



STRATEGY BRIEF

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What are jurisdictions learning and doing as they address racial disparities in child welfare?

The Race Equity Improvement Collaborative (REIC), launched in late 2019 by Casey Family Programs, supports a select group of jurisdictional teams working to address racial disparities in child welfare. Participants from state, county, and tribal agencies representing 15 jurisdictions¹ have been involved in the REIC since it began. The collaborative's vision is of a child and family well-being system that is free of structural racism and where outcomes for vulnerable children and families can no longer be predicted by race or place. The goals, objectives, and roadmap for the REIC generally align with the [seven steps to advance and embed race equity and inclusion](#), developed by The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Core teams gathered in late 2019 to develop common language, examine disaggregated data, and build working agreements. Given the importance of local context and needs, conversations varied widely. While the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the teams and collaborative logistically, it also underscored the importance of addressing longstanding inequities. Work continued at the jurisdiction level during the pandemic, and six convenings (four of which were virtual) took place between 2020 and 2023.

Addressing racial disparities requires both urgent actions to reduce harm *and* long-term adaptive change. To achieve transformation, child protection agencies can implement policies and practices to safely reduce the number of children in foster care — such as addressing [the definition of neglect](#), creating [alternative pathways for support](#), [embracing procedural justice](#), and making active efforts to apply the [principles of the Indian Child Welfare Act \(ICWA\)](#) as the standard of child welfare practice for all children. To sustain transformation, agencies also must identify and address the factors and conditions that contribute to racial disparities.

This brief provides a snapshot of perspectives and lessons learned from a group of jurisdictions working to address racial disparities.² It offers a window into what jurisdictions participating in the REIC are exploring and navigating, and may offer ideas and insights to inform and inspire the efforts of others.

Further evaluation is needed to better understand whether and how any specific strategy may or may not be contributing to changes in outcomes.³

“This is not something we are adding on. This is a fundamental shift in how we practice. So yes, we need to make time for it. But this must actually be the nucleus of how we do the work in every facet of the organization, not just the role of that department over there.”

—Tanya McClanahan, Director of Inclusion and Analysis, Franklin County (Ohio) Children Services

Preliminary lessons

As jurisdictional teams reflected on where they have been and where they are going, several important themes emerged.

Start somewhere

Racial bias, disparities, and disproportionality should be addressed at every decision point within the child welfare system. Achieving specific outcomes in those areas, however, requires special focus and prioritization. Jaime Trujillo, a bilingual unit supervisor at **Denver County** Human Services in Colorado, describes this challenge as one of the most difficult facing her team. “Where do we start? Racism is like a web — it’s everywhere. But we have to start somewhere.”

Staying committed to long-term, comprehensive change while also identifying shorter-term targeted strategies to implement and learn from, requires persistence and commitment. “I am realizing all of the harm that has been done throughout history,” said Zoe Lyons, Jackson County director of the **Michigan** Department of Health and Human Services. “I feel a responsibility to do everything we possibly can in order to see change happen.” [Starting somewhere is critical](#), as is persisting through the many challenges agencies are likely to encounter, including turnover, resistance, and competing priorities.

Cultivate leadership

As is the case with advancing any significant challenge, courageous, trusted leadership is critical. Leaders from the Connecticut Department of Children and Families, which has a long history of addressing racial inequities, emphasize the importance of establishing clear goals, communicating regularly about this work, allocating resources to support implementation, and embedding an equity focus and accountability across functions, strategies, and work units.⁴

Jurisdictions where this work has gained traction point to leaders who lead by example and engage in regular dialogue with staff. As a result, they have built trust and momentum. Gaps in leadership and leadership transitions have slowed progress in some jurisdictions. When leaders who championed a focus on racial equity transition out of their roles, progress can stall, especially when the work is not linked to strategic goals or accompanied by clear and formalized shifts in agency policy and practice.

“Leadership needs to demonstrate that equity is more than conversations and branding. Being inclusive and diverse is essential to delivering quality programs and services.”

