



## DISRUPT SYSTEM MINDSETS AND HABITS

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Systems engage in unlearning and adopt and sustain a race equity framework, shifting from seeing families as problems to be fixed toward seeing families and their communities as the key to thriving children.

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### Develop and Implement a Racial Equity Lens

**Critically reflect on systemic racism and its impacts as a step toward building trust and relationships**

Public systems operate in the shadow of long histories of racist and exclusionary practices. This means that in approaching community, institutions are trying to build bridges with Black and brown neighborhoods that have borne the brunt of decades of systemic disinvestment, paternalism, and racialized violence. The Subject Matter Experts we collaborated with called out the difficulty of beginning a transformative process in institutional spaces that haven't engaged in critical reflection on this legacy and its impacts on current efforts.

Past initiatives have attempted to overcome this challenge by building system actors' critical consciousness about systemic failures and disinvestment impacting Black and Brown communities. They have also called out these actors' own roles in systems of oppression. One of the key recommendations emerging from the Holyoke Food & Fitness

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**Disrupt System Mindsets and Habits** highlights findings and strategies culled from an integrative synthesis of research papers, case studies and experts from across the field.

The strategies are meant for public systems as they seek to collaboratively develop solutions, break down racist and stigmatizing narratives about Black and Brown communities, refocus on relationships and trust, and overcome the gaps between what individuals and families say they need and what systems deliver.

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Policy Council (HFFPC) was to “organize regular facilitated dismantling-racism trainings for all stakeholders and partners together” and to “engage a highly skilled facilitator who does not have a stake in the outcome to offer facilitation and guidance” (Sands et al., 2016, p. 107).

This process of reflecting on power and positionality (referring to how differences in social position and power shape identities and access in society) is not without friction. Another child welfare system change effort, which focused on addressing racial disparities, engaged in an internal reflection process on bias in system decision making. The authors cite one program administrator, who commented:

“... [There] was a lot of and continues to be push back from staff. They said that they are color blind. They treat all the children the same way and, they are doing the best that they can and they could not really give an answer why the data was what it was.” (Lorthridge et al., 2012, pp. 283–284)

One of our Subject Matter Experts spoke in detail about how building an understanding of racism and privilege was critical to her own work. She suggested that starting with historical knowledge allows individuals to participate in a way that avoids defensiveness.

Re-orientation to community was also key. In Building Healthy Communities (BHC), system leaders and staff needed to develop their own motivating narrative about why they should engage residents as partners (Preskill et al., 2013). This was echoed in a publication by James, Green, Rodriguez and Fong (2008) on a Texas child welfare system partnership effort. The authors wrote, “Countless testimonies from staff describe how they have reexamined their life stories and view families and youth differently” (James et al., 2008, p. 293).

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Many initiatives and organizations dedicated to race equity have developed their own racial justice toolkits to disrupt system mindsets and habits. As part of this and other briefs, we have collected and posted these documents for easy reference.

### **Reinforce community narratives about their strengths and needs, while also recognizing impacts of deficit-based frames**

Too often, public systems, as well as research studies and policy making, reproduce centuries-old narratives that pathologize and objectify Black and brown people. Deficit-based frames like “at-risk,” “endangered,” and “vulnerable” dominate discussions of Black communities in public systems, policies, and research. These frames ultimately undermine efforts to build community leadership and power.

Members of the research team observed that the growth and professionalization of the nonprofit sector has pushed organizations toward white Eurocentric values and outcome-driven approaches. As a result, agency leadership often looks different from the communities they serve, and providers come to see families as passive recipients of services, or as something to be fixed. For example, in The Annie E. Casey’s multisite community change initiative, Making Connections, some sites found that “[well-meaning] non-profits often saw themselves as the gatekeepers to

residents but failed to truly invest in their leadership or take their ideas to heart” (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2013, pp. 12-13).

In light of these tendencies, community-determined language and asset-based framing is critical.

In one Seattle public health partnership, community members demanded a change in how the initiative talked about their neighborhoods. They wanted to move from a language of the “lowest 20%” in health outcomes to “community of opportunity” (Wysen, 2021). This new language, which became the name of the initiative itself, pushed institutional partners from a framework which centered deficits to one oriented toward a future where the whole community is thriving. When institutions and organizations absorb and reinforce new narratives about community, system transformation becomes more possible.

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## Shift Expectations about Timelines and Outcomes

### Take the long view

Many initiatives recognized that the population-level changes they wanted to see in their community required long-term engagement, both in terms of direct supports and in terms of the partnership effort itself. Mannes, Roehlkepartain, and Benson (2005) drew on an earlier report by Chaskin, Brown, Venkatesh, and Vidal (2001), proposing that real impacts require moving away from program development and toward “building the capacity of individuals, organizations, and networks to contribute to all of the

## CREATE STRUCTURES TO ADVANCE AND SUSTAIN EQUITY EFFORTS WITHIN AND ACROSS SYSTEMS

While the literature and case studies we examined did not speak to the need for institutions to create governance structures that ensure equity efforts cut across systems and their decision making, the experiences of Chapin Hall staff working with public systems underscore this priority.

Today, we see states creating Equity Offices both at the executive and departmental levels. While we applaud this shift, equity efforts centered in a single office are insufficient for widespread and durable change. Systems must be intentional from the outset about establishing infrastructure, coordinated planning, and continuous quality improvement mechanisms that allow for inter- and cross-departmental shared learning and accountability.

