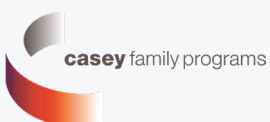


A Guide for Child  
Welfare Leaders and  
Decision Makers

# APPLYING RACE EQUITY STRATEGIES

THROUGHOUT THE  
CONTINUOUS QUALITY  
IMPROVEMENT (CQI) PROCESS

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This resource offers action steps that can be applied within each of the core functions of the CQI process as well as a set of cross-cutting strategies that support applying a race equity lens at any stage

# BACKGROUND



Applying specific strategies throughout an organization’s continuous quality improvement (CQI) process can provide the focused, proactive, and sustained attention needed to identify and address racial and ethnic disparities in child welfare outcomes. This resource offers action steps that can be applied within each of the core functions of the CQI process as well as a set of cross-cutting strategies that support applying a race equity lens at any stage. This resource is designed to serve as a reference tool when implementing a CQI program, when working on a focused CQI initiative, or when facilitating an organization’s ongoing improvement planning process.

CQI leaders and practitioners—those specifically responsible for designing, implementing, and managing quality improvement, performance management, and quality assurance efforts—can refer to the strategies and action steps outlined here as they keep race equity appropriately centered within their work. CQI can play a key role in facilitating change and creating the space and direction for action and improvement. These strategies and action steps are grounded in an operationalized belief in equity and authentic engagement and in including key stakeholders in each activity of the CQI process.

# ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS

Ensuring equity in the CQI process requires intentionally engaging diverse stakeholders: those with lived experience and those with professional experience in the child welfare system. Stakeholder engagement offers the opportunity to identify and address common evidence-based gaps in care delivery and the opportunity to mitigate improvement barriers through the CQI process. The definition of “stakeholder” is useful here. A stakeholder is “an individual who is involved in or affected by a course of action” (Merriam-Webster, 2011).

These individuals can include but are not limited to:

- Former and current foster youth
- Birth parents
- Relatives
- Fictive kin
- Foster parents
- Adoptive parents
- Frontline workers
- Child welfare training staff
- Social workers
- Lawyers/LGALs/CASA workers
- Judges
- Administrators
- Representatives from Tribal Nations<sup>1</sup>
- Other Community partners

## ADOPTING A STAKEHOLDER FRAMEWORK

### Ensures That Engagement Is Conducted Systematically

Organizations engaging in CQI activities should do so systematically and consider using a theoretical framework. Stakeholders are more likely to be engaged when the project has a visible goal, clear strategies, and ways to measure progress. Additionally, administrators must be intentional in their efforts to include the voices

of these stakeholders as equal contributors to the CQI process with the overarching goal of exchanging and developing ideas.

Stakeholders should have the opportunity to contribute equally in every step of the CQI process, beginning with clarifying program priorities and desired outcomes. Once priorities are established, stakeholders can help identify potential barriers and obstacles to addressing them. Their subject matter expertise and lived experiences should serve as a foundation for developing improvement strategies that build on strengths and address performance problems. Additionally, stakeholders should be involved in monitoring improvement strategies’ effectiveness. Their input should be considered before publishing the final draft of any reports that result from the CQI project.

**Stakeholder’s expertise  
and lived experiences**  
should serve as a foundation  
for developing improvement  
strategies that build on  
strengths and address  
performance problems

It is important to note that there is a growing debate among organizations over use of the term “stakeholder.” This debate has largely centered around the paternal origins of the term; many experts have advocated ending its use. Agencies should discuss the implications of using this term to refer to individuals who may find it offensive, such as Indigenous/Aboriginal populations. Suggested alternatives include “interested parties,” “affected communities,” “individuals with lived experience,” “collaborators and contributors,” “partner organizations,” and “subject matter experts.”

<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that tribes are sovereign nations and their CQI process may look very different than CQI processes that exist in state, county, or even private child welfare agencies. When states and counties partner with tribes, it is critical that tribal specific CQI processes are respected and followed. Many tribes have their own human subject review boards and often require authorization by tribal council. These additional processes can add time to a project, and should be accounted for in a project timeline.

