ready, simple to access, and easily understandable performance measures are critical to building community trust.
- The ability to disaggregate data by demographics and census tracts is important to understanding disparities.
- Data is the starting point – understanding the data and the story behind the numbers is key to support decision making. Making improvements is an iterative process that will require refining goals as targets are met.

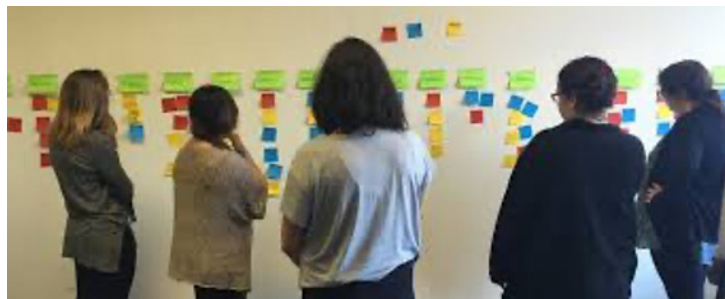


Engage the Community

Evaluate and reimagine community engagement practices to focus on inclusion and hearing from all parts of the community, especially historically marginalized communities.

- Ensure engagement opportunities are accessible to all – ADA accommodations, language services, times and locations of meetings, accessible technology, accommodations for working parents and those with limited transportation options, etc.
- Create and leverage partnerships with community leaders to expand outreach opportunities.
- Develop relationships with community influencers and leverage their help.

- Go beyond normal outreach efforts to fully engage the community and other stakeholders in decision making.
- Build community trust in actions through open and honest dialogue on issues and what can and cannot be accomplished.
- Use the tools developed by the International Association for Public Participation to enhance community participation and trust (see reference below).
- Build the community capacity of residents, businesses, and stakeholders.
- Realize the purpose of community engagement is to benefit the community and not to serve the needs of government.



BEST PRACTICES AND RESOURCES

The **Government Alliance of Race and Equity (GARE)** is a national network of government working to achieve racial equity and advance opportunities for all. <https://www.racialequityalliance.org/>

The **Institute for Sustainable Infrastructure (ISI)** is the organization that developed and manages *Envision*, a framework that encourages systemic changes in the planning, design, and delivery of sustainable and resilient infrastructure. Social Equity is one of the three core principles of sustainable development (People, Planet, Profit). <https://sustainableinfrastructure.org/>

One Fairfax (Fairfax County, Virginia) is a joint social and racial equity policy of the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors and School Board. One Fairfax is a framework—or “lens”—that will be used to consider equity in decision-making and in the development and delivery of future policies, program and services. <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/topics/one-fairfax/>

PolicyLink: Strategies for Addressing Equity in Infrastructure and Public Works is part of the PolicyLink series, Building an Inclusive Economy, which brings together national best practice scans of specific sectors and strategies that work to create economic opportunity for disadvantaged populations. https://www.policylink.org/sites/default/files/pl_brief_nola_infrastructure_FINAL_0.pdf

The **American Planning Association (APA) Research KnowledgeBase Social Equity Collection** discusses the planning professional’s role in applying a social equity lens to community planning and investment. <https://www.planning.org/knowledgebase/equity/>

The **City of Boulder Racial Equity Plan (Boulder, Colorado)** is a living road map that will guide the City of Boulder government through the process of prioritizing goals, specifying details, and assigning resources to achieve meaningful change. <https://bouldercolorado.gov/racial-equity/>

The **International Association for Public Participation (iap2)** is an organization whose mission is to advance and extend the practice of public participation through professional development, certification, standards of practice, core values, advocacy and key initiatives. <https://www.iap2.org/mpage/Home>