In Ohio, the Governor’s Office published [A Plan of Action to Advance Equity](#) (2020). This document outlines the kinds of infrastructure needed for cross-system equity work, including:

“. . . establish a common language and set of definitions that will be used consistently across all agencies, boards, and commissions to promote and advance equity so that success can be tracked and measured consistently throughout the state enterprise; identify correlations between state agencies’ missions and the contributing and confounding factors of social determinants of health that can be affected through collaborative policy changes.” (Office of the Governor, 2020, p. 12)

We point our readers to this plan as an excellent resource.

community's young people's accumulation of many developmental assets in multiple contexts and across time" (Chaskin et al., 2001, p. 243).

Partnership efforts also took a long view of their role in system change. In a retrospective on the BHC effort, which began as an effort to go upstream and address social determinants of health (Pastor et al., 2014), evaluators recognized a need to plan for the long haul—preparing to capitalize on policy windows as they open, seed growth in grassroots organizations, and invest in a leadership pipeline (Farrow et al., 2020). Community Organizing for Family Issues (COFI) provides multiyear training for every cohort of parent advocates, a testament that community-led shifts in policy take time and planning (COFI, 2014, 2017). Similarly, in the Community Action to Fight Asthma Initiative, "[Not] all of the coalitions' efforts led to concrete outcomes or improvements in a timely manner. Much of the work of policy advocacy. . . [was] long-term activities" (Kreger et al., 2011, p. s215).

### **Move away from chasing short-term outcomes and deadlines**

Prevention and partnership efforts often extended beyond the target or service population, toward community-level impacts. In light of this, many efforts highlighted that important ripple effects wouldn't show up in conventional program evaluation. In the Prevention Initiative Demonstration Program (PIDP) in Los Angeles County, some of the most important impacts included effective network building, social connection, and community organizing (McCroskey et al., 2009; Pecora et al., 2009). An evaluation of BHC similarly noted key, difficult-to-capture impacts in community social capital (Pastor et al., 2014). In a later BHC publication, the authors report that even in instances where policy efforts failed, power-building efforts prepared communities to be ready the next time opportunity presents itself. The authors argue that these intangibles are as important as specific wins (Farrow et al., 2020).

The value of these difficult-to-quantify impacts often conflicted with funder and public system expectations. Accordingly, there was a call to reconsider what constitutes success and measurable progress. For example, in the San Francisco Health Improvement partnership, "Some stakeholders and funders were impatient to see evidence of improved public health indicators and health equity. Such outcome-oriented evaluations are limited by the time needed for changes to materialize, and the cost of performing rigorous outcome evaluations" (Grumbach et al., 2017, p. 5).

Subject Matter Experts also reflected on the disconnect between funder expectations about impact and the realities of community change on the ground. One person described how, at the beginning of multiyear initiatives, there is a lot of talk about how to put communities in the lead. However, as time passes, funders start asking about outcomes. Further, they noted the potential pitfalls of impact reports, where initiatives are implicitly encouraged to take credit for family and community progress.

**A reorientation toward the strength of relationships, both within the community and between partners, could destabilize these system-centric mythologies about how change happens in communities.**

# FOCUS ON FAMILY AND COMMUNITY STRENGTHS IN SERVICE DESIGN

While the focus of this synthesis did not extend into reviewing effective service design, our review of the literature and case studies, conversations with Subject Matter Experts, and observations of current work in the field suggest that taking the long view points us toward leveraging family and community as assets in the context of service provision.

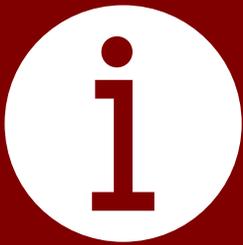
Family resource centers are one example of such system-supported services. The LA Prevention Demonstration Initiative created family resource centers, with support from the child welfare department, to ensure that families receive supports without risk of being reported to the child abuse hotline (McCroskey et al., 2009). Positive impacts extended beyond those individuals involved in primary prevention services; parents and families cited benefits including greater involvement in community and decreased feelings of isolation (McCroskey et al., 2010).

Today, there are a number of similar initiatives taking hold in New York State (New York State Office of Children and Family Services, 2021); New York City (Youth Studies, 2020); Orange County, CA; Teller County, CO; and Washington, DC. These approaches show positive impacts, not only in preventing entry to foster care, but also in increasing parent reports of self-sufficiency. We note there are community concerns about child welfare agencies running these centers, and Chapin Hall is looking into models that ensure Family Resource Centers and other community-level supports do not adopt a surveillance role.

There are also opportunities to examine current policies and services with a strengths-based lens. Subject Matter Experts pointed to the value of strong community and family relationships, and their role in dismantling oppressive institutional practices and in building social capital. However, they also argued that the current status quo in social service systems, like restrictions on resource sharing in food and housing assistance programs, makes it difficult for communities to build social capital. Systems have an opportunity to rewrite policies and programs that penalize resource sharing, to build rather than erode the resilience of community social safety nets.

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# OTHER RESOURCES



**Disrupt system mindsets and habits:** Reflect on the impact of racism, reinforce strength-based narratives, take the long-view when setting milestones.

**Invest in communities:** Position communities to take the lead and cultivate community strengths and skills.

**Reimagine community engagement:** Prioritize community relationships and trust, broaden the decision-making table, and create substantial engagement opportunities.

**Transform systems with community in the lead:** establish community ownership over system responses and resources and then scale up.

**Embed community leadership and adapt over time:** Build collaborative infrastructure and commit to continuous evaluation.

## For methods, limitations, and acknowledgements:

System transformation through community leadership:  
Strategies for building effective partnerships with Black and Brown communities:  
Methods report.



## Toolkit:

An array of highly actionable resources culled from the field to activate leadership in system change.



## Contact Us:

For more information or to engage in this dialogue about system transformation, email us at: **CommunityLeadership@ChapinHall.org**



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