— Prestina Singleton, Director, Alumni Programming, UCAN (youth and family services agency in Chicago)

Prioritize engagement with lived experts

Many jurisdictions consider involving youth and families directly affected by the child welfare system in decision-making and service delivery an important aspect of their equity work. Lived experts who participate in the REIC⁵ underscored the importance of [early, meaningful, and ongoing involvement](#), as opposed to isolated advisory opportunities that are unlikely to have long-term impact and have the potential to tokenize and re-traumatize. In **Hawaii**, people with lived experience are members or co-leads in most work groups that shape policy and practice within the Social Services Division's Child Welfare Services Branch. "We have made real contributions to systems change," said Chassidy Kruse, a parent partner at [EPIC 'Ohana](#), a social services agency that prioritizes family and youth engagement. "I've seen input taken into consideration and have a beneficial impact."

In **Lucas County, Ohio**, paid parent mentors⁶ work in several different agency programs as part of an intentional effort to change how people experience the system, and youth advisors⁷ are informing the development of a new building and services for youth aging out of foster care. In **Washington**, [Passion to Action](#) is a statewide youth board that advises the Department of Children, Youth and Families. Members provide input, feedback, and recommendations regarding agency policies, practices, publications, and training. In **North Dakota**, elevating the voices of parents and other lived experts is a goal of the [Indian Child Welfare Act \(ICWA\)](#) Implementation Partnership Grant. Parents have been involved in planning and training efforts to date, and a goal is to hire parents to work as ICWA family preservationists, staff who address barriers related to family preservation and help both families and child welfare teams understand the letter and spirit of ICWA law.

Leverage the power of data

Data has the potential to drive change, but not without commitment and follow through. Digging deeply into disaggregated data with increasingly broad groups of staff, partners, and community members can create shared understanding of who is coming into foster care and why, build momentum for change, and determine where to focus in supporting families to prevent maltreatment. "We now require managers to look at how their unit's racial inequity data compares to the overall agency and why," said Judy Tudor Clark, assistant director of **Clark County (Nev.)** Family Services. "These are not conversations we have had historically. Threading this data in is how we are working toward our overall agency goals."

In **Lucas County, Ohio**, facilitated [data walks](#) were one of the earliest activities of the race equity core group and evolved into a monthly activity that includes caseworkers. "The formation of a core group to analyze data and assess practice on an ongoing basis has been invaluable. The group's insights have led to action and measurable, positive outcomes," said Hope Bland, director of diversity, equity, inclusion and strategy in Lucas County. In **Washington** state's Department of Children, Youth and Families, agencywide [public reporting of racial disparities](#) aims to drive improvement and increase accountability. **Clark County (Nev.)** is launching a [ChildStat](#) process that combines case dialogue with data review and includes an explicit equity focus. The **Utah** Division of Child and Family Services is working with the University of Utah to conduct focus groups with community members and review its administrative data to identify key gaps and opportunities to advance equitable practices and outcomes.

In addition to [disaggregating and using administrative data in new ways](#), jurisdictions are reconsidering what data they collect, and in some cases, are collecting new data to inform their work. The **Hawaii** Department of Human Services is allowing children and families to self-identify given the limited race/ethnicity designations embedded within federal reporting requirements. In order to identify potential racial bias, an assessment oversight group in **Washington** is reviewing more than 40 assessment tools used by the state Department of Children, Youth and Families. In **Michigan**, the Department of Health and Human Services is reviewing data collection efforts to develop recommendations for improving the accuracy and reliability of race equity data. The **Illinois** Department of Children and Family Services' Office of Racial Equity is developing an internal anti-racist equity assessment toolkit to help teams, divisions, and agency partners craft specific race equity plans.

Acknowledge that sustained change requires commitment

While some changes can be implemented quickly, sustained adaptive change to shift mindsets requires time and resources, especially when it is embedded across an organization rather than treated as a standalone initiative. “We need more time and space for conversation, for reflection, for sharing, for practicing different habits and different leadership,” said Kelly Knight, director of organizational health at **Franklin County** Children Services in Ohio. “We need everyone in it for this change to take hold.”

