

# Key Themes from Staff and Partner Feedback on Advancing Racial Equity in County Health

County Health Public Health, Policy, and Planning (PHPP), Behavioral Health and Recovery Services' (BHRS) Office of Diversity and Equity (ODE), and the Government Alliance for Racial Equity (GARE) cross-divisional team hosted two forums in July and September 2020, to engage County Health staff, Boards and Commissions, and contractors in identifying challenges, opportunities, and priorities for implementing racial equity in County Health. Staff and partners provided invaluable feedback via the forums and post-event surveys which will be used to inform the update to County Health's Racial Equity Action Plan (REAP), a roadmap for implementing key actions aimed to strengthen racial equity in the department. The following three methods were used to solicit input<sup>1</sup>:

- 1) Small group facilitated discussions held during the Racial Equity Forums on July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020 and September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020.
- 2) Zoom polls issued during the forums which collected information on staff knowledge and interest in racial equity work and demographic information of participants.
- 3) Two surveys sent to all County Health staff, Boards and Commissions, and contractors following the forums. These surveys asked respondents similar questions posed during the forums which allowed those who could not attend the forums to share feedback, as well as provided an additional opportunity for attendees to share more input, including explicit questions on racism and discrimination in the workplace.

Below is a summary of themes that present big picture learnings from all feedback and data received which can help to guide and understand the actions and next steps needed for County Health leadership and staff to embark on, to meaningfully implement racial equity. Detailed analyses and findings of this data can be found [here](#).

## Key Themes

- 1. County Health Leadership's commitment and focus on racial equity is critical.** County Health Leadership has taken important steps to communicate to staff during the Racial Equity Forums, a renewed focus and commitment to addressing racial equity, as an organizational-wide imperative that impacts all staff and partners, and the communities we serve in San Mateo County. Staff appreciate County Health Leaders' desire to understand how racism impacts our work and relationships, and in naming the areas that need to change systemically and structurally to advance racial equity. County Health Leaders have an important role in shifting the system's work culture to fully embrace racial equity, to provide opportunities for staff to safely and feasibly discuss and engage more fully in racial equity work, and be accountable for advancing racial equity in the work place. Areas of focus and actions for leadership that staff identified include:
  - Engage in open and transparent communication with staff on systemic limitations and challenges to advancing racial equity and promote greater visibility of values, policies and proclamations of support toward advancing racial equity.
  - Take concrete actions to advance systems-level changes through applying racial equity lens in decision-making, supporting changes to hiring processes and other procedures that County Health could influence, and institutionalizing actionable goals, plans and accountability systems.
  - Increase racial equity coordination at the County Level.
  - Model internal practices and work culture among leadership where the norm is sharing power with staff, strengthening personal relationships with staff, and continuing to model humility and vulnerability in doing this work.

- Complete intensive trainings on racial equity and strengthen Division Director leadership to engage in racial equity work within their Divisions.

## **2. Improving safety for staff and normalizing the conversation on racial equity are major challenges.**

Staff shared across the feedback methods that a lack of safety and skills/know-how create barriers that preclude them from: 1) discussing racial equity in the workplace, 2) meaningfully addressing sensitive issues in teams or with Supervisors, and 3) bringing their full selves to work. Providing safe spaces and the resources and tools necessary to equip all staff to encourage, participate in, and/or facilitate challenging conversations on racial equity and to address racial discrimination are key areas for change. Black/African American and Latinx/a/o survey respondents had a higher rate of reporting experiencing racial discrimination at work and half of Black/African American respondents reported modifying their behavior or appearance to avoid racial discrimination at work. Creating a safe and inclusive culture is impacted by power dynamics and how County Health Leaders, Supervisors, and Managers address (or do not address) these issues with their staff. Specific actions suggested include:

- Provide trainings and capacity building resources to empower and equip all staff to continue normalizing the conversation and increase safety to discuss sensitive and challenging topics. Suggested topics for training and capacity building include:
  - How to create a culture of inclusion and belonging
  - Understanding personal bias/prejudice on culture, race, difference, etc.
  - Systemic racism
  - How to operationalize racial equity policies
  - How to facilitate and participate in challenging conversations on racial equity
- Ensure Managers/Supervisors promote racial equity involvement with their staff.
- Create safe spaces where people can speak freely and not fear retaliation, and safe methods for reporting and addressing racism and discrimination in the workplace.
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- Organize racial affinity groups with interest in racial equity to share ideas, resources, and develop shared language.

## **3. Implementing racial equity requires intentionality, action, resources, and accountability.**

Championing racial equity at a systems level will require intentionality and commitment on behalf of all staff and a more robust allocation or re-shifting of resources toward racial equity goals and actions. Staff and partners identified the following five (5) priority areas for action:

- 1) Support staff to integrate racial equity (RE) in current work and create a shift in mindset and culture.
- 2) Support racial/ethnic diversity in County Health workforce and leadership.
- 3) Create a system of accountability and culture of expectations for advancing racial equity.
- 4) Increase safety for staff and address power dynamics. By breaking down systemic power hierarchies, we can have more open and safe conversations about racial equity, build stronger trust across the department, and demonstrate that everyone's voice has the same value.
- 5) Strengthen racial equity in our service delivery to clients/communities in order to improve services and protection of all residents' health in communities of color in San Mateo County.

Specific actions suggested to address these priority areas encompass the following:

- An array of capacity-building tools and resources needed to support staff and individual teams to integrate racial equity into their workloads and shift the overall mindset and work culture of staff to one that is intentional in addressing racial equity in all aspects of our work.

- New policies and other systems-level changes to County Health administrative and program-level procedures and structures, such as 1) strengthening our focus on addressing the social determinants of health, 2) incorporating equity and diversity strategies into our hiring and promotion processes to increase representation of Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) in higher level positions and among all staffing, and 3) integrating a systems wide trauma framework, among several others.
- An actionable plan with clear goals and metrics to operationalize racial equity, track its progress, and ensure accountability.

**4. Staff lack the time, capacity, and resources needed to engage and advance racial equity.** In all feedback methods, many staff shared that within their current role, they don't have sufficient time, capacity, and/or resources such as funding and staff to engage in racial equity work, despite being interested in getting involved and/or finding this work very important and valuable. A lack of time and capacity was reported most among those who responded to the September 10<sup>th</sup> forum poll and who filled out the post-event survey as "the biggest barrier" to engaging in racial equity work. Staff identified the following actions to address this challenge:

- Align funding/resources with increased time, capacity, and staffing to focus on racial equity efforts.
- Provide more guidance to Supervisors/Managers to promote racial equity involvement among staff and support implementation of racial equity actions within their work.
- Require or strongly encourage participation in racial equity trainings and forums.
- Grow funding for this work through public/private partnerships and major donors.

**5. 5A. More must be done to engage a broader segment of County Health staff and partners and inform staff how to get involved.** The majority of those who have participated in the forums and/or filled out the surveys are County Health staff members who are interested in racial equity work, bring some knowledge about racial equity work at County Health, have had some discussions about it in the workplace, and/or feel that this is an important focus area for County Health. Sixty-eight (68) percent of the respondents in the September 10<sup>th</sup> survey said they do not supervise staff and only 6 percent identified as a contracted partner. In order for our efforts to be successful, it will require the buy-in, engagement, and input from all staff, including any staff or community-based organizations who may face limited capacity during the pandemic crisis, and also staff who may be less interested or familiar, and/or uncomfortable with discussing racial equity. Sharing a recording of the previous forums and event materials and administering a follow up survey allowed for more staff to engage in these topics and the current work happening and should be further expanded upon in the future. Many staff are also not very familiar with how to get involved in County Health's racial equity efforts. Efforts or resources identified by staff that could enhance staff awareness of County Health's racial equity work include:

- Establish an LMS racial equity educational portal with activities, forums, webinars, trainings, personal story sharing, capacity building offerings, and other resources. Provide credit for participation.
- Disseminate a racial equity resource newsletter to all staff on how to get involved along with regular updates.
- Require racial equity training as part of onboarding new staff.
- Set up ways for staff to learn about racial equity issues across divisions through shared infrastructure and resources.

**5B. All of us as staff members of County Health provide an important role in furthering racial equity.** While some staff reported little to no knowledge of racial equity work, we must connect the work that we are engaged in every day with racial equity. The vast majority of County Health's

operations is in direct services to our local community, serving a client base that is majority people of color and low-income people to improve their health outcomes and access. All staff are working to advance the mission of County Health and advancing the health of all people requires a racial equity framing. This means we are all responsible for advancing racial equity in some capacity and need to see all of ourselves more fully as integral to improving how we operationalize racial equity efforts both internally and externally. We are all part of the solution, but not all staff may be aware how to specifically engage or conduct racial equity work within their roles and workloads. Staff discussed the importance of addressing the unique needs of staff through:

- Targeted capacity building to workgroups and units to develop specific priorities, strategies, and performance metrics in advancing racial equity.
- Targeted trainings and other resources for staff with varying levels of comfort, knowledge of racial equity, experiences, power, positionality, and privilege.
- Support Supervisors/Managers to help staff identify ways they can improve advancing racial equity within their existing responsibilities.

**6. County Health racial equity efforts should be informed by the experiences of our clients of color and strengthen service delivery, relationships, and trust in communities of color in San Mateo County.** Implementing racial equity into the operations and structures of County Health, is ultimately in service to improving how we work with and serve our highest need communities. Centering the priorities, experiences, and input of our diverse clients is an important step to engaging them in this process and learning from them how we can better advance racial equity in a manner that leads to more effective service delivery and stronger communities that support health and community agency. This will also require us as staff to address our own assumptions, biases, and power dynamics that may shape and undermine our ability to build stronger relationships and trust with communities of color or across cultures other than our own. There are gaps in our outreach, programs, and data collection that suggest we could be doing more to effectively serve all communities of color. Furthermore, when we have lost positions and capacity in connecting directly with our communities, this affects our ability to be accountable to this shared value and sustain this critical work. Suggested areas for action that relate to County Health’s work in communities of color, include:

- Provide feedback forums and other methods for ensuring our clients and community members with lived experience as well as our frontline workers working closest with impacted populations, inform our work, such as a Community Advisory Board.
- Share available community resources and services with clients and communities that may have less access to information about our systems and available resources.
- Provide racial equity trainings and capacity building to our community-based partners providing services and supports to our clients and communities.
- Allocate additional resources when and where needed to strengthen programs serving communities of color.
- Address data gaps and infrastructure to better understand County Health inequities, who we serve, where are our gaps, how to improve services, and where additional outreach is needed.
- Support local community leadership, hire local community members, and compensate community leaders for their expertise.
- Create an easier contracting process for community-based partners and provide funding to support their engagement in decision-making processes that impact the lives of impacted communities.

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<sup>i</sup> Data on Participants and Respondents: July 15, 2020 Racial Equity Forum: 281 attendees and 211 survey respondents. September 10, 2020 Racial Equity Forum: 228 attendees and 220 survey respondents. \*Roughly 65 percent of the survey respondents did not attend the previous Racial Equity Forum.