# GUIDING PRINCIPLES

All efforts to promote equity should be informed by a set of guiding principles (Dean-Coffey et al., 2014; Public Policy Associates, Inc., 2015; Bernabei, 2017; Hawn et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2019). We suggest aligning agency principles with those outlined below. These principles reflect the agreement and commitment of the collaborative partnership responsible for this resource.

**Figure 2. Guiding Principles to promote equitable strategies**



1. Research, evaluation, and CQI efforts play an important role in advancing equity; these activities warrant specific strategies and oversight.
2. The work of developing and implementing race equity strategies in research, evaluation, and CQI must be approached with humility.
3. Research, evaluation, and CQI activities are most effective and influential when they meaningfully include representatives from the communities that stand to be most impacted by the work.
4. Individuals with lived expertise must be engaged throughout the life cycle of any research, evaluation, or CQI effort. What that involvement looks like may vary and should be customized to suit the context and preferences of the individuals involved in specific projects.
5. Individuals do not need to be trained researchers, evaluators, or CQI professionals to be valuable members of project teams and decision-making entities within jurisdictions.
6. Leaders, decision makers, and project team members must intentionally and continually examine their own internal biases and how those impact their behaviors, relationships, and decisions.
7. Research, evaluation, and CQI efforts must be trauma-informed,<sup>2</sup> such that any associated activities do not exacerbate or cause further harm to communities that have historically been marginalized and disenfranchised.
8. Advancing equity is a developmental process, and jurisdictions are at different places on the equity continuum. It is important to achieve the balance of addressing inequities with the urgency that is required while meeting jurisdictions where they are developmentally.

<sup>2</sup> Applying the principles of trauma-informed care to research can be challenging, as researchers may have minimal contact with survivors of trauma (for example, in survey research). There is also not clear consensus between researchers and practitioners on how trauma informed principles are defined and implemented from both a research and practice lens (Berliner & Kolko, 2016). It is important that researchers and community partners take time agree on these principles in developing program manuals and evaluation plans.

CQI relies on an organizational culture that is proactive, supports continuous learning, and is firmly grounded in the overall mission, vision, and values of the agency.

## CQI AS A CORE AGENCY FUNCTION

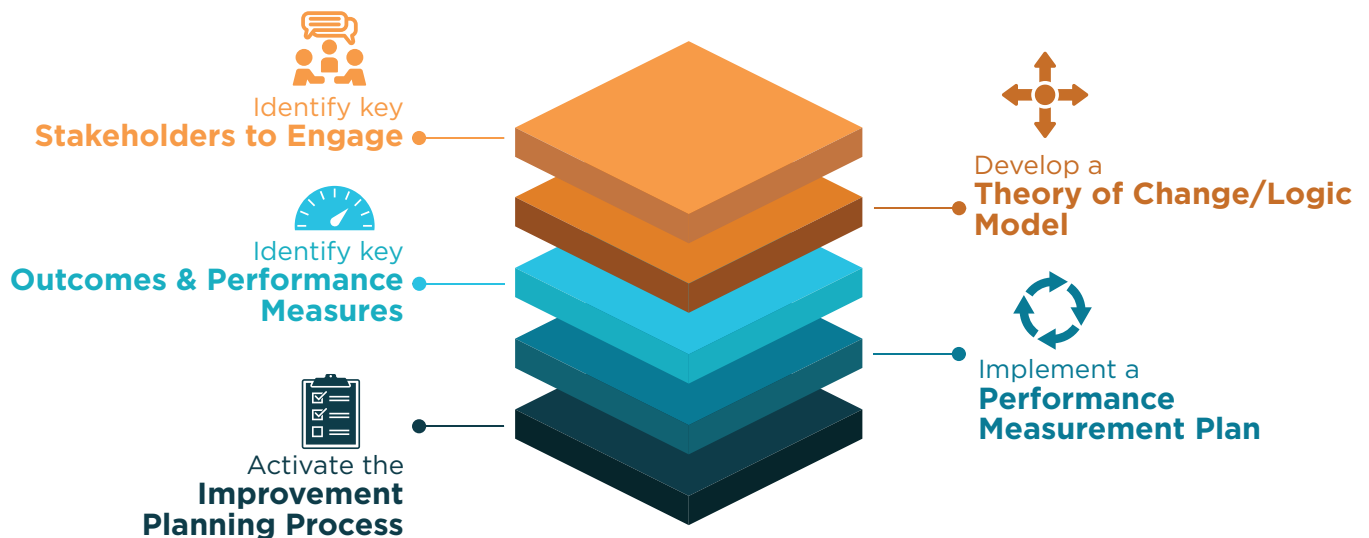
According to *Using Continuous Quality Improvement to Improve Child Welfare Practice: A Framework for Implementation*, CQI is a complete process for identifying, describing, and analyzing strengths and problems and then testing, implementing, learning from, and revising solutions (Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 2012). CQI relies on an organizational culture that is proactive, supports continuous learning, and is firmly grounded in the overall mission, vision, and values of the agency. Perhaps most importantly, it is dependent upon the active inclusion and participation of people with a diverse set of experiences throughout the process, including staff at all levels of the agency as well as children, youth, families, and other stakeholders.

## FOUNDATIONAL CQI ACTIVITIES

There are several activities that are central to any CQI process (see Figure 1) and serve as the foundation for specific race equity considerations outlined in subsequent sections:

- Identify key stakeholders to engage. This includes internal and external partners who will have a role in the CQI process.
- Clarify priorities and desired outcomes by developing a theory of change that articulates the issues that need to be addressed, the potential pathways to change, and the anticipated outcomes. An aligned logic model will also be helpful for illustrating how the proposed solution/intervention/programs are intended to work and to inform decisions about what should be measured.
- Identify key outcomes and performance measures (process, quality, and capacity) that are aligned with the logic model.
- Implement a performance measurement plan that outlines exactly what will be measured and the proposed data elements, data sources, and data collection, analysis, and reporting processes.
- Activate an improvement planning process that will drive how performance questions will be answered and problems addressed. Activating such a process also includes thinking about the performance review cycle: in what forums will performance data and evidence be discussed and improvement strategies co-developed? How often will meetings take place? Who are the key participants in those discussions? What is the feedback loop? This could mean applying specific methods such as:
  - The Plan-Do-Study-Act cycle (PDSA cycle)
  - Results-Based Accountability
  - Data-Driven Decision Making
  - 4 Disciplines of Execution
  - LEAN/Six Sigma
  - Define, Measure, Analyze, Improve, Control
- CQI processes can also be used for sustainability planning so organizations don't revert back to status quo ways of doing business at the end of a demonstration/pilot project effort.

**Figure 1. Foundational CQI Activities**



## OVERARCHING RACE EQUITY STRATEGIES

Regardless of where you are in the CQI process, certain important strategies should be considered and applied at every step to ensure racial equity. These strategies should be promoted and supported by all the organizational leaders.

1. Center the interests, values, and desired outcomes of communities of Black, Indigenous, and people of color in CQI and evaluation efforts (Dean-Coffey et al., 2014; Center for Evaluation Innovation et al., 2017).
2. Devote money and time toward efforts that allow for relationship building with community participants for co-designing and testing instruments, planning, data collection, and dissemination (Center for Evaluation Innovation et al., 2017).
3. Build and expand partnerships across organizations to increase collective impact.
4. Establish an understanding of race equity and inclusion principles by CQI leaders and those involved in the CQI process (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018).
5. Add youth and family voices to an existing CQI or strategic planning advisory board. These voices should not be tokenized (Daya et al., 2020). Lived experience voices should be represented at a level on the board that promotes authentic engagement in ways to ensure their voices carry the same weight as professionals represented on the board.
6. Create an advisory board dedicated to youth and family voice that includes multiple perspectives.
7. Engage in self-reflection on how your values manifest into perceptions, attitudes, and other types of judgments—prejudicial or not (PPA, 2015).
8. While all groups might benefit from a specific strategy, it is important to focus particular attention on the groups experiencing the most difficulty (GARE, Erika Bernabei, 2017).
9. Examine your own background and biases and how they influence your worldview and ways of being/working.

# CENTERING RACE EQUITY STRATEGIES

## within the Core Functions of the CQI Process

The following are specific race equity strategies and related action steps that can be applied within each core function of the CQI process.



### Identify Key Stakeholders

## Race Equity Strategies

### 1. Articulate the agency's vision, priorities, and the value of stakeholder involvement

#### Action Steps:

- In a vision statement, ensure that race equity is clearly noted as a strategic priority.
- Involve stakeholders in crafting the vision and identifying CQI priorities.

### 2. Gather the foundational information needed to effectively engage key stakeholders

#### Action Steps:

- Establish/acknowledge the organization's positionality in the work and present with humility.
- Consider how the community would want to be approached and the appropriate gateway. For example, are there trusted community leaders who need to be engaged first and who can serve as champions or partners in engaging others?
- Gather information about how the community views the issue, priority, or concern and identify specific language used by that community in discussing it.

### 3. Ensure that the necessary infrastructure is in place to support respectful and meaningful involvement of stakeholders

#### Action Steps:

- Identify and clearly articulate how much time key stakeholders will need to invest in the CQI effort.
- Identify how you will compensate key stakeholders for the time they invest.
- Consider allocating resources to individuals in leadership to ensure that they have the time and support to prioritize stakeholder engagement activities.





**Cocreate a *theory of change* that articulates the issue(s) needing to be addressed, the pathways to change, and the anticipated outcomes AND develop a *logic model* to illustrate how the proposed solution/intervention/program is intended to work and to inform decisions about what should be measured.**

## Race Equity Strategies

- 1. In partnership with the community, identify, analyze, and interpret internal and publicly available data to determine focus areas. Involvement of community stakeholders requires thought and an investment of time and money.**
- 2. Based on an analysis of the data, cocreate a hypothesis based on analyzing and exploring strategies.**

### Action Steps:

- Consider an approach for engaging stakeholders that includes a core group of active working partners who represent critical areas as identified through an analysis of the data, including lived expertise and a broader array of stakeholders for review and input.
- Engage in developing a theory of change or logic model (or both) to understand the issues that need to be addressed from the standpoint of the persons and communities most impacted, the potential interventions/activities, and the potential immediate and intermediate outcomes to be achieved.

- 3. Intentionally review and explore areas for consideration of equity in development of both strategies and potential outcomes.**

### Action Steps:

- Consider decision points throughout the logic model and theory of change where there may be implications of equity or bias in both the effectiveness of the strategy and in the potential achievement of outcomes. Consider if the outcomes may differ for diverse populations and if strategies and interventions should be targeted to address equity considerations.
- Consider the use of tools such as a race equity impact assessment (Farrow & Morrison, 2018) to support dialogue and discussion about existing strategies and interventions and potential consideration of new strategies and interventions. This type of assessment can support ways of considering equity throughout the CQI lifecycle of strategy development, implementation, evaluation, and improvement.

- 4. Regularly review and revisit the theory of change and logic model as the CQI cycle progresses to determine updates or refinements that may be needed. Consider an ongoing review of all decisions and processes throughout development, implementation, and evaluation to ensure that they continue to advance equity and that they align with intended outcomes.**



### Race Equity Strategies

#### **1. Include the perspectives of the community you are serving in your agency's CQI processes.**

##### **Action Steps:**

- a. Identify stakeholders impacted by the work (for example, frontline staff, families, youth, tribes, other community partners, funders).
- b. Ensure that the perspectives of all segments of the population you are serving are included, including potentially underserved populations and youth.

#### **2. Determine what outcomes, performance measures, and questions are most meaningful and important to the community you are serving and what data can be most informative.**

##### **Action steps:**

- a. Different data and outcomes may be more important to different parties (such as members or funders). Develop an approach that includes all priorities.
- b. Take note of questions about the outcomes that come from the community and the data.
- c. Guard against the assumption that the dominant culture is the default comparison or norm.
- d. Ensure that your questions address meaningful outcomes for all stakeholders.
- e. Limit your questions to only those that are necessary to understand the problem or issue and inform the improvement planning cycle.

#### **3. Define quantitative and qualitative data that will serve as indicators for outcomes and performance measures to be addressed as part of your measurement framework.**

##### **Action steps:**

- a. Create definitions for outcomes and measures and engage community voices in reviewing and finalizing the definitions so all agree.
- b. Incorporate meaningful data from a variety of stakeholders so that each group is getting what they need.
- c. Consider the benefit of proposed data collection for specific outcomes and performance measures and who will benefit from the data being collected (researchers, participants, community).
- d. Explicitly review data indicators for potential bias in data collection and reporting (e.g., power structures, consent implications, sampling validity).
- e. For each question and data/performance indicator, consider: What and whose mental models are the data and outcomes being interpreted through?

#### **4. Host family or youth listening sessions on how people perceive data and what it means in their context to inform decisions about the performance measurement plan.**

#### **5. Engage cultural ambassadors/translators to review proposed outcome measures and provide feedback.**



### Race Equity Strategies

#### 1. Engage members of the community in designing and reviewing data collection instruments and activities before these instruments or activities are put into practice.

##### Action steps:

- a. Request feedback from community members to inform the development of survey or focus group questions, case review questions or criteria, etc.
- b. Review standardized assessments in light of cultural considerations or advocate for original instruments that account for culture. Ensure measurement tools are valid for measuring concepts and outcomes within each cultural context.
- c. Where critical data points of interest to the community are lacking, collaborate to develop a plan to address these gaps. For example, could qualitative data captured through case record review or other case-related documents, client/community surveys, or focus group/listening sessions be used to supplement administrative data?

#### 2. Ensure that data analysis captures the full range and experiences of each population served so that differences can be thoroughly explored and discussed with the community.

##### Action Steps:

- a. Disaggregate data so that variations in how different groups experience process measures or outcomes are transparent and able to be considered and discussed.
- b. Create materials that are understandable and easily digestible to help build data literacy and support conversation about data and outcomes with the community.

#### 3. Involve community members in reviewing, exploring, analyzing, and interpreting the data.

##### Action Steps:

- a. Ensure that perspectives from all segments of the population you are serving are included in data exploration conversations, including potentially underserved populations and youth.
- b. As part of the data exploration process, ask the following questions (Child Trends checklist):
  - i. How might implicit bias be affecting your analysis?
  - ii. What additional data do you need to make decisions?
  - iii. How are stakeholders interpreting the findings? Be sure to ask community stakeholders about their interpretations. They can provide invaluable contextual information that better explains research findings.
  - iv. What questions are stakeholders asking about the data?
  - v. How do stakeholders' interpretations differ from or align with the research questions? If you observe discrepancies, what accounts for them?
  - vi. What do stakeholders see as the next steps for disseminating the data?



### Race Equity Strategies

#### 1. Engage stakeholders to get their insight into what may be driving factors behind the data and potential solutions based on their expertise and experiences with the system.

##### Action Steps:

- a. Support the active and consistent involvement of stakeholders in convenings where performance data are reviewed and discussed. This could include smaller meetings with different stakeholders or taking advantage of larger venues where stakeholders might already be gathering (in order to reduce burden).
- b. Consider how stakeholders might be involved in the planning and decision making in an ongoing way instead of in isolated data review meetings.
- c. Consider what supports might need to be in place in order to engage stakeholders more fully. For example, leadership buy-in, reducing barriers to participation (such as transportation/childcare, compensation, language), process for engagement, and increasing data literacy for stakeholders should be considered.

#### 2. Identify strategies and target resources to address root causes of inequities revealed through data analysis (Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2018). Race Equity Crosswalk Tool. Annie E. Casey Foundation.).

##### Action Steps:

- a. Support the active involvement of stakeholders in the analysis of root causes of inequities to lift the story behind the data (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018).
- b. Establish a team that includes individuals who are most affected by the problem or challenge the agency is seeking to address to explore root causes and potential strategies to address those root causes. Consider whether the makeup of the team reflects the populations served by the agency.
- c. Consider how youth and families with lived expertise are represented on the team and what steps are needed to ensure they are on equal footing with agency staff and other partners (such as meetings are scheduled at times youth and family representatives can join, virtual meetings, access to technology, foundational information/preparation for the conversations).
- d. Consider other venues or opportunities to engage a broader cross-section of youth and family voices with lived expertise to provide additional perspectives on potential root causes and solutions for the team to consider (for example, are there existing regional or statewide Youth or Parent Advisory Boards, kinship support groups, or community meetings/gatherings, such as a tribal council meeting, where input and ideas can be generated).

#### 3. Explore specifically what it would take to implement performance improvement solutions and recommendations with and in specific communities.

##### Action Steps:

- a. Establish an implementation team to guide the implementation of performance improvement solutions. This team should be selected in partnership with the community and should include community members.

- b. Consider whether the members of the team reflect the populations and communities served by the agency and whether the team includes representation of those populations or communities most impacted by implementation of the intervention.
- c. Consider how youth and families with lived expertise are represented on the team and what steps are needed to ensure they are on equal footing with agency staff and other partners (such as meetings are scheduled at times youth and family representatives can join, virtual meetings, access to technology, foundational information/preparation for the conversations).
- d. Consider whether the intervention will be implemented or delivered by a source the community trusts.
- e. Develop an implementation plan that identifies and addresses the supports needed to implement the intervention in a way that advances equity and inclusion (for example, steps to address readiness of community partners, training, coaching, resource needs, etc.).
- f. Identify potential barriers or factors that could contribute to inequity in implementation (for example, language barriers, barriers to access, etc.) and consider how these barriers might be addressed in the implementation planning phase.

**4. Evaluate the effectiveness of improvement strategies and adaptations as needed (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018).**

**Action Steps:**

- a. Close feedback loops with participants to confirm how their feedback informed the agency's change efforts.
- b. Focus on variations in impact to discern what adaptations are needed to reduce disparities (Farrow & Morrison, 2019)
- c. Ensure the meaningful engagement of youth and families with lived expertise and those most impacted in designing plans for evaluating the effectiveness of improvement strategies and in reviewing implementation and evaluation results.

**5. Communicate decisions, progress, and next steps with all stakeholders throughout the entire CQI process.**

**Action Step:**

- a. Develop a communication plan that includes consistent and ongoing communication with stakeholders. Communication should include how their feedback has informed the CQI process as well as when and why certain feedback may have not been used. Making stakeholder feedback visible can improve engagement and reinforce understanding.

Applying race equity strategies throughout the CQI process is an iterative endeavor. But it is one that will surely result in the adjustment of these strategies and action steps over time as more is learned about what is most effective.

# POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF CENTERING RACE EQUITY AND INCLUSION IN THE CQI PROCESS



Engaging in CQI activities that center race, equity, and inclusion in projects and decision making can result in a more accurate understanding of the effectiveness of programs and processes. It can also increase collaboration and partnership around finding equitable solutions and improvement strategies. If implemented, potential outcomes that might be achieved through considering equity in a CQI process include:

- increased inclusion, empowerment, and representation of the voice of those with lived experience as well as other stakeholders, agency staff, and program participants in the CQI process itself;
- increased normalization of race equity considerations and appreciation of cultural differences;

- improved accuracy and dissemination of CQI results and recommendations, with intentional considerations of equity, to entities that might have the power and resources to influence change;
- increased co-ownership of findings by diverse communities (The California Endowment, 2005);
- increased likelihood that the strategies resulting from the CQI efforts will be used/sustained to the benefit of the most affected groups towards improving equity;
- increased substantive knowledge and awareness among policymakers about equity issues impacting diverse communities; and
- increased CQI resources directed toward understanding inequities in outcomes.

CQI leaders and practitioners are uniquely positioned to influence and monitor an organization's progress toward the benefits outlined above. This resource represents initial thinking on strategies and action steps that might be applied to achieve these goals. Applying race equity strategies throughout the CQI process is an iterative endeavor. But it is one that will surely result in the adjustment of these strategies and action steps over time as more is learned about what is most effective. We welcome your feedback and input for the next iteration of this resource.

## SUGGESTED CITATION:

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