Resource constraints have been challenging in some jurisdictions, and the work has accelerated in contexts where legislatures or agency leaders have allocated funds to support training, planning, and staffing. Participants shared both pros and cons related to the creation of dedicated equity-focused positions and teams within agencies, such as the new Department of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Strategy in **Lucas County, Ohio**. Bland, who directs that department, explained that its function grew to include additional direct staff as well as the quality assurance and training and development departments. “This infrastructure helps drive the mission and ensures that equity is embedded throughout and is considered central, not an addition.”

This area of work is demanding and can result in some staff taking on additional duties, leading new teams or processes. This can be unsustainable long term, and particularly challenging given unprecedented turnover challenges currently facing many jurisdictions. However, when new roles or offices are created, momentum sometimes can slow as new relationships are built and workplans are created.

“I learned what it meant to be Black before I learned to ride a bicycle. But learning I’m not alone, and having people alongside me, is so important. Knowing that I can talk with colleagues about this, and be supported and not judged, is huge.”

—Leticia Pittman, Director of Child Welfare, Catholic Charities of Western Michigan

Commit to ongoing dialogue

Changes to specific policies or practices can be sustained when the conditions, mindsets, and biases that hold the status quo in place are surfaced and addressed. This means that ongoing dialogue and a commitment to transform organizational culture are at the heart of this work. “Once I saw that this was important to my agency and not just another temporary initiative that was going to get swept under the rug, I began to feel more valued,” said Tiffany Carr, a case management analyst at **Clark County (Nev.)** Family Services. “We’re having uncomfortable conversations. It’s important that we continue to have these conversations and build trust internally.”

In jurisdictions where open dialogue has been established, participants shared powerful testimonials about improvements in organizational culture and personal motivation. In many cases, what began as one-time or occasional events evolved into sustained activities. In **Franklin County, Ohio**, Equity Lens Town Halls began during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and continued throughout 2020 and 2021 as forums for staff to talk about issues unfolding in the community and country. Similar staff listening sessions were developed and sustained in **Clark County, Nev.** In **Utah**, monthly directors’ chats have become an important vehicle for child protection agency leadership to reflect together on what it means to lead for equity. In **Washington** and **Michigan**, after participating in foundational anti-racism training, staff with shared racial identities meet regularly in caucus groups for dialogue and reflection.

Shifting practices, policies, and resources

This work is evolving across REIC jurisdictions, and many teams are grappling with how to identify and prioritize strategies that address root causes. Many have faced significant challenges, including resistance and turnover, that can slow the work. Many concrete steps have been taken, however, that can improve experiences and outcomes for children and families. Examples of such changes, in the areas of practice, policy, and resources, are described below.

“We were engineering too much of our approach to avoid risk. Racial bias combined with a traditional approach to risk management was toxic.”

—Frank Ordway, Chief of Staff, Washington Department of Children, Youth and Families

Practice

Areas of practice change that participating jurisdictions are making cut across roles and decision points within the child welfare system. In **Montana**, the Yellowstone County ICWA Family Recovery Court has increased access to culturally appropriate services for American Indian families through a partnership with the [Billings Urban Indian Health and Wellness Center](#). In 2022, **Illinois** began planning a three-year [bias-free child removal pilot](#) focused on decreasing the overrepresentation of children of color in out-of-home placements in three counties. In **South Dakota**, a racial equity core team is developing a prevention-focused diversion program, focused on supporting American Indian families. The **Michigan** Department of Health and Human Services has deepened its collaboration with tribal government partners since 2020, including a [written acknowledgement of past mistakes and specific collaboration commitments](#) that all partners agree to follow and use to drive decision-making. In **Utah**, an evidence-informed family teaming model prioritizes family voice in decision-making, beginning as early as possible in a case.

Policy

Policy and rule changes aimed at advancing equity in child welfare outcomes are being pursued in many jurisdictions. **Denver County, Colo.**, reviewed agency hiring and drafted a reclassification for bilingual social workers. In **Utah**, the Division of Child and Family Services championed a 2021 [statutory ban](#) on the use of hair follicle and fingernail testing in child welfare proceedings to detect illegal drug use, based on concerns that they were racially discriminatory. In **Washington**, when the child protection agency found that people of color were being turned away from serving as caregivers based on past crimes unrelated to child safety, the agency pursued changes to the background check process and had certain misdemeanors removed as disqualifiers. In late 2021, the **Illinois** Legislature passed a [bill adding an implicit bias module](#) to training for all mandatory reporters, with retraining required once every 3 years.

