

Implementing Equity Principles in Population-Focused Research: A Framework to Move Beyond Visioning to Action

Introduction and the Importance of Equity Reflection in Population Specific Research

Research focused on Black families has often been [problem-focused, framed around deficits rather than strengths, and stripped of historical and other context that informs research findings](#). In addition, much of this scholarship has been funded, designed, and conducted by individuals with limited grounding in Black culture or lived experience. These blind spots matter because research carries real influence: it shapes how society understands and values families—including Black families—and it drives much of the country's policy and practice priorities. At the heart of research focused on specific populations such as Black families is a desire to uncover and document new knowledge in ways that can explain factors, relationships, or root causes of certain phenomenon, predict future outcomes or trends, and/or inform pressing issues or gaps in knowledge. National organizations with members that conduct family-focused research such as the [American Psychological Association](#) (APA), the [National Association of Social Workers](#) (NASW), the [National Council on Family Relations](#) (NCFR), and others have long maintained statements, ethical codes, and guiding principles that speak to the importance of working toward more equitable research environments and practices. For example, in January 2025, NCFR adopted an [expanded vision](#) and set of guiding principles centered on equity and justice. Despite this recognition, there is a lack of written guidance and strategies for research teams interested in engaging in equity-centered work. This issue is further compounded by substantive federal shifts in 2025 that have affected national, state, and local landscapes and constrained efforts to center equity-focused values and practices.

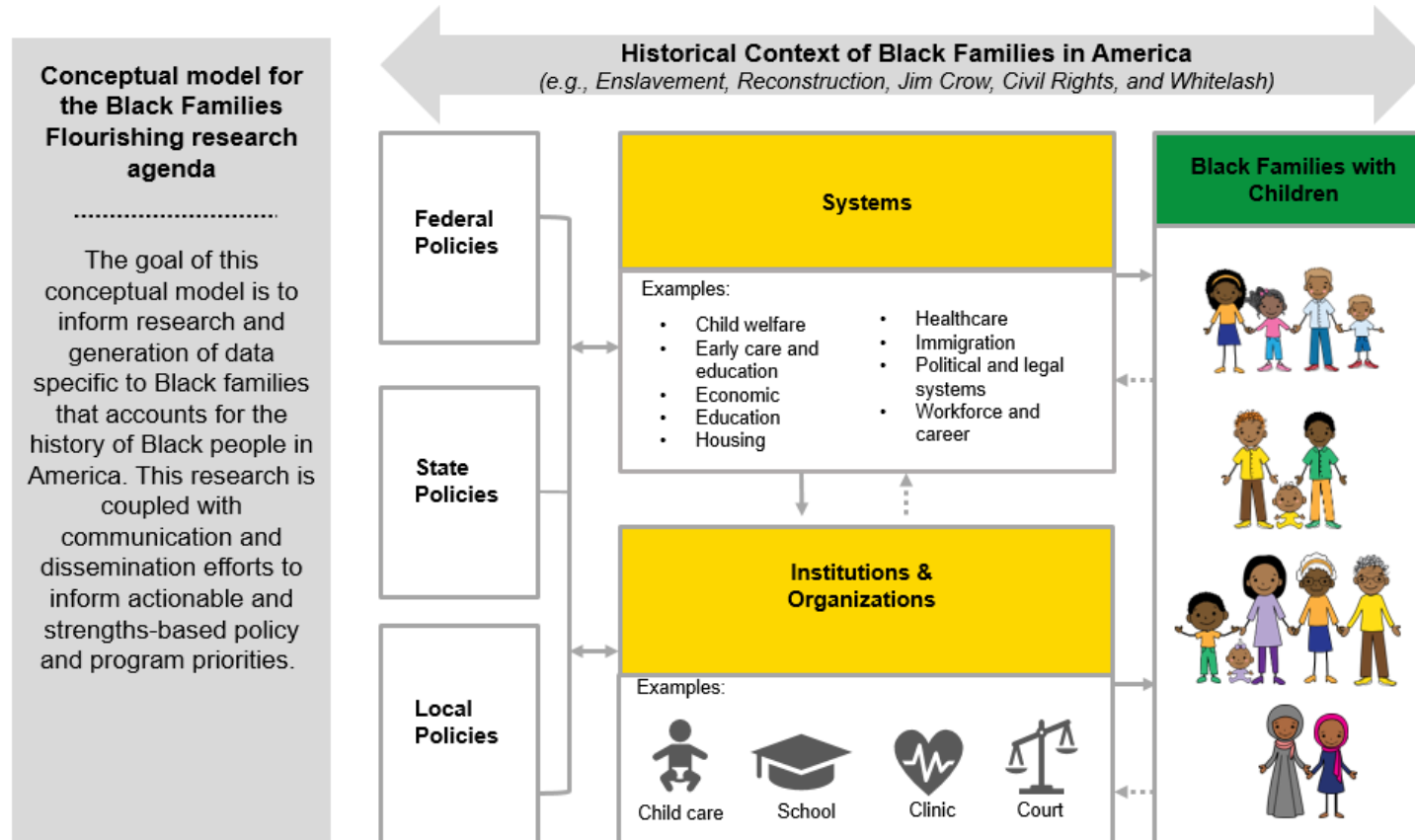
For those who are interested in and committed to promoting equity in research, access to and utilization of a framework that can be tailored to research team priorities, population-specific needs, and project activities throughout all phases of the work is a useful tool. This brief provides a blueprint for the development of an equity reflection framework, detailing the experiences of the Black Families Flourishing (BFF) project team in developing, implementing, and refining it to guide our work. We begin by providing an

overview of the BFF project, as background and context to inform the development of the equity indicator framework. We then summarize our team's process for developing and implementing the framework, highlight illustrative equity indicators tied to our project's guiding principles, and conclude with considerations for teams, research participants and communities, policymakers and practitioners, and funders interested in applying a similar approach in their own work. Our hope is that other research teams can use the framework as a guide to adopt and implement equity reflection processes in their own work.

Overview of the Black Families Flourishing Project

[The Black Families Flourishing \(BFF\) Project](#) is a multi-year effort designed to highlight the diversity of Black families in the United States, identify their cultural strengths and assets, understand the systems that influence family well-being, and shed light on how Black families flourish. Key activities include a nationally representative survey and dataset; research focused on Black families with limited comparisons to other racial/ethnic groups; partnership, collaboration, and fundraising with other organizations and individuals conducting work in support of Black families; capacity building and mobilization with community-based agencies interested in using research and other tools to support Black families through policy/program change; communications strategies to inform narratives focused on Black families; and project management to support team operations. Each of these activity areas is led by a member of the BFF project team with other members of the team helping to operationalize and move the activity work forward. The BFF activities build on prior work including a BFF Conceptual Model (Figure 1) and a [100-Year Review of Research on Black Families](#) that was written to guide future research, policy, and practice focused on Black families with children.

Figure 1: Black Families Flourishing Conceptual Model



Our team uses Guiding Principles (see *Black Families Flourishing Guiding Principles* text box) to inform and operationalize BFF activities. These principles were developed collaboratively among the BFF project team and advisory board¹ and reflect BFF’s collective values and beliefs.

Establishing the Guiding Principles in advance of engagement in team equity reflection processes helps to ensure that our work is consistently flourishing-focused, Black family centered, and supportive of visionary, transformative, and sustainable change.

Developing an Equity Framework

The BFF team in collaboration with an external consultant co-developed a structure for defining, measuring, reflecting on, and documenting the specific approaches and actions we use to advance equity for Black families in our work as well as on our own team. We refer to this process as our Equity Indicator Framework or the Framework. The Framework aims to promote equity-centered team reflection and actions— including the development of equity indicators that can be measured, tracks, and updated across all BFF project activities (i.e., survey; research; partnership, collaboration and fundraising; community and professional capacity building and mobilization; communications and dissemination; and project management) over the course of the project.

The indicators focus on the who, what, when, where, and particularly the *how* of conducting equitable research focused on Black families, with an explicit focus on a reflective team process. In this way, we engage in a parallel process for equity reflection that includes “internal” equity indicators within our own team interactions and professional development, as well as “external” equity indicators that attend to project implementation and outcomes.

Black Families Flourishing Guiding Principles

ONE: Ensure Black family well-being, excellence, cultural assets, and history is elevated in a way that supports Black family flourishing.

TWO: Focus on Black people and families in their own right, with limited comparisons to others.

THREE: Consider Black families from an intersectional, African diasporic lens that draws upon culturally grounded and strengths-based perspectives.

FOUR: Utilize multi- and inter-disciplinary lenses, such as history, demography, sociology, developmental, family science, economic, and lived experience perspectives.

FIVE: Understand racism is devastating for the entire nation and requires multipronged responses to eradicate inequitable systems and disparate outcomes.

SIX: Partner with Black families/communities and Black family supporting organizations throughout the research process, from conceptualization through design, analysis, and dissemination to ensure data relevance and utilization.

¹ The BFF Advisory Board intentionally represents diverse perspectives and includes researchers, policy experts, direct service providers, members of Black families, and media professionals.

Laying the Foundation for Equity Reflection

BFF engaged in several foundational activities to set the stage for engaging in authentic and meaningful equity reflection. These critical foundational activities should not be overlooked. While we recognize that not every team may have the infrastructure, funding, or leadership commitment to fulfill all these foundational steps, existing guidance on [systems and equity-focused change](#) demonstrate that they are key ingredients for success. These foundational activities for BFF included:

Project Initiation

- Ensuring a strong commitment from team leadership and funder at the initiation of the project to integrate equity reflection into all aspects of the project.
- In consultation with our advisory board, establishment of guiding principles and refinement of a conceptual model that serve as BFF's "north star" in our equity reflection processes.
- Building a team with lived and culturally informed experience, foundational knowledge, and skills related to conducting and communicating about research focused on Black families, and who are committed to engaging in equity reflection processes.
- Identifying and hiring a consultant-facilitator who is an expert in equity reflection, has knowledge of Black families, and who is external to the project team. The consultant-facilitator guides the use of the Framework by leading team discussions and providing feedback on indicators and progress.
 - Having a consultant-facilitator external to the project matters because it is difficult for anyone embedded in a team's hierarchy, deliverables, and funding relationships to name blind spots or power dynamics within that same team without risk. The consultant's positioning outside the team, paired with subject-matter expertise, brings an additional and informed perspective, helps surface equity blind spots the team may not see on its own, and can increase individual and team safety and trust because the consultant has no stake in team hierarchy or performance evaluations.

Project Flow and Processes

- Allocating and protecting staff time for relationship- and team- building outside of specific work activities, tasks, and deliverables to create an environment that prioritizes interpersonal trust and psychological safety when discussing equity topics.
 - Ensuring connection opportunities that are not linked to specific project responsibilities is a foundational and critical piece of the work: equity reflection asks team members to grapple with power and positionality dynamics, as well as points of disagreement, a level of dialogue that rarely develops in interactions limited to tasks and deliverables.
- Dedicating time for engaging in equity reflection, including individually, in activity groups, with project team leadership, and across the full project team.
- Sharing equity reflection learnings with funders, partners, and external stakeholders.

Implementing the Equity Reflection Framework

After laying the foundation for the Framework, we began identifying equity indicators for each project activity (i.e., survey; research; partnership, collaboration, and fundraising; community capacity building and mobilization; communications and dissemination; project management). Activity leads and their teams collaborated to draft and refine written equity indicators using the [SMART goal](#) (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time Bound) approach in alignment with their activity focus areas over a 12-month period. The draft equity indicators and subsequent revisions are reviewed together with the external consultant, who facilitates discussion and flags potential blind spots the team may not see on their own. The indicators are then revised by the activity teams and rated by the group as: *achieved*, *in progress* (on schedule), *in progress* (not on schedule/behind), *not yet started* (on schedule), and *not yet started* (not on schedule/behind). This process is repeated quarterly, with any recommended revisions to equity indicators from the team, following discussion with the consultant-facilitator in writing and during reflective team sessions. For indicators that remain *not yet started/behind*, the activity team meets to discuss challenges or contributors to not being able to address an indicator over several months and identify potential solutions, which may include addressing project implementation factors or revising or removing the indicator if it is no longer relevant to the activity. Following feedback and revisions, equity indicators are subsequently re-rated by activity teams. Figure 2 illustrates the framework BFF established and implemented for equity indicator development, assessment, and reflection.

Figure 2. Black Families Flourishing Equity Indicator Development, Assessment, Reflection, and Learning Process

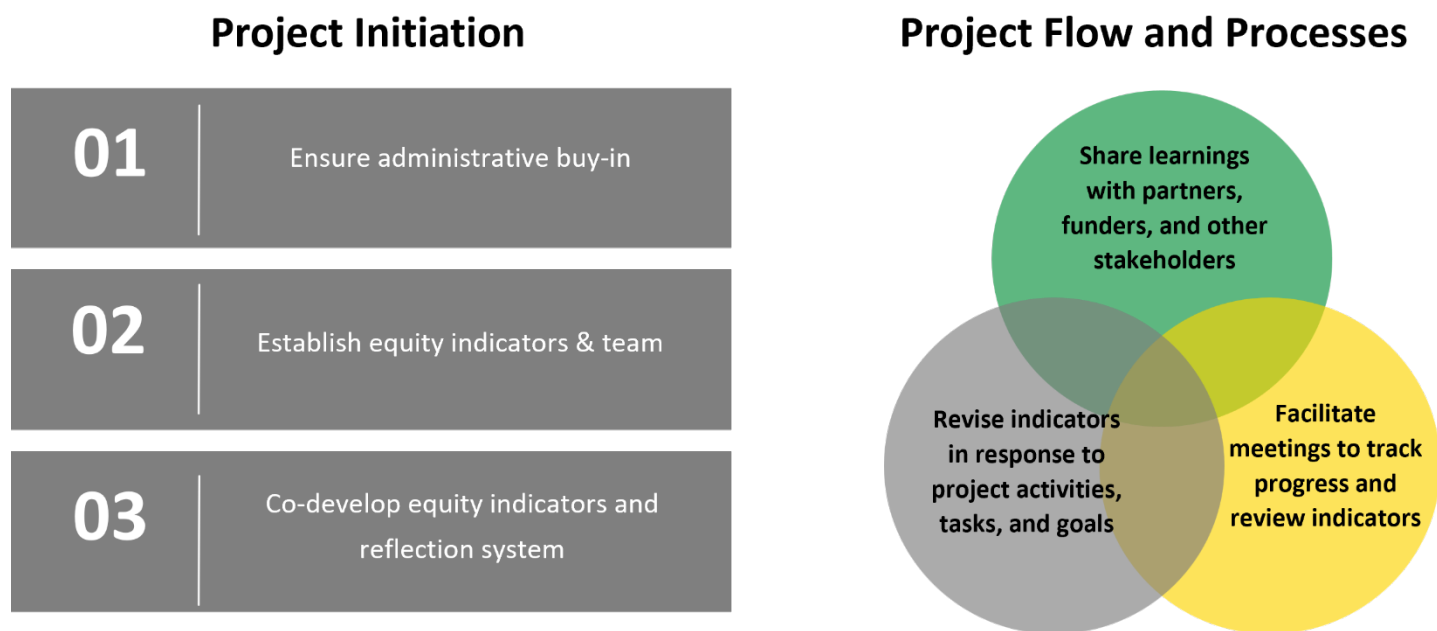


Table 1 provides an example of how BFF applies the framework to our project’s guiding principles, specific project activities, and goals for measuring progress. Project activity teams continuously review and discuss their progress on the equity indicators using a standardized rating and project tracking form, which is shared with and reviewed by the equity consultant in advance of full team reflections. Equity indicator language and team reflections are reviewed by the consultant who flags potential strength and growth areas for the team’s consideration; specifically (1) do equity indicators and team actions reflect one or more BFF guiding principles? (2) do equity indicators incorporate SMART goal principles? and (3) are equity indicators and team actions focused both on outputs

of equity-focused work as well as the process for promoting equity within the research team and throughout project activities? Our team engages in several individual reflections, small team discussions, and large group sessions with the external consultant, which generally results in revisions to equity indicator language to align with project and activity goals and shifts (e.g., indicators are continuously revisited and revised as project activities change). Notably, the framework is not intended to be a linear process with a predetermined ending but instead is designed to allow for an ongoing journey where our project team continues to grow, learn, shift, and strengthen the way we “show up” and conduct ourselves as well as our specific research activities. It is also important to note that despite our team’s use of a formal framework and structure for engaging in equity reflection, the process of implementing the Framework is inherently “messy.” Project priorities evolve, team members change, and contexts shift, which are all variables that play a role in how the Framework implementation unfolds.

Table 1. Sample Equity Indicator Team Plan for Black Families Flourishing

		Project Activity PCF=partnership, collaboration, fundraising; S=survey; R=research; CBM=capacity building and mobilization; C=communications and dissemination					
BFF Guiding Principle	Equity Indicator	PCF	S	R	CBM	CD	Evidence of equity intention, using specific, measurable, and timebound (SMART) actions
1, 5	Disrupt negative narratives about Black people and families by leading with strengths-focused approach to our work. We will center and honor the lived experiences of our team and participants and not recreate harmful research practices.	☐	☒	☒	☐	☐	We will intentionally include research questions, study designs, and analytic strategies that have strengths-based framing (e.g., 25% of literature will include strengths-based terms/approaches; quantitative analyses will examine strengths-based variables, conditions, and/or outcomes).
2	Limit comparison of Black people and families to others in the development of survey items, research questions, analysis, and interpretation.	☐	☒	☒	☐	☐	We will prioritize survey and research recruitment and data collection instruments to focus primarily on Black people and families and will not compare

							results of our analysis to other racial groups or general population statistics.
3	Conduct research that considers intersectional identities and variation that exist within Black families by collecting information on intersectional identities (e.g., sexual orientation, gender identity, immigration status, ethnicity, caregiver status) and disaggregating data analyses.	☐	☒	☒	☐	☐	We will deliberately include survey questions, research tool items, and dataset variables that capture the variety of identities and intersectionality that exist in Black families. When statistically possible, we will disaggregate and cross tabulate data and information to reflect the diversity of Black family experiences.
6	Proactively engage families, communities, and other stakeholders interested in Black family flourishing when designing research studies and engaging in data interpretation. Engagements will include fiscal remuneration in recognition of the participants' efforts.	☐	☒	☒	☐	☒	Member checking of research findings and learnings will occur with Black families and other interested stakeholders (e.g., verbally sharing and/or sending written summaries to research participants and requesting feedback to ensure accuracy and credibility of findings). Record keeping of feedback received via spreadsheets indicating what was incorporated (or not) and the rationale for why, will be documented and shared with stakeholders as needed. The number of individuals solicited for feedback will vary based on the type of study and level of involvement of research participants and/or key stakeholders. Family, community and stakeholder engagement with project work will be compensated and all parties (regardless of group affiliation) will receive the same amount.
4	Engage a range of multi-disciplinary stakeholder perspectives that focus on Black family flourishing; we will leverage stakeholder engagements to cultivate	☒	☐	☐	☒	☐	Prioritization and participation in at least 6 yearly events (e.g., trainings, webinars) or meetings that are demonstrably committed to Black families' flourishing

	ongoing partnerships, elevate collective Black voice, and mobilize actions that promote flourishing.						defined by being rooted in listening (e.g., facilitated feedback, post-event surveys, or community-led agendas), relationship-building, and concrete action. We will track both the number and type of actions taken because of these engagements, focusing on depth of action and influence for our work and ensuring we are soliciting diverse voices/perspectives, including critics who will/can provide constructive feedback in good faith.
		☒	☐	☐	☒	☐	We will engage in at least 2–3 conferences annually with community-based, local, state, and national audiences, seeking roles as participants and contributors—particularly in spaces that elevate Black voices and community-driven solutions. From these engagements, we aim to achieve concrete outcomes such as new partnerships, increased visibility, and knowledge to strengthen our work.
		☒	☐	☐	☐	☐	We will initiate and document at least two new partnerships each month with mission-aligned organizations, families, or individuals.
		☐	☒	☒	☐	☐	All primary data collection activities informing the project will be moderated by culturally knowledgeable facilitators and data collectors. Data analysis processes will always include explicit attention to Black families' strengths, cultural assets and the ways in which they flourish within systems with whom they engage including those that have racist, oppressive and/or discriminatory practices.

6	Produce communications and dissemination that amplify Black family, community, and/or stakeholder voice and avoid extractive storytelling practices.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☒	At least two public facing communication materials or engagements a month will feature voices/stories of individuals not in BFF project leadership.
4, 6	Tailor dissemination and sharing of research findings for individual audiences to ensure that data and other content produced by the BFF project is relevant for their work with (or in support of) Black families.	☒	☐	☐	☒	☒	All slide decks and presentations emanating from our survey and research activities will communicate key project findings with at least three target groups with whom we have an existing relationship (e.g., funder, community-based partner organizations, and agencies that serve Black families) to promote practices that facilitate Black families' flourishing. Measures documenting success will include number of organizations interested in/registered for and attending (at least 50% registered attend) sessions; audience engagement (e.g., participants pose questions, share resources in the platform's chat, and comment during the session) and/or follow up post sessions (interest in learning more and/or collaborating as indicated via post session surveys).
1	Actively engage in and promote the ongoing growth of BFF team members and upcoming scholars in the field via equity focused professional development, training, and/or mentoring opportunities.	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒	At least two external trainers and/or opportunities for focused professional development opportunities, or speaking engagements will be provided to support the upward trajectories of BFF team members and other early scholars who may be connected to the project via advisory group members or other channels.

1	Ensure all project team members engaged in the intense work of supporting Black family flourishing will be provided with opportunities for mental and physical restoration.	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒	At the end of each project year, all project members will participate in a retreat that provides a full day for project reflection and another for team fun and bonding. Team members will also have the opportunity to participate in individually selected respite time that can be taken advantage of at their discretion.
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Considerations for Equity Indicator Framework Utilization

As this brief highlights, engaging in equity-centered research processes requires consideration across a project’s lifespan and attention to multiple levels. In the case of BFF, development and utilization of equity indicators happens on two levels simultaneously – internally or within the research team and externally in how families, communities, and other key constituents such as policymakers and practitioners, and funders are engaged. Below we share select questions these groups might consider as they engage in the utilization, application, or funding of population specific research that is grounded in an equity indicator framework. While the questions highlighted below are not all encompassing, they draw on and are reflective of real-world learnings gleaned from the BFF equity indicator framework development and process. As we continue to build out the BFF project and research activities, we expect more learnings and questions for consideration will emerge.

Research Focused Considerations

Teams

1. Researchers vary in their equity knowledge as well as their capacity to engage in equity focused activities. Given this reality, what is the capacity of our team to engage in equity focused research? Topics to explore include examination of and reflection on researchers’ individual and collective (i.e., team) backgrounds, biases, and privilege.
2. What resources are available to support and/or provide training to our team regarding equity centered research and how to undertake it?

3. How do power differentials play out in the application of equity indicators on our research team? Do we have strategies/mechanisms in place to address them?
4. What processes do we have in place to support ongoing assessment and application of equity indicators? How often will these processes occur? Who is accountable for ensuring the processes happen and necessary adjustments are identified and made?
5. How can we build in time (i.e., rest or respite) for the research team to recover from the emotional labor it takes to engage in equity focused work?

Research Participants/Community Members

1. Are research participants from the communities involved in the research incorporated into research processes in ways that support co-design, acknowledgement of multiple participant/community perspectives, realities, and intersections?
2. Have we planned for how best to engage research participants and communities across the lifespan of projects in ways that are meaningful and not overly burdensome?
3. Do we have mechanisms in place, including clearly identified and accountable points of community representation, to address power differentials between the research team and research participants/the community? Who is accountable for ensuring adherence to and evaluating the success of the plan?
4. Is our research being designed in ways that are value added and not extractive—meaning information and resources gathered from research participants/communities are designed and shared with participants/communities in ways that support well-being?
5. Are we setting up structures and processes that support participants/community members having access to data during and after research processes?

Policymaker and Practitioner Considerations

1. Are our policies and/or programs being designed to consider the variation and nuance in identity, context, and circumstances that exist across and within Black families?

2. Do our data collection and analysis practices surface rather than mask the diversity of Black families? Do we have a clear sense of who we are and are not reaching?
3. What infrastructure do we have in place that helps us to capture population specific nuance? What funding strategies do we have in place to support development of, access to and utilization of this infrastructure?
4. Do assessments of policy or program success include evaluation standards that prioritize attention to population specific and/or equitable practices and insights over broad “one size fits all” actions?
5. Do we ask those most affected by policies and/or those participating in our programs to contribute to strategy development, advisory committees, and/or board roles to ensure their perspectives are helping to shape policy and programmatic decisions.

Funder Considerations

1. Are we allocating funding to support the building and maintenance of population specific and equity focused research infrastructure? For example, making platforms available to host equity informed indicators, research findings, and data that can be easily accessed by interested parties for the long term?
2. Have we accounted for the reality that grantees who center equitable research practices often need longer runways before producing outputs? Do we understand and act on the reality that multi-year funding commitments are often necessary for population specific and equity-focused work to be done well?
3. Do our grant application and/or reporting requirements provide guidance about and incentivize the use of equity indicators to strengthen research practices?
4. Do we assess whether staff who are of color and working in White-led organizations (often the individuals leading population specific work) feel safe, heard, respected, and not tokenized by organizational leadership? Have we considered ways such as endowed positions to ensure staff remain safe and are not under threat of losing their research agendas and/or jobs if organizational cultures and/or priorities shift?
5. Do we have tools to support us with actively seeking out funding partnerships with researchers committed to equitable processes on their teams as well as in their research endeavors?

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