Resources

In addition to investing resources in staff training, several jurisdictions have created dedicated positions, consulting roles, or units over the past several years to advance race equity work, such as the new department of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Strategy in Lucas County Children Services in **Ohio**. While the large equity-focused team at the **Texas** Department of Family and Protective Services was eliminated in 2017, the department managed to successfully rebuild the unit in 2021, expanding from a single position dedicated to disproportionality to a team of four that leads a [range of initiatives](#) including professional learning for staff, and data-driven review of practices, policies, and procedures. Contracting is another area where resources are being allocated with an intentional focus on racial equity. In **Franklin County, Ohio**, an increased focus on how child and family service providers approach diversity, equity, and inclusion is evident across the contracting process, from request for proposal development to proposal review and selection.

Moving forward

“We have tried not to approach this as an initiative, or something new with a beginning and an end. We have dedicated our own internal resources. We are figuring out what the right pace is — moving quickly enough that people know we are being responsive, without pushing so hard that people step out of it.”

—Tonya Myrup, Deputy Director, Utah Division of Child and Family Services

Jurisdictions participating in the REIC are approaching this work in different ways, with different tools, and in very different environments. However, several common areas of opportunity lie ahead for most teams:

- **Urgent, targeted action.** To move from dialogue and learning to intentional action, agencies must identify places where racial disproportionality persists, and implement and test targeted strategies that are designed to address root causes.
- **Communication.** Jurisdictions see the need to involve more people in their racial equity work and to communicate more regularly and with greater impact. This may mean expanding conversations from one unit across the full agency, from management to frontline staff, or from the agency out to partners and the broader community.
- **Partnership.** Leaders see opportunities to align and collaborate with different systems — like the courts, education, and behavioral health — to address the root causes of racial inequities, since all systems have contributed to those causes. In addition, child protection agencies need to deepen efforts to partner with people with lived expertise, to ensure solutions address root causes of racial disparities and increase accountability for equitable and sustainable change.

¹ Fifteen jurisdictional teams from the 14 states engaged with Casey’s Strategic Consulting Team 1 were invited to participate: Colorado (Denver County); Hawaii; Illinois; Michigan; Montana; Nevada (Clark County); North Carolina; North Dakota; Ohio (Franklin County and Lucas County); South Carolina; South Dakota; Texas; Utah; and Washington state.

² Content of this brief was informed by interviews with representatives from race equity teams in all participating jurisdictions between July and December of 2022.

³ Despite decreases nationally and in all REIC jurisdictions in the number of Black children entering foster care since 2018, Black children still enter at disproportionate rates in all 15 REIC jurisdictions. The disproportionality rate for Black children entering foster care has decreased (improved) in six of the 15 jurisdictions, increased in four, and remained flat in five. In addition to decreases in nearly all REIC jurisdictions in the number of American Indian/Alaskan Native children entering care since 2018, disproportionality for this group decreased (improved) in seven jurisdictions, increased in three, and remained flat in five. Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children, Youth and Families, Children’s Bureau (2018-2021). AFCARS and NCANDS 2018-2021 [Dataset].

⁴ Connecticut Department of Children and Families leadership presented to the members of the REIC during a convening in October 2022.

⁵ The content of this brief also was developed in consultation with persons who have lived experience with the child welfare system, representing five REIC jurisdictions. They are: Janell Braxton, Paula Bibbs-Samuels, Tecoria Jones, Chassidy Kruse, and Prestina Singleton.

⁶ For more information about parent mentor programs, see the Casey Family Programs briefs:

- [What are the key elements for sustaining, expanding, and spreading parent partner programs?](#)
- [How do parent partner programs instill hope and support prevention and reunification?](#)
- [How do parent partner programs recruit, train, and supervise parents with lived experience?](#)

⁷ For more information about youth engagement, see the Casey Family Programs briefs:

- [How can agencies and organizations prepare for authentic youth engagement?](#)
- [What are some best practices for recruiting and working with youth advisory boards?](#)
- [What does it mean to value youth partners as assets?